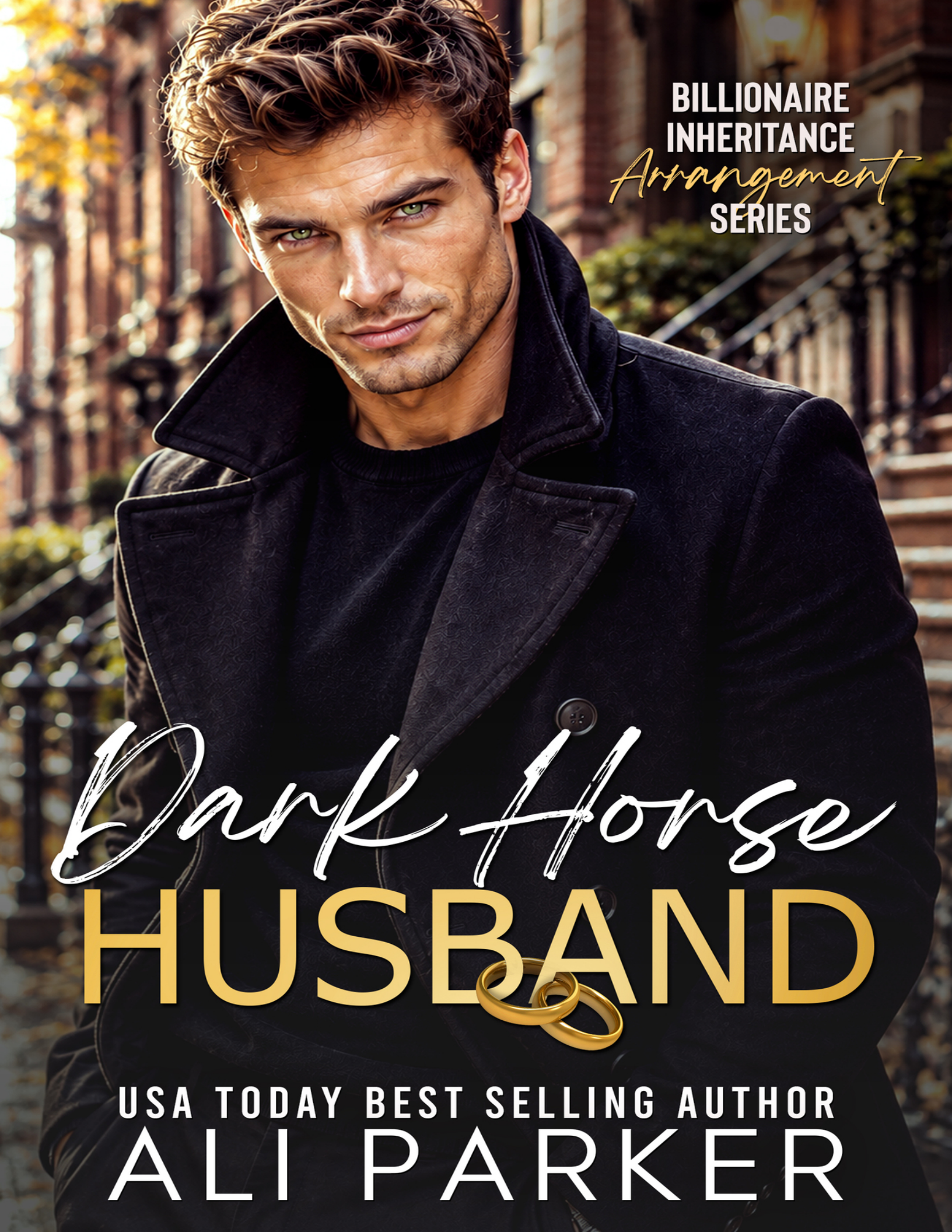

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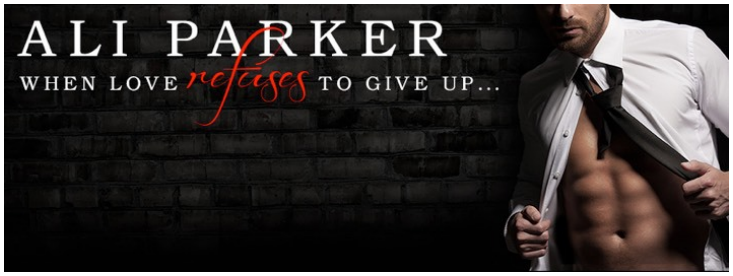
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Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insider Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining, you'll receive a free book on me!

Join the fam Here!

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A NOTE TO THE READER

A Note to the Reader - I don't use AI in my books.

Every story I write starts with a spark, a “what if,” and characters who refuse to leave me alone until I tell their story. Some of them are FAR more abusive than others. Ha!

This story you're about to jump into was written the old-school way. It is fueled by my imagination or the brilliant colors of my family and team members as we work together to create something immersive for you. There's aching fingers, a lot of coffee, and lots of late nights. I don't do early mornings.

I care deeply about the stories, and honestly, you. I've been writing stories for over a decade and I still remember why I started so long ago.

I'd just finished reading a book and my very painful world felt lighter. The colors were almost back in my day to day activities. All because of a well written book.

I needed a place to hide away. And that book gave it to me. I wanted to spend the rest of my life offering people the same 3rd place to disappear to. So I left my CPA career and, since then, have been doing just that.

All of the tension, the banter, the messy emotions, and the happily ever afters? All of it was built word by word, with you in mind. Everyone is terrified of AI right now, and maybe it's warranted. I don't know. I live in stories in my head, so in there, everything is pretty great. This book wasn't conceived, written, edited or reviewed by AI. We have a lot of humans on our team and honestly, God told me and Jacob (hubs) a long time ago that we were here to create great jobs for good people and love them like family. So we do.

Thank you for reading, for escaping with me, and for supporting stories that are created with intention and heart.

With all my love,

Ali Parker

This work is a product of original imagination and creative effort, and no generative AI tools were used in the creation, ideation, writing, co-writing, or editing of this manuscript.

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DESCRIPTION



I don’t believe love makes a man better.

I’ve seen what happens when the wrong man gets everything he wants.

So marriage? Kids? A woman trusting me with her heart?

Not interested.

Then my family finds a way to put my frozen trust back in my hands, with one catch.

I have to get married and produce an heir.

Fine.

I’ll take the money that’s mine, marry the stranger they’ve chosen, and keep my heart out of it.

Except my new wife is five-foot-two, blonde, curvy, covered in freckles, and completely unimpressed by me.

She took the deal for financial security.

I took it for access to my trust.

We understand each other.

At least, I thought we did.

Because every time I push, she pushes back harder. Every time I expect her to want more from me, she surprises me by wanting me.

And somewhere between sharing her home, fixing everything I can get my hands on, and discovering how good my wife feels in my arms, this arrangement stops feeling temporary.

I want her.

In my bed. In my life. Carrying my ring because she wants to, not because a contract says she has to.

I want the family I swore I’d never risk having.

There’s only one problem.

I’ve spent my entire life terrified I’m exactly like my father.

And loving her means giving myself the chance to prove it.

Or finally prove everyone wrong.

Because I’m starting to think losing her would destroy me far faster than loving her ever could.

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CHAPTER 1

HOLDEN

Graduate students threw terrible parties. This was the first one I'd been dragged to, but where my old friends at Columbia used to throw ragers, these people threw bore-fests.

Cheap beer had been replaced with boxed wine. Instead of kegs, someone crying in a bathtub, and someone else deploying a fire extinguisher, we were all now just standing around, talking. I was pretty sure that by eleven, these people were going to have the whole place cleaned up and be in bed because everyone had a very important seminar in the morning.

Let's just say it's less party, more pretentious gathering.

No one here had any money. The deep-dish pizza we were feasting on had been funded by the meager teaching-assistant salaries of several of the attendees, but from the way they were acting, it was like they truly believed this was a gathering of high-society *intellectuals*.

The scent of mildew and old radiator heat wafted through the air and we'd probably pass out from lack of oxygen if we stayed down here for too long. I took another sip of my terrible wine, appreciating that at least the grapes had had aspirations of becoming some form of drinkable alcohol, but that was really the only upside to this situation—the grapes had, in fact, become alcohol.

"This is painful," I muttered to Price. "Remind me again why we came."

“Like it or not, these are our peers now.” He took a drink of his own terrible wine and looked around the basement, seeming significantly more optimistic about being here than I was. “We have to mingle, right? Get to know the people we’re going to be spending all of our time with for the next two years, give or take a couple months.”

I groaned, but Price was one of the few people I’d met in the MBA program so far who was bearable. That was why I’d agreed to come.

According to Jane, the University of Chicago was supposed to be a fresh start for me. I’d been on my way back to New York for my master’s degree, but things had changed when we’d found out about my dad.

Naturally, my sister had tried to turn that into a good thing. She’d argued that instead of returning to Columbia, it would be better to start this next phase someplace new. I still didn’t want to be starting said new phase at all, so in the end, I’d agreed to stay in Chicago simply because it kept me close to the office.

“I can’t spend all my time with them.” I didn’t even wince this time when I took another sip of the liquid in my glass masquerading as wine. “If we have any free time at all, I’d rather spend it at work.”

Price shrugged. “You and me both, but I wasn’t referring to *free* time. As far as I know, having that isn’t something we need to be worried about.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I’ve heard the same thing, but that doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it.”

After I’d graduated the first time, I’d taken a break from my studies to work as an account manager for Thayer Steelworks, and unexpectedly, I’d ended up enjoying it. What had started as a necessary evil, helping out at the office while Ryan had been otherwise occupied, had turned into a role I was actually able to see myself in—*and* I’d been good at it.

Hell, depending on who was being asked, I’d been more than good. I’d been on my way to being great. When my brother had finally come back, I’d stuck around without even thinking about walking away to go back to school.

If it had been up to me, I still would have been there, working my way up and learning on the fly, but Jane had insisted that I do things *the right way*. To her, that meant completing my education, and when I’d tried pointing out that I didn’t need an MBA to work for our family’s very own company, she’d completely refused to hear it.

In her opinion, she'd fought too hard for too long to make sure Ryan, Wyatt, and I had the opportunities she believed we deserved. Fighting her on something like finishing a degree was like arguing with a fish about not being able to breathe out of water.

Utterly pointless. It's just a fact.

Price nodded at a group standing near the stairs. I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but from the snippets I caught here and there, they were arguing about constitutional interpretation. "We should go introduce ourselves to them."

"The wannabe lawyers?" I scoffed. "No, thank you. If that's what you're into, go ahead, but I'm good."

"They're wannabes now, but they won't be in the future," he said sagely. "It's always good to have a few of them on speed-dial in the real world. It's called networking. You should do it."

"With lawyers? No."

I didn't mind the change of pace or even the bottom-shelf wine over easily chuggable beer, but I already knew I wasn't going to fit in and this conversation was just confirmation of that fact. I wasn't like the social science kids or the law school kids. Not even the suits, like Price, were on the same track as me.

The guy was alright, but he was business through and through, a strategy and consulting junkie who spoke about the markets like humanity only existed to generate graphs. My own path leaned heavily toward business technology—systems and infrastructure.

Socially, that left me in an awkward position. I wasn't interested in spending my evenings listening to future attorneys argue about why they were technically correct about absolutely everything and I definitely didn't care about carbon credits or venture philanthropy either.

"Go ahead," I repeated when he hesitated. "I mean it. I'll be fine. If you wait for me before you start networking, you're not going to meet a single lawyer tonight."

He chuckled, hesitating for one more second before he nodded and clapped me on the shoulder. "Alright. You know where I am if you want to join us."

"Yeah, man. Don't worry about me."

Price took off toward the lawyers, effortlessly falling in with the group when he reached them. He had them laughing in no time and I shook my

head. Maybe if I hadn't had enough of lawyers in the last decade to last me a lifetime, I would have been right there with him.

I knew how important connections were in this life. God, did I know, but networking just wasn't on my radar tonight. Things were a little turbulent in Camp Thayer right now. No one I met now, in the *before*, would want to know my name in a few weeks anyway.

If I was going to take the time to network, I'd do it in the *after*. Once the bombs had dropped. At least then I'd know who I could trust to actually take my call if I ever needed them.

As I went to refill my recycled jam jar with red wine, a girl standing near the wall caught my eye. She looked vaguely familiar. *Maybe we have a lecture together or something.*

She looked up and caught me staring, raising an eyebrow before excusing herself and making a beeline for me. As she approached, she flashed me a toothy grin and nodded at the box I was pouring the wine from.

"We're so elegant, don't you think?"

I shrugged. "There are worse things in life than free booze."

She grinned again, and this time, I almost shuddered. Up close, she was very pretty, but not at all my type. Way too loud and with far too many teeth on display at all times.

While she'd spoken at a perfectly reasonable volume, I could tell from her energy that she was one of those people who was always making their presence known. As she was now, coming over just because I'd been trying to figure out where I knew her from.

"You're the guy from ethics," she said. "I'm Tasha."

"Holden."

"I know." She laughed, proving that I'd been right about her being loud, and leaned over to refill her own glass. "We're in the same lecture twice a week and it's been a few weeks. Our class isn't *that* big."

"It's big enough."

"Clearly." She glanced up at me while waiting for the dwindling wine supply to trickle into her glass. "Are you having fun at the party?"

"No."

She laughed again. "Do you have a study group yet?"

"No."

"Well, you do now."

“That seems presumptuous. I haven’t even been invited to one, but you think I’ll agree to join yours?”

“You will.”

“You’re pretty optimistic, aren’t you? You don’t know anything about me. There’s no way for you to know if I’ll agree.”

“Maybe I don’t know anything about you, but I do know a lot about *me*, and I’m collecting the people who take the best notes. From what I’ve seen, you’re not one of them, but I’m feeling generous, so you can join us.”

A guy behind us said something I didn’t catch, but Tasha spun to face him without skipping a single beat. “Are you seriously going to stand there and say *capitalism* won’t survive *climate change*? I mean, are you serious?”

He blinked hard. “I didn’t—”

“Yes, you did. I was standing right here.” When he glanced at his friends, she folded her arms. “Don’t look at them. They’re not going to save you.”

The guy muttered something but then turned and walked away. Tasha shook her head. “That’s what I thought. Just another spineless blowhard whose mouth is bigger than his brain.”

Without paying any attention to his gaping friends, she turned back to me. “You really should join my study group. We’re mostly normal. Except for the law students.” Tasha leaned closer. “They’re not invited.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Because I hate lawyers.”

Okay, I like her. Platonically, obviously, but between that statement and the fact that she’d just given a complete stranger shit about his incorrect point of view, she seemed like she would be fun to be around.

“In that case, I’ll think about joining your group.”

She grinned and held out her hand. “Excellent. Your application has been accepted. Give me your phone.”

I unlocked it and handed it over, watching her send herself a message before she gave it back. “There you go. Now you can reach me and I’ll text you the schedule. See you around, Holden. Watch out for box-wine hangovers. They’re a bastard.”

With that, she flashed me one last grin and walked away, seamlessly sliding into another group and completely taking over their conversation. I chuckled, my head shaking, then finished my wine and decided that my work here was done.

Price was networking, and evidently, I'd found a study group. That was good enough for me. So I set down my jam jar and left, honoring my long-standing tradition of the Irish Goodbye.

As I pushed through the slightly busted main door of the apartment building, the cool air outside smacked me right in the face. After a couple hours in that stuffy basement, it felt genuinely cold out here. I shoved my hands into my pockets and started walking.

My phone vibrated against my fingers with a notification of some sort, but when I pulled it out and saw I'd missed a call from Alex, I slid the phone back into my pocket. He could wait until the morning. *Or next week. Possibly forever.*

As much as I loved the guy, he and I were not on the same page at the moment. When he'd married my sister, I hadn't been convinced we would ever be on the same page, but over the last few years, he'd become more of a father figure to me than my own father had ever been.

I looked up to him. I just didn't want to talk to him about what I knew he wanted to talk to me about.

Halfway across the street toward my block, a car came speeding through the intersection and a woman who'd been crossing on her bicycle swerved. The car missed her by inches and my stomach clenched as I registered the narrow miss.

"What the fuck?" I muttered, seeing her trying to keep the bike upright, but the basket attached to the handlebars tipped and groceries scattered all over the road.

The driver didn't even stop to check that she was okay. I scowled after him but immediately doubled back toward the woman. *Because some people still have common decency.*

"Are you okay?" I asked as I jogged closer.

Already on her haunches next to the bike, she barely looked up at me as she nodded, her voice coming out in a dazed, breathless rush. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so. That was a close one, though."

I grabbed a packet of ramen before the next car could crush it, then collected a few more before I realized she had a truly impressive amount of the stuff. *College student, then.*

As I handed it over, she took the packets from me, still gathering a few other things from all over the pavement. "Thank you."

“You should wear a helmet,” I said bluntly. “If he’d hit you, we’d be cleaning up way more than your groceries right now.”

Her eyes finally snapped up. I looked into them and it was like I could feel the world shifting. Obviously, there was no dramatic music and no lightning strike to indicate that anything had changed, but for a moment, I completely forgot what I’d been talking about.

She has beautiful eyes. What color even is that?

In the ambient light on the street, I couldn’t quite decide if they were blue or green. Maybe both. *With a dash of gold in there too.*

Her cheeks turned pink as she held my gaze, but then she pushed to her feet and looked away. “Thanks again for your help.”

“It was nothing. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Without looking back at me, she dumped all her stuff into the basket and climbed onto the bicycle, taking off and disappearing down a narrow alley between two buildings before I’d even regained enough brain power to ask for her name.

Maybe it’s for the best, though.

My life was busy enough right now. The last thing I needed was a girl with pretty eyes to complicate things even more.

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CHAPTER 2

ALICIA

Seven thirty in the morning was way too early to be contemplating the possibility of life without caffeine, but when only three beans fell out as I shook the coffee container, I was forced to confront the truth that it might be today's harsh reality.

Unless coffee beans could be reused, I was screwed. *Maybe if I put yesterday's grounds back into the machine and add water, I'll be able to see if they operate on the same principles as soup.*

As tempted as I was to try it though, I didn't really have time to get too creative. *There have to be more beans somewhere. I just have to find them.*

Determined to trust that the universe would produce coffee if I just looked hard enough, I opened the cupboard next to the fridge, then searched under the cabinet with the mugs, and then, finally, found seven more beans behind the toaster and chose not to think about how they might've ended up there as I scooped them into my palm.

Hallelujah.

I was just dropping them into the grinder when Tasha came downstairs, her backpack slung over one shoulder and her hair pulled up into a bun that looked like she'd made it while running from a fire. On the other hand, she'd been my housemate for a while now and she almost always looked like she'd gotten dressed while running from something.

The life of a grad student, I guess.

"Good morning," she said happily, then glanced at the coffee machine on her way into the kitchen. "Wow. That's rough."

“Tell me about it.”

“We’re out of coffee.”

I laughed. “Yeah, thanks for the update.”

“You said to tell you about it.” She smirked. “Are we out of instant too?”

“We’re out of anything containing an acceptable amount of caffeine,” I said. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” She shrugged. “I’ll just grab a coffee on my way to class. We do need groceries, though. There’s only mustard and half an onion in the fridge.”

“I bought some more ramen,” I said. “It’s in the pantry.”

Tasha grinned. “Well, at least that’s dinner sorted.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t really thinking about the ramen anymore. Instead, my mind had wandered to the exceptionally good-looking asshole who’d helped me save it. *Mr. Tall, Blond, and Handsome.*

I had no idea where he’d come from, but when he’d appeared seemingly out of thin air to ride to my groceries’ rescue, I’d thought maybe he was my knight in shining armor. Until he’d opened his mouth. Oh, and looked at me like I was the greatest disappointment he’d ever had the displeasure of experiencing.

All because of a helmet. Asshole.

Tasha snapped me out of my thoughts when she tossed a stack of envelopes onto the kitchen counter. “Before I forget to give this to you again, I grabbed the mail yesterday. I just forgot it in my backpack.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She smiled, extracting another envelope from the mess inside the backpack and setting it down on top of the mail. “There’s my rent, too. Don’t spend it on coffee.”

I groaned. “Trust me, I wish I could.”

“We’ll make it big one day, babe. Just keep your chin up. Five years from now, we’ll be swimming in the best beans money can buy.” She winked and backed toward the door. “I’ve got to get going or I’ll be late, but have a good one!”

“You too,” I said, barely managing to get the words out before the front door slammed behind her.

Exhaling a deep breath, I waited until I heard her car start before I looked through the mail. It was mostly junk, flyers, and a few other things,

but underneath all that was an envelope that made my heart squeeze and my stomach drop.

I didn't even have to open it to know what it was. At this point, the city had sent me so many of them that I recognized the threat before I'd even touched the packaging it had come in. This particular letter had a red stripe across the front, which I hadn't seen for a while.

The last time I'd received one of these, they'd let me appease them with promises, but my luck was definitely running out. *Just another day in paradise.*

Instead of reading the bold warning, I chose to protect what little joy I could find in my weak coffee and went to get ready for the day. Then I headed to work without even looking at the envelope again. The time would come when I couldn't ignore it any longer. I was painfully aware of that.

As it was, I was on borrowed time in the house. Ultimately, I would lose it. One way or another. I simply didn't want to face the heartbreaking reality of that until I absolutely had to—and I didn't need reminders from the city to know what was going to happen.

When I got to the library, it was like I could feel my worries check themselves at the door. I dropped my bag behind the children's desk and immediately headed to the picture books to choose one for story time, determined not to let the world ruin my happy place.

The library might be where I worked, but it was also my sanctuary. While I was in here, I got to escape to beautiful, magical worlds and go on exciting adventures. One day, I'd be a pirate and the next, a fairy. I could go on fantastical quests with tiny, gleeful, trouble-free children and forget that my real life was a mess.

With Halloween coming up soon, my job got even more exciting. It was still weeks away, but children operated on a different calendar system, which meant that technically, Halloween had already begun and Christmas was right around the corner. Plus, every day was potentially dinosaur day for one of my five-year-old regulars who owned a T-Rex outfit.

I was reaching for a book about a dinosaur going trick-or-treating with his friends when I heard my name from the entrance to the reading nook. "Alicia?"

When I turned, my eyebrows inched up, but a smile spread across my face. "Jane. Hi."

Jane Thayer returned my smile, opening her arms for a hug as she crossed toward me. “It’s been a while.”

“You can say that again.” I wrapped my arms around her. “I was starting to wonder if you’d forgotten where the library was.”

She chuckled and gave me a quick squeeze before pulling away. “Don’t judge me. We’ve been busy.”

“I figured as much. There was a time you spent half your life here, but I haven’t seen you in months. We’ve missed having you guys around for story time.”

Jane smiled. “Trust me, you haven’t missed us as much as the kids are missing you.”

“Are they here?” I asked.

She shook her head and waved an immaculately manicured hand toward the conference room. “I have a planning meeting for the Halloween Gala.”

“We’re hosting that here again?”

“Indeed, you are.” She pumped her eyebrows at me. “And you’re helping.”

“I’d really rather not.”

“I’d really rather not beg you, but I will.” She pressed her hands together. “Please help to keep me sane during this planning process?”

I sighed. “Fine, but only because it’s you asking.”

She looked around the children’s department, her features softening. “Gosh, I’ve missed being here.”

I followed her gaze toward the story-time corner. “You can come visit anytime. Maybe bring some doughnuts.”

“I’ll think about it. But for now, I have to go plan how we’re going to raise funds to make sure this place isn’t going anywhere.” She smiled. “I’ll see you later?”

“Probably,” I said. “Unless the children revolt and carry me away to Neverland.”

Jane laughed. “Before I head in there, I actually came over to invite you to a little dinner Alex and I are having at our house tonight.”

My brain stopped functioning for a full few seconds. Jane and Alex were not just *Jane and Alex*. They were Jane *Thayer* and Alex *Westwood*, power couple extraordinaire. Both of them were CEOs of companies worth billions of dollars, the kind of people whose names regularly appeared on any list of the city’s most influential people.

And they're inviting me *to dinner at their house.*

For a second, I just stared at her like she was inviting me for tea with the president. Jane Thayer had always been mildly intimidating to me. She'd never done anything to make me feel that way. In fact, she'd always been warm and kind, but she could buy my house, pay off all the outstanding taxes, and not even notice the transaction on her bank statement.

"Uh, okay," I finally agreed. "It'll be good to see the kids again."

"Yeah, they're going to love seeing you as well. I've been meaning to bring them, really, but ever since Cameron started grade school, it's been hard to find the time to do all the things we used to do together. He still reads a lot, though."

"Good."

She chuckled. "He might be all cool and sophisticated now that he's started big school, but that love you instilled for reading is definitely still there."

Genuine happiness erupted in my chest. "That's the best news I've heard all week."

Someone called her name from the front desk and she glanced over, showing them she just needed a minute before she turned back to me. "I have to go, but I'll text you the address. We'll see you at eight, Alicia. I'm looking forward to catching up."

"So am I," I said, but I was already stressing about what I was going to wear.

Even as I waved before she spun and walked away, I was mentally rummaging through my closet. I had no idea what one put on to eat dinner with people who owned chairs worth more than the average car.

The conundrum stayed with me all day, only getting worse as the hours ticked by. When I eventually got home, I was already in a flat spin, practically ready to start pulling out my hair as I stripped off my clothes and went to stand in front of my closet in my underwear.

For thirty long minutes, I tried on one outfit after another, but I hated them all. I was seconds away from faking my own death to get out of dinner when Tasha appeared in my doorway.

"What are you doing?" she asked, frowning when she glanced at the pile of discarded items on my bed. "Fall is an odd time for spring cleaning, don't you think?"

“No, it’s not that. I wish it was, but I have a dinner.”

“With the Pope?”

“No, but it kind of feels like it. Actually, no. That would’ve been better. This is at Jane Thayer and her husband’s house.”

She paused halfway to my bed. “Jane Thayer, as in, the head of Thayer Steelworks?”

“The one and only.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“That’s pretty freaking fancy.” Tasha’s eyebrows climbed to her hairline and she promptly switched direction from heading to my bed to coming to stand next to me at the closet. “What are you wearing?”

“Why do you think I’m standing here?”

She shrugged. “Well, you have to wear something.”

“That’s the current plan, but what am I supposed to wear to dinner at the house of not one, but two billionaires?”

“Beats me.” She suddenly stilled, a slight frown furrowing her brow. “Wait. *Thayer*. I wonder if my new friend is related to them.”

“Your new friend?”

“Yeah. From ethics class.” She pulled out her phone and opened her messaging app, showing me an unsaved contact of someone whose name came up as *Holden Thayer*. “Do you think your Thayer and mine are brother and sister?”

“I have no idea, but unless it’s going to help me figure out what to wear, we’ll have to work it out later.”

Tasha rummaged through a few things in my closet, finally pulling out a simple, dark blue dress. “Here. Wear this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It won’t make you look like you stood here for an hour trying to decide what to wear.”

“It’s been more than an hour.”

She gave me a pointed look. “Do you want them to know that?”

“Obviously not.”

“Then wear this.” She shoved the dress toward me and I took it, pulling it over my head before striding toward the mirror.

My stomach was in absolute knots as I looked myself over, but she’d been right. The dress was stylish and classy without making it look like I

was trying too hard. “Do you think rich people notice when someone doesn’t know which fork to use?”

Tasha laughed. “Relax, babe. I don’t know if they’d notice that, but I suspect everyone notices when someone is so nervous that their hands are shaking.”

“Shit, I didn’t even notice that until you pointed it out.” I shook my hands out, trying to diffuse the nervous energy.

“You’re welcome.” She started toward the door, turning back to smile at me once she’d reached it. “Just relax and enjoy tonight, Alicia. You deserve a break.”

As she spun around and disappeared into the hall, I decided she was right. I did deserve a break. As long as I didn’t make a fool of myself, I would have a great time.

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CHAPTER 3

HOLDEN

I went to Tasha's study group because she'd asked me three times, reminding me again during our ethics lecture this morning and then texting me just to make sure I hadn't forgotten. The girl was like a dog with a bone.

On the other hand, the textbook for this class had cost around the same as a small kidney. It seemed ethics at master's level required an intense financial commitment, which was probably why she was so determined to pass.

God only knew, if I had to buy a new textbook for the same class next year, Jane was going to sit me down and tear me a new one. I turned another page of the unreasonably expensive book, wondering if at some point, I was going to come across gold or diamonds in these pages.

So far, I hadn't had any luck on that front, but neither had any of the other six graduate students sitting around the scarred table in a study room at the library with me. Tasha leaned over as I skimmed the chapter we were supposed to be working our way through, evidently more concerned about getting people here than caring about what happened after we'd actually arrived.

She set down her highlighter and focused completely on me. "Can I ask you something?"

"No."

She sighed, glancing back down at her notes before going ahead and asking anyway. "Are you related to the Thayers, as in, *the* Thayer family?"

For a fraction of a heartbeat, I felt every muscle in my body lock up, but as soon as I realized it had happened, I forced myself to relax. “There are a lot of Thayers in Chicago.”

That was a lie. There weren’t a lot of Thayers anywhere, but I’d played this game before.

Unfortunately, Tasha didn’t have enough of a sense of propriety to let me get away with it, which was a pity. Most people did. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and slowly raked them across my face. “That’s not very convincing.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m not applying for a job with you.” I dropped my gaze back to my stupidly priced textbook and started reading again, but she still wasn’t giving up.

“My roommate got invited to dinner at a Thayer’s house.”

Before I could stop myself, my eyes shot over to hers. “She did?”

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations?” I said, wondering why any of my siblings would’ve invited this girl’s roommate over. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Alicia was super nervous about it,” she explained. “I figured it might make her feel better if I could text her that you were related to this other Thayer and that you’re okay. Grumpy as fuck, but not a bad person at least.”

I sighed. “Tasha?”

“Yeah?”

“Study,” I said firmly, not even interested enough to ask which Thayer we were talking about here.

My best guess was that Ryan and his wife, Maggie, were in town, and that she’d befriended a random college student. Age-wise—and Maggie-wise—it fit. Maggie was around the same age as me, and whenever they were here, she talked to *everybody*.

Thankfully, I stopped having to try to figure it out when Tasha dropped the subject and went to her textbook too, highlighting just about every sentence as she read. For the next couple hours, none of us talked about anything that wasn’t relevant to the course, and by the end of our session, I was surprised at how much I’d actually learned with these people.

They might not be able to disagree without eventually raising their voices and a couple of them would’ve been able to go on all night about moral philosophy, but all things considered, it had been worth coming.

As one of the guys closed his laptop, he looked around the table and grinned. “Anyone up for a beer? I think we’ve earned it.”

Several people agreed on autopilot, but I shook my head. “Sorry. I can’t.”

Tasha laughed. “Come on. It’s one beer.”

“If those aren’t famous last words,” I said. “Come tomorrow morning, at least one of you will be waking up somewhere you don’t recognize.”

She groaned. “Yeah, and that person will probably be me, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“That’s right. I don’t have to worry about it. Because I’m not going.”

As I packed my textbook into my bag, Tasha got up and shook her head at me. “God, you’re miserable.”

“I’m a delight, actually.”

“Then come for a drink, man,” the guy who’d suggested this fieldtrip in the first place said. “None of us are staying for more than one.”

“Yeah, it’s still a no.”

Tasha swung her bag over her shoulder and laughed again, her head still shaking. “Based on your personality, you’re going to find cubicle life a paradise after graduation.”

I didn’t even argue with her. Least of all to let her know that I already had an office waiting for me and that I would never spend so much as an hour in a cubicle. After nodding my goodbyes, I headed out and I didn’t look back, not once even considering changing my mind.

I stepped out into the cold wind stirring up the leaves that had already fallen to the sidewalk. My phone buzzed and I sighed but pulled it out of my pocket. Another call from Alex. I ignored it as I crossed the parking lot and climbed into my car.

Avoiding my brother-in-law was going to become a full-time job at this rate, but it would be worth it if I could also avoid the reason he was calling. He tried calling again as I drove home, and finally, as I was pulling into my driveway, he texted too.

Alex: I have two questions for you. 1. Why are you ignoring me? 2. We’re having people over for dinner tonight. You should come.

I read the message but didn’t respond. I climbed out of the car and grabbed my backpack off the passenger seat. Before I’d even reached the front door, another text came through.

Alex: Come on, Holden. I know you're currently living off protein shakes and boxed mac and cheese for no reason. Just come to dinner. At least let us feed you proper food.

I shook my head and unlocked the door, mulling over a reply. If I didn't send anything at all, he would drive over here and physically drag me to their house. We'd reached the point where that was a definite possibility, even if I did reply, actually. It was simply more likely if I didn't.

That was the thing about Alex. Once you were part of the select group of people he considered *loved ones*, he never gave up. He was there for everything and everyone in every possible way, whether you were winning or losing and regardless of the fact that we weren't biologically related.

When he'd stepped up to the plate and married my sister for the sake of our company and theirs, he'd blown into our lives with all the subtlety of a hurricane and he'd never left. That was also why my relationship with him had grown into what it had.

Alex had been there for Wyatt and me in ways our own parents never had, showing up and trying to guide us through the hard stuff when I'd just started college and Wyatt had still been in high school. Whether I liked it or not, I owed the guy. So finally, I typed out a quick reply.

Me: Thanks but not tonight. I just got home from a study group and I'm beat.

Almost immediately, three little dots appeared, jumping until they suddenly stopped, then reappeared, then disappeared again. I leaned against the kitchen counter, wondering just what the hell he was typing for it to take this long, but eventually, the dots just disappeared and never reappeared again.

Since Alex wasn't the type to abandon conversations, especially when he'd been trying to start one for this long, he was either offended, plotting, or their guests had arrived. Either way, it seemed I was off the hook for now, so I put my phone down.

Naturally, as soon as I turned away from it, it buzzed. I grunted in disappointment but reached back and picked it up. Surprisingly, it wasn't Alex or even Jane this time.

Tasha Ethics Study Group: Did you take the folder with my notes in it when we left the library? I have your notes, so I think we might've forgotten to swap back after that last exchange.

My extremities turned ice cold. I unzipped my backpack on the counter, and as soon as I opened it, I realized we had, in fact, forgotten to swap back. The folder I had was bright purple. Mine, unfortunately, was black.

Me: Yeah, I've got it.

Begrudgingly, I typed out another message just seconds after sending the first.

Me: What's your address? I'll bring it over and grab mine.

Right now, I would've preferred to be going in for open-heart surgery over having to run this particular errand, but those notes were worth their weight in gold and we had our first assignment coming up soon.

I guess it's true what they say. There really ain't no rest for the weary. Especially when the weary is a grad student.

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CHAPTER 4

ALICIA

When my GPS announced that I'd arrived at my destination, I blinked up at the house on my left and wondered if I'd inserted the wrong address. Obviously, I'd known Alex and Jane were wealthy, but the place I'd pulled up to on the Gold Coast was sprawling, probably covering more square footage than the footprint of the library.

I nearly turned around then, and I nearly turned around again after finally parking and climbing out of my car. The house looming ahead was beautiful but understated. With its large windows, a vibrant garden out front, and painted a light gray, it could've looked like just another house, but its modernity, a couple well-placed water features, and the aesthetic of the tiles and plants out front whispered that it was expensive.

Super, incredibly, well out of my comfort zone expensive. People like me didn't belong in houses like this. *Maybe I can text Jane and tell her I came down with something. A sudden plague, perhaps.*

Even as I made way up to the front door, following a winding path surrounded by flowerbeds and hedges, I considered pretending that I'd received an urgent call from the library. I just wasn't sure it would be believable.

What emergency could there possibly be at the children's department at this time of night? We're not even open right now.

Saying there might be a fire probably wasn't worth inducing the kind of panic the news would cause a woman actively planning a fundraiser there,

but I was still thinking about it when two kids came running outside. “Alicia!”

Well, that settles it. I’m busted.

“Cam!” I stopped walking and dropped down to my haunches, my dress thankfully long enough that I didn’t flash a minor in the process.

Cameron and his sister reached me at almost exactly the same time, throwing themselves into my arms like there was absolutely no way I could possibly fall over. I laughed, barely managing to keep from landing on my ass as I wound my arms around them in turn.

“Oh my God,” I said, grinning so hard my face started hurting. “Look at you two. When did you get so big?”

A proud smile spread on Cam’s lips. “I’m in elementary school now. I can write!”

“No.” I widened my eyes at him. “You? That can’t be true.”

“It is.”

I smiled, feeling genuinely emotional as I looked between them. It had been months since I’d last seen either of them and they were enormous now. “I can’t believe you’re writing. You should still be a toddler.”

He squealed with laughter. “No. I even have homework now.”

“That’s not possible.” I shook my head and let go of them, then pushed to my feet. “I remember you being this big.”

I held my hand near my knee and Cam rolled his eyes. “That was a long time ago.”

“Well, if all that’s true, then you have my condolences on the homework,” I said solemnly. “I know it’s tough, but you should always do it. That’ll make you even smarter than you already are.”

“You sound like my mom.”

“Ah, that’s because your mom and I both did all our homework, so we’re super smart now.”

As he sighed, Jane appeared in the doorway, a smile on her lips as she leaned against the frame. “Would you guys like to come in, or should I just leave you out here and send some food?”

The kids ran back to the house and I straightened, almost wishing they would have opted for what was behind door number two. Having a picnic out here with them instead of whatever was waiting in there would’ve suited me just fine.

Jane pushed away from the doorframe as I approached. Still smiling, she pulled me into a hug. “Hey, Alicia. I’m so glad you made it.”

“I almost left,” I admitted as I hugged her. “Unfortunately, it’s like your children smelled my fear and came outside with the express purpose of stopping me.”

She laughed. “Why would you possibly be scared?”

I gestured vaguely toward the house. “Uh, I don’t know. Maybe because you live in a mansion?”

“Well, it’s not like it’s haunted,” she said, laughing again before glancing back at the house. “At least, I don’t *think* it’s haunted. We’ve never had any problems, anyway.”

“That’s probably because even the ghosts are too intimidated,” I muttered.

She rolled her eyes and waved me in. “Come on in. You’ll see. There’s nothing to be intimidated by.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. As soon as I stepped through the door, I realized Jane and I had very different opinions on what qualified as intimidating. The house was warm and lived-in, with children’s toys in corners and pictures on every available surface, the scent of roast chicken and something buttery and delicious wafting through the air, but I still had an almost overwhelming urge to apologize for my shoes.

They were perfectly clean. It was just that they had no business being on floors like these, expensively tiled and immaculate, with richly colored rugs scattered in strategic places and plush carpets in some of the rooms we passed. Jane led me to the sitting room, smiling as she brought her hand out to rest on my arm.

“Everyone, this is Alicia.”

To their credit, they all turned to smile at me before they went back to their conversations, some even giving me brief waves, but as she proceeded to lead me further in and tell me their names, I quickly learned that her and Alex’s so-called friends were some of the most influential people in town.

I’d read these names in news articles and seen pictures of these faces in the tabloids staring up at me from grocery store counters. They were successful people, important, wealthy, and way out of my league. Yet every last one of them was friendly enough as they shook my hand. Even if I heard two of the guys comparing notes on yachts—without laughing.

Holy shit, they’re not joking.

Alex stood when I approached. “Alicia.”

“Hi.”

He smiled and offered his hand. “It’s good to finally see you outside of the library. Jane was thrilled you were able to join us.”

“Thanks for having me.”

I shook with him, surprised once again that he seemed so normal. Alex Westwood was the stuff legends were made of in business circles, but on the very rare occasion I’d met him before, he’d never been pretentious or cocky. In fact, Alex and Jane had *both* always come across as nothing but kind and caring.

“Of course, I’m thrilled she’s here. You should be too. Alicia is the reason half our library events run as smoothly as they do,” Jane said from my side. “I’d be screwed without her.”

I felt my cheeks flush and prayed my dollar-store makeup was good enough to hide it. “Oh, I’m not sure that’s true. You’re the brains behind the operation.”

She shrugged. “My ideas wouldn’t mean anything if I didn’t have the best right-hand woman in the history of right-hand women.”

A few of the people who’d been with Alex when we’d approached finally tuned into the conversation.

Jane smiled as she looked around the circle. “I’m serious. She helps organize the galas and fundraising events every year and she’s incredible.”

I shook my head. “I’m moderately competent. At best.”

Alex laughed and Jane sighed, handing over a glass of white wine. I accepted it happily, grateful that it gave my hands something to do while also wondering whether these people could tell how often I ate noodles for dinner.

When the conversation finally moved away from me, I stood in relieved silence, simply listening to them talk about work, upcoming events, and kids. Just normal life stuff, which I found odd. Outside of that one conversation about yachts, nobody even mentioned a bloated stock portfolio or an exceptionally ruthless hostile takeover.

Huh, would you look at that? These people are actually nice.

I’d thought I would be going home and telling Tasha I’d spent the evening being judged by rich strangers, but instead, they included me in their conversations as we drifted toward the dining table, asking questions about my life, my work at the library, and even listening to my answers.

Alex took the seat next to mine, friendly to a fault as he turned toward me. “So, Alicia, where are you from? I feel like I’ve spent the last few years hearing your name more often than I’ve heard my own. The kids adore you. As does my wife.”

I chuckled. “I adore them right back, and I’m from right here, actually. Chicago, born and raised.”

“Really?” he asked. “Same here. Whereabouts?”

“Oh, I, uh, I have a house in Hyde Park, but I only lived there until I was seven. I grew up in the suburbs after that.”

A flicker of confusion mingled with surprise in his eyes. “You own a house in Hyde Park?”

“Yeah, I inherited it from my parents,” I explained lightly. “After they died, I was raised by my aunt and uncle at their house, which is why I grew up in the suburbs.”

Sympathy softened his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” I gave him the smile I’d been practicing basically my whole life. “It was a long time ago, though.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make it suck any less, does it?” He took a swig of his wine, sounding like he actually knew what he was talking about. Briefly, I wondered who he’d lost, but I decided not to pry. “At least you still have the house, right? It must be nice to have been able to keep that connection to them.”

“It was.”

“*Was*?” he asked, frowning. “I thought you said you still have the house?”

Shit.

It had been a quick, careless slip of the tongue, but nothing seemed to get past this guy. My cheeks heated again, and I took a sip of my drink before I gave my head a slight shake. “Yeah, I, uh, I do still own it, but I’m probably going to have to sell it soon.”

“Time to move on?” he asked, which wasn’t an unreasonable assumption, but I shook my head.

“No, not time,” I said. “Taxes.”

“Ah.”

“They’re a real bastard on a property like that,” I said, then flushed an even deeper shade of red for having just said *bastard* in front of Alex

Westwood, but mercifully, it didn't look like his cultured ears were about to start bleeding.

Instead, he laughed. "Yeah, tell me about it. Property ownership isn't all it's cracked up to be. There's the taxes, the maintenance, and somehow, always something that needs to be replaced inside."

"Exactly," I said quietly, surprised that it sounded like he actually understood this, too. "In my case, there's also back taxes the estate couldn't keep up with, so unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, the maintenance won't be my problem for much longer."

"Do you *want* to sell?"

"No."

Something changed in the way he was looking at me, almost like the gears in his head were now spinning at a thousand miles an hour. Jane snapped him out of it when she announced that dinner was about to be served and he refocused, but there was still something strangely contemplative about him while we ate.

The rest of the evening was just as pleasant, with no one outright judging me for so obviously not belonging in company like theirs. When the first people announced that they were leaving, however, it was my opportunity to get out while I was ahead.

"I should probably get going too," I said. "It's getting late and I've got an early morning."

Jane tried convincing me to have another drink, but in the end, she walked me out and said goodbye. Alex was right beside her, as friendly and warm as ever, but whenever he caught my gaze, it still looked like there was more going on in his head.

It was pretty strange, but on the other hand, rich people probably just enjoyed discussing property. That was the subject we'd been on when his switch had flipped, after all. *Maybe figuring out taxes is a hobby of his.*

By the time I got home, I'd mostly shaken it off, just relieved to have survived without making a fool of myself. The lights were on inside when I pulled up in the driveway, which meant Tasha was home.

I smiled when I opened the front door, about to announce how proud I was of myself for emerging victorious, when my footsteps slammed to a stop. Tasha was here, alright, but she wasn't alone.

There was a man in my living room. A very tall, broad man standing next to my couch while Tasha dug through her backpack, which made me

suspect his connection to her was school rather than a date.

The thing about this man, however, was that I knew him. He looked over as the door fell shut behind me, and my heart catapulted into my throat. This was the guy who'd helped me save the ramen from the road. He had the same artfully mussed, dark blond hair, the same exceptionally cut features, and the same aloof, haughty expression in his eyes when he'd told me to wear a helmet.

Across the short distance between us, his gaze met mine and locked on, and somehow, for some utterly inexplicable reason, he *seriously* did *not* look happy to see me. In fact, it didn't look like he liked what he saw at all.

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CHAPTER 5

HOLDEN

I hadn't even planned on stepping off the sidewalk when I got to Tasha's place in Hyde Park, but now, I was standing in the living room of a rather glorious brownstone, holding a glass of wine I hadn't wanted while Tasha searched for the folder she'd already misplaced.

"How did you lose it that fast?" I asked, genuinely confused. "It's been, like, an hour since you texted me and you had it then."

Tasha appeared out of a room off the hall. "It's not lost. I simply can't remember where I put it."

"That's the same thing."

"Stop being so negative," she said, smiling as she darted toward another room. "I was getting ready to start with the assignment and I had to get all my stuff together."

As she disappeared into the next room, I sighed and looked around, still surprised by how nice her house was. Old and full of character, it was the kind of historic home that had survived multiple generations without losing its original grandeur. No matter how many designs of horrible wallpaper had probably covered these walls along the way.

Tasha emerged from the room, carrying a stack of papers and looking triumphant. "Look what I found."

"That's not my folder."

"No, but it might just be better." She shoved the stack toward me. "They're notes I got from a girl who aced this class last year and I'm going to let you borrow them. As long as you promise to return them tomorrow."

“Thanks, but I’d really rather just have my folder.”

“Trust me, you’re going to want these too.”

When I just kept staring instead of reaching for them, she set them down on the couch and rolled her eyes. “Have some wine.”

The glass in my hand was still full, but again, I hadn’t come here for a drink. “I really should get going.”

“I know, but you’re making me nervous, and if I’m nervous, I’ll never find it. So just drink.”

I sighed and took a tiny sip, grimacing at the battery-acid taste that hit my tongue. “Fuck, what even is this?”

“It’s wine.”

“No, it’s really not.”

Tasha laughed. “You know, our study group kind of reminds me of the people on this dating show I watch.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” She reached for a backpack lying on the counter but didn’t make any moves to open it. “They’re all on this island and the personalities of their group matches ours almost exactly.”

An island? Why the fuck would they be on an island?

“I don’t even want to know where you’re going with this.”

She grinned. “See? That’s exactly what I mean. You’re the mysterious one who refuses to participate but signed up anyway.”

“Except, I didn’t sign up. You begged me.”

She scoffed. “I did *not* beg you. I gave you a golden opportunity and you were smart enough to take it, but anyway, Justin is like the finance guy who definitely wants to hook up with Cassandra, who’s like the consultant girl.”

“I have no idea who any of those people are.”

She groaned. “You just spent *two hours* with the group. Surely, you know their names by now.”

“That’s not a requirement for passing the class, so no.”

“God, you really are in an emotional bunker,” she muttered, then finally unzipped the backpack and started lifting books, more piles of paper, and a few other folders in there. “Maybe I never even took it out.”

Just as I was about to give up and tell her I’d get it from her tomorrow, the front door opened and I turned, practically swallowing my tongue when I recognized the girl who’d just walked in. *No. It can’t be. What?*

That was the woman who'd nearly been mowed off her bicycle the other night. I would know those eyes anywhere. They were the ones I'd nearly had to scrape off the damn street.

Only tonight, she was wearing a cocktail dress that forced me to fix my face and keep my eyes elsewhere. *But yeah, I definitely know her.*

Tasha finally stopped digging through her bag, her face lighting up when she saw the girl frozen just inside the door. "Alicia! You're just in time."

Alicia. So that's her name. Unless I was very much mistaken, that had also been the name of the roommate who'd been nervous about having dinner with a Thayer. *What in the actual fuck is happening right now?*

She finally broke eye contact with me, moving slowly as she blinked and turned toward Tasha. "Just in time for what?"

"Holden is going to stay and watch the show with us," she said, waving me toward the couch. "Sit down, would you?"

Before I could ask why I would possibly stay to watch TV with them when all I'd wanted since I'd gotten here was to leave, Alicia finally moved.

"What show?" she asked, her voice a little breathy, but I couldn't fault her for that. I was pretty fucking taken aback by this turn of events myself.

Tasha sighed. "Stranded for Love."

I snorted. "Is that really what it's called?"

"Yeah." She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Nothing. It's just a really terrible name, is all."

"You think everything is terrible."

Alicia glanced between us, then shook her head and started toward the stairs. "I actually have a few emails to catch up on tonight, but I'll be down shortly."

Once she disappeared upstairs, my heart rate slowly returned to normal, even if I was still completely bowled over about the fact that I was standing in the house Ramen Girl lived in. "She doesn't seem to be as big a fan of the show as you are."

Tasha sighed. "She's just a little shy around new people."

That sort of figures. After the way she'd taken off that night, I had wondered if she was just flat-out rude or if there was another explanation, but obviously, I'd thought I would never find out. *Plus, there's the fact that I shouldn't have wondered about her at all.*

“Does being shy mean she’s only going to come downstairs once I leave?” I asked, even though it had nothing to do with me. “Either way, I’m not staying to watch reality TV with you. All I need is my folder.”

She nodded and reopened the backpack. “You should stay. I think you’d like the show. It’s ridiculously cheesy, and horrible, and perfect. I also think it’d be good for Alicia if you stayed too.”

I grimaced. “Why? You just said she was shy. Maybe having a stranger in her space is the last thing she needs after a day at work.”

“If she had any other job, I might agree, but Alicia works with kids,” she said. “At the library. Those aren’t really known for being loud and busy.”

“I think the kids’ section anywhere is known for being loud and busy.”

Tasha shot me an amused look. “Wait, are you actually defending her, Holden Thayer?”

“No.” I scowled. “It’s called logic, Tasha.”

She laughed. “Uh-huh. Okay, if you say so, but anyway, the point is that she’s one of those quiet, bookish people who sometimes needs a little nudge to interact with actual grownups on occasion.”

“Who said I was a grownup?” I asked dryly, and despite hating the fact that I was curious about her, I finally just decided to indulge myself. “Isn’t she the same person you mentioned earlier? The roommate who was having dinner with a Thayer?”

“She is.” Tasha glanced at me. “Jane Thayer. Do you know her? There was a—” She suddenly snapped her fingers and raced around the kitchen counter into what I was pretty sure was a pantry. “Aha! As soon as I thought about dinner, I remembered where I put it!”

When she reappeared, she had my folder in her hands and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. But instead of handing it over, she gave me a smile that immediately made me suspicious. A second later, she confirmed that my gut feeling had been right.

“I’ll give it to you on one condition,” she said. “Tell me if you’re related to the Royal Thayers.”

“It’s mine and you took it. I shouldn’t have to meet any conditions to get it back.”

She shrugged. “All’s fair in love and war.”

“I wasn’t aware this was either of those things.”

“And yet, I’m the one holding the folder.” She cocked her hip against the counter, her smile turning downright smug. “Are you, or are you not, a Thayer?”

I rolled my eyes. “You already know that’s my last name.”

As the mistake she’d made registered on her features, I used the distraction to pluck my folder from her hand. She instantly refocused on me, scowling as she crossed her arms. “You know I wasn’t just talking about your last name. I was asking if you were one of *them*. The *Royal* Thayers.”

“I hate to break it to you, but there’s no royalty in Chicago.” I set the full glass of battery acid down on the table and lifted the folder a little higher. “Thanks for this.”

As I said it, footsteps sounded on the stairs. Alicia paused but then descended further. She’d changed into light pink sweats and an oversized t-shirt, her golden hair pulled into a messy bun I wanted nothing more than to tug on. Just so I could watch those long locks tumble back down.

Okay. Yeah. That’s my cue. I need to get out of here.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and pretended to check it. It wasn’t ringing, but I glanced at Tasha anyway and started backing toward the door. “I have to take this, but I’ll see you in class.”

She breathed out a heavy sigh. “You’re really not staying?”

I shook my head, turning just as Alicia reached the bottom step. Our gazes clashed, and for some reason that defied all logic, I *winked* at her. The blush that rose to her cheeks in response threatened to rearrange my entire nervous system, so I yanked open the door and focused on getting the hell out of Dodge.

“You really are no fun at all!” Tasha shouted after me, but instead of even acknowledging that I’d heard her, I just walked right out and let the door slam shut behind me.

I really, *desperately* didn’t need this right now. Curiosity was for people who *weren’t* about to stand by and watch a train wreck happen without being able to do anything to stop it. I wasn’t one of those people.

Instead, I was the guy who was going to be standing firmly in the splash zone, or whatever that was called in train terms, and I was definitely going to get hit by the fallout.

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CHAPTER 6

ALICIA

Usually, I worked on Saturdays but not today. I wished I was, though. At the library, at least people only asked me about books, or for recommendations, and on occasion, where the bathroom was. I felt far more equipped to deal with that than this.

My heart was pounding in my throat where I sat in front of the bank manager, my hands folded tightly in my lap and my lungs refusing to function the way they should. I'd been *dreading* this meeting for weeks, and now that it was here, I was sweating bullets.

God, I hate banks.

The man sitting across the desk held the roof over my head in his hands, but instead of saying anything, he shrewdly studied my financial profile on his computer. It had been long enough since he'd opened it that I was definitely in trouble.

Obviously, I already knew what he was looking at and there was nothing good in there, but I'd been holding out hope that maybe, just *maybe*, he would hand me a miracle. The hard line of his jaw and the deep furrow on his brow said that wasn't about to happen.

The knot at the center of my chest pulled tighter. Between my salary and my student loans, there simply wasn't any wiggle room. After my loan payment had been sent off, my checking account had precisely enough money to allow me to buy food and some basics.

That was it.

I had a savings account, but it was so close to being drained that it was hardly worth mentioning, and hell, I'd even sold my near-junkyard status Honda a couple months ago to cover my bills, but it had all caught up to me despite every effort I'd made.

This wasn't even the first time I was in this chair, but before, I'd managed to convince them I could fix it. I'd truly believed I would be able to but not this time. Not now. There was nothing left to figure out anymore. My options had run completely dry.

As the stoic manager finally looked back up at me and shook his head, I knew they were about to take the last thing I had left. "You mentioned previously you were applying for grants, Ms. Nettles. Has there been any progress on that front?"

"No, sir. I applied, but the grants didn't come through."

"How about the historical society?"

"They couldn't help." My eyes stung as I admitted it. "I even spoke to the estate lawyer again, but there's nothing he can do either."

The man pulled his glasses off and folded them in one hand, leaning back in his chair before bringing his gaze back to mine. "I'm sorry, Ms. Nettles. I'm sympathetic to your situation, but I'm afraid the bank can't offer you a loan at this moment."

My heart sank to my knees. "I understand."

"I don't think you do." He brought his elbows to his armrests, his expression softening as he looked back at me like he was explaining something to a granddaughter he was fond of, but who wasn't too bright. "The amount of back taxes owed on the property is significant. Over ten times your annual salary."

I flinched. "I realize that, but I was hoping you might be able to accept a smaller monthly repayment amount."

"Ms. Nettles," he said gently. "You don't have investments or other assets you can use as collateral. It simply wouldn't be responsible for us or for *you* to add to the debt you're already carrying. No matter how much the monthly installments would be, you cannot afford it."

I stared back at him, feeling like my throat was closing up and my eyeballs were about to explode from the pressure. *This is it, then. I'm losing my house. My parents' house. The last thing I had left of them.*

They hadn't been incredibly wealthy people, but they had been well off. Aside from the house, which had been paid off, they'd also left me a small

inheritance. Unfortunately, it hadn't been enough for my upbringing, college, and to keep up with the taxes on the house.

My aunt and uncle had spent most of it during my childhood, not leaving me with enough money to get a degree or to settle the back taxes. I'd been working my ass off to pay that back throughout my early twenties, but after I'd realized it was going to take more than just hard work to raise the amount I needed to settle my account with the city, I'd done everything I could.

I'd exhausted every option, filled out every form, and applied to every organization who might've been able to help, but it *still* hadn't been enough. That was the worst part of it all.

None of this was my fault. It was never supposed to happen this way, and yet, as I stood up from my chair, I knew it was well and truly over, and it broke my heart into millions of tiny pieces.

The bank manager stood too, slowly extending his hand toward me. "I'm sorry, Ms. Nettles. I wish there was something else we could do."

I shook with him, trying desperately to fight the tidal wave of emotion thrashing around inside, and nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Having reached the end of my rope in keeping this inside, I dropped his hand as soon as I could and spun toward the door, leaving his office before I fell apart. *I'm going to have to sell the house. Oh, God. I'm really, actually going to lose it. I'm so sorry, Mommy. I'm sorry, Dad. I tried. I really did.*

Silent tears started streaming down my face as I pushed at the glass panel of the revolving doors and stumbled onto the sidewalk. Heartbroken and keeping my head down so no one would see the rivers running down my cheeks, I tried to process that I was about to put my parents' house on the market when I smacked into something hard.

Solid enough that I bounced backward.

A hand caught my arm before I could embarrass myself further by falling down on the sidewalk. "Whoa. Hey, are you okay?"

When I looked up, I found myself staring into the semi-familiar blue eyes of Alex Westwood. Naturally, the multi-*billionaire* was the person I had literally run into seconds after finding out that I would never have enough money to pay the taxes on my house.

"Alica?" Alex frowned, doing a slow double-take as his gaze swept across my face. "Shit, I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

“No, and it wasn’t your fault. I wasn’t watching where I was going, so *I’m* sorry.” I pulled myself upright and adjusted the strap of my purse on my shoulder. “I should get going. Send my love to Jane.”

As I made to move past him, he gave me a decidedly fatherly look. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You really aren’t.”

“I’m just having a bad day.”

Alex made a soft sound, like a tsk, then checked his watch and took my arm again. “There’s a coffee shop across the street. Let’s go.”

“Excuse me?”

“Coffee, Alicia. It must be a *really* bad day if you don’t even recognize that word.” He gave me a soft smile, already leading me toward the intersection. “Jane would never forgive me if she found out I ran into you looking like this and just left you, so I’m getting you a cup of coffee.”

It sounded more like an instruction than an invitation, and while I wanted to just go home so I could fall apart in private while I still had a house to do it in, I followed. “Coffee isn’t going to fix this, Alex. You really don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t, but I do lots of things I don’t have to,” he said. “In fact, I find the things I don’t have to do are those I enjoy doing most. It might come as a surprise, but the things I have to do are honestly pretty boring most of the time.”

It turned out the coffee shop he led me to really was directly across the street from the bank. He hadn’t lied about that, but he’d neglected to mention that it was at the base of the massive Westwood & Sons corporate tower.

I glanced up at his name on the fancy wall across the lobby and felt my heart squeeze again. “Alex, it’s fine. I’m fine. Really.”

“Coffee, Alicia,” he insisted gently, veering toward the interior entrance of the shop, but then bypassing it.

Through the windows, I saw the line inside, people working on laptops, and even a pastry selection I would give my teeth for but would never be able to afford. But instead of even slowing, Alex just kept right on walking.

“I thought you said we were going to the coffee shop.”

“No. I mentioned there was a coffee shop and there is one. That’s not where we’re going, though.”

“It’s not?”

“No.” He approached a private elevator, pulled a badge from the inside pocket of his jacket, and scanned it across a reader mounted next to the polished silver doors. They opened a fraction of a second later and Alex strode into the car. “The coffee upstairs is better anyway.”

I frowned, but at least he’d let go of my arm, which meant that while he was already on the elevator, I was still outside of it. As I stared back at him, waiting for me to join him with a patient expression on his face, I wondered if I should be panicking right now.

Alex had never given me a reason to be scared of him, but I’d also never been alone with him before and he was a powerful man. *Those are usually the type we’re supposed to be wary of, right?*

“It’s about the house, isn’t it?” he asked a moment later, keeping the doors open with one finger on the button in the interior. “That’s why you came out of the bank crying.”

I stepped into the elevator immediately but not because I was suddenly, magically sure of him. This was simply a survival instinct.

There were moments when a person no longer had control over their own body, and for me, this was one of them. While I normally reserved bursting into tears for private locations, the elevator doors had barely slid shut before I became the human definition of a torrential downpour.

“Oh, shit.” Alex mumbled at my side, sounding genuinely startled. “I’m so sorry, Alicia. I didn’t bring it up to be insensitive.”

I couldn’t formulate a verbal response, so I just shook my head to let him know that I hadn’t thought that was what he’d done. In fact, I knew he’d brought it up to explain why he’d brought me to a private elevator and was insisting on not having coffee where dozens of other people would’ve had to witness this.

But still.

The sounds coming out of me were awful, sort of like someone was drowning a cat who also had the hiccups, but no matter how hard I tried, I could *not* stop. Because it was about the house. The house I would have to pack up soon. Parts of it I’d never even touched would have to be boxed up and—

Alex reached over and awkwardly patted my shoulder. “I thought so, but look, I have a proposition to make and I promise, I have both tissues and coffee in my office. Just hear me out. In the meantime, take this.”

He produced a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it over, not saying anything else as we ascended to his office. Stuck inside a private elevator with one of the most powerful men in Chicago, I bawled my eyes out, and even though my heart was already shattered into a million tiny shards, I couldn’t help feeling that he was about to make things much worse.

I would just have to hope that after that, whatever this proposition was, it would also somehow be able to make them better.

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CHAPTER 7

HOLDEN

The basketball hit the rim, bounced off the backboard, and came straight back to me. I caught it, took a few steps, and shot again. The swish of the ball flying into the net echoed through the otherwise empty court. I jogged backward to grab another ball, wiping sweat off my brow with my forearm.

It was amazing how, the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. This recreation center had been my refuge once, the only place in the city where no one had cared about my last name or the fact that my dad was just another rich guy who'd stepped out on his wife and allowed his new, young sidepiece to tempt him into screwing over other rich guys.

Now here I was again, so many years later, still finding peace in the same place and trying to drown out the noise in my head about the same issue. I was lining up another shot when the gym doors opened and Alex strode in.

Neither surprised nor enthused about his arrival, I didn't even have to turn my head all the way to know it was him. "You're becoming predictable."

Alex laughed, tossed his gym bag down, and walked onto the court. "Good morning to you, too."

He picked up a ball from the rack and started dribbling while I went back to shooting. The two of us fell into an easy, familiar rhythm. Back in the day, this had been our thing. I would come home from college and Alex

would be there, waiting to shoot hoops with me, or drag me to lunch, or ask annoying questions about classes and whatnot.

It had taken me a while to realize what he'd been doing, but he'd stepped up, stepped in, and filled a space in my life that had been pretty empty—my father's. It had worked back then, but I was older now. I'd seen more of the world and I'd learned that it wasn't kind simply because you tried to be good, especially for my family.

For almost half an hour, Alex and I played in complete silence, the only sound our shoes against the hardwood and basketballs hitting the floor. Then Alex caught a rebound and tucked the ball against his hip instead of shooting again.

"Okay, that's enough. Let's talk," he said patiently. "What's your problem lately, Holden?"

I kept dribbling my ball. "Nothing."

Alex watched me smack the ball against the floor, sighing when it bounced the wrong way and damn near hit me in the face. "It's either about Court getting out or that you regret going back to school. Those are the options I've narrowed it down to."

"Aren't you a genius?"

Instead of taking offense, Alex smirked. "I am, actually, but in this case, I didn't even really have to apply myself."

"I'll try to have more interesting problems in the future."

"Thank you." He tossed the ball toward me. "Try for something incredibly intricate and complicated with a lot of moving parts. I like those problems."

"I'll do my best." I shot again but missed. *Because why not lose almost every degree of skill I've ever possessed for this game on top of everything else?*

Alex retrieved the ball but didn't pass it back. "In the meantime, since those are the problems we're currently facing, let's focus on them. How's school? I know Jane wouldn't take no for an answer. It's okay if you're pissed about it."

"Thanks, but I'm fine. School is fine, and to save you the trouble of having to think of another clever way to ask, I don't regret going back, Alex."

He arched a brow at me. "Are you sure? My wife threatened to rearrange your life unless you agreed. That doesn't always create positive

feelings toward furthering one's education."

I snorted. "I don't need positive feelings, so you can drop your corporate HR speak. Jane didn't threaten me. She merely strongly implied that I would be wasting my potential if I didn't do it."

"Does that mean you've come to agree with her?"

"No. I liked working. I liked my office, my projects, and my deadlines. I *really* liked my salary, but I still don't regret going back. An MBA is something no one can take from me. That makes it worth it."

Alex inhaled a deep breath, watching me without saying anything for a long moment as I grabbed another ball and started dribbling again. "So it's about Court."

My jaw clenched, but I didn't confirm or deny it. "Whatever."

"I know he's a sore subject for you, man, but he *is* getting out, so you can't avoid it, or him, forever."

"Watch me."

"Have you even gone to visit him once, Holden?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"No."

Alex sighed. "Have you at least called him? Have you talked to him at all?"

"No, because unlike most of the people I share a last name with, I don't have a single fucking thing to say to that man. Leave it alone."

Red dots scattered across my field of vision just thinking about it. My siblings could visit him. They could talk to him. Hell, they could invite him to live with them after he got out.

But I could go the rest of my life—happily—without ever having to lay eyes on the man again. After the arrest, they'd all made it so complicated, trying to pick through the wreckage to salvage what they could of their respective relationships with him.

As far as I was concerned, there was nothing complicated about it. In fact, it was pretty fucking simple. He'd destroyed our lives, crushed our hearts, paraded his mistress around like her vagina had a direct link to the fountain of youth, and committed several felonies while he was at it.

Why the hell did I need to go sit in a prison visiting room and give him an opportunity to explain why?

Because of him, not only had I lost my entire life as I'd known it, but my trust fund, and those of every last one of my brothers, had been frozen. Technically, the funds were supposed to have been released a few months ago, but then something had happened. I hadn't even asked what the issue had been this time. Now, Colin and Jane were once again in a tizzy trying to get it back, but it was a mess.

It always was.

After watching those two meet with lawyers, have hope, get crushed all over again, and then restart the whole process for almost a fucking decade, I wasn't ready to forgive and forget. There was always something, some new mess for them to clean up. All of it courtesy of what our dad had done so many years ago.

And for what? For nothing. To get his dick wet. That's it. What a role model.

In the meantime, I was broke as shit. All the money I *did* have was tied up in stocks and investments, completely inaccessible. I could afford my rent, but since I wasn't working right now, being back in college was sucking me dry.

Alex bounced the ball and sent it flying toward the hoop. Naturally, it dropped exactly where it was supposed to, neatly sliding through the net.

I rolled my eyes, my head shaking, and I took another shot of my own. "Why are you here, Alex?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about. It's important, and since you've been avoiding me, I thought I'd come to you."

"If it's important, that means it's a conversation you'd rather have in a conference room, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "I like conference rooms, but I'm adaptable enough to pivot when necessary."

"Well, by all means, pivot away and just spit it out."

He smiled and shrugged. "When Jane and I got news about the Thayer money being gone, probably for good this time, we decided to set up new trust funds for you, Wyatt, and Ryan."

My eyebrows shot up. "You did what? And what about Isaac and Colin?"

He shook his head. "They weren't interested. Thayer Steelworks' partnership with GlobalStar has meant big things for each of them in their personal capacities, so they turned us down."

“Is that an option for me?”

“No.” Alex dropped down to sit on his ass right there on the court, waiting for me to do the same. “Your brothers could afford to turn us down, Holden. You can’t.”

“Shouldn’t I get to decide that? Where are these trust funds coming from, anyway? Because I don’t want anything from my father—”

“This money isn’t connected to him at all. It’s not dirty.”

I let out a long breath and met his gaze. “So where did it come from?”

“Jane and me,” he said. “It’s clean, Holden. I swear. It’s money from the Westwoods and the Thayers that your father never has and never will touch.”

I blinked hard. “You can do that, just… make new trusts?”

Alex shrugged. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but in a nutshell, yes. I can. We did the same thing for Ryan, and since he’s married, he’s already gained access to his.”

Everything inside me turned to ice. “Since he’s *married*?”

“Yes.” Alex held my gaze, gesturing for me to sit again, and this time, I did.

My knees were on the verge of giving out after what he’d just said anyway. “What does that mean?”

“It means there are conditions attached to Westwood inheritances,” he said. “I’m aware that most people consider our traditions archaic. Ridiculous, even. But those traditions have protected my family for over a century and they can do the same for yours.”

My heart slammed against my ribs so hard that it was almost painful, but he wasn’t wrong. The Westwoods were a financial juggernaut. Obviously, my own family hadn’t fared quite so well. I didn’t say any of that though, since the speech center of my brain was currently unavailable.

“If you want what I’m offering, you’re going to have to play by the Westwood rules,” he said. “Even if I wanted to do anything about that, I can’t, so don’t even ask. My hands are completely tied on that front. Those rules have been set in stone and sealed by blood for generations.”

All I could do was stare at him, but at least he didn’t keep me waiting. “What that means is that in order for you to access this money, you would have to get married.”

A bark of dry laughter escaped me. “What the hell, man?”

“Yeah. I know, but those are the rules, Holden. Again, I can’t change them, so you’d have to get married, but not only that. You’d have to be married *enough* that there’s the promise of an heir. It can’t only be a superficial arrangement on paper.”

My lips parted. “Did you hit your head in the locker room or something?”

“No,” he said, not even cracking half a damn smile, which meant he was completely serious. “Our traditions require a commitment to continuing the family line, Holden. They always have. Think about it, though. If you take me up on this, you will never have to worry about money again. Your children will never know what it feels like to be in the position you are now and neither will *their* children.”

“Are you seriously telling me that dead people want me to either reproduce or remain broke?”

Alex shrugged. “Do you want what’s rightfully yours or do you want to keep trying to survive grad school on four thousand dollars a month before taxes? Because this is it. This is what you should’ve received. It’s what you *would have* received from your family had it not been for your father.”

“But I have to get married, and *breed*.”

“Yes.”

I dropped my face, my head hanging. I shook it and tried to remember how to breathe. “Fuck.”

“I know.” He sighed. “I know how bad it sounds, but look at Jane and me. Look at my brothers and yours. You’ve met my cousins too. We were all bound by these same rules and traditions, and now, it’s your turn.”

My head spun at about a million miles an hour. “And I’m just supposed to conjure up a wife out of the clear blue sky?”

“Jane and I know someone,” he said casually. “She’s great. Your age. Normal.”

“What do you mean by *normal*? Because none of what you’re proposing sounds normal.”

Alex smiled. “Normal life. Normal job. Depressingly normal bank account.”

I stared at him. “Is she a rescue dog?”

Alex huffed. “She’s in a rough spot, Holden. Life hasn’t been kind to her. She’s all alone in the world, and not by choice. You can change that. You can give her people to belong to.”

Something in his voice gave me pause. Alex genuinely seemed to believe he was *helping* this woman, and after being shunned from the elitist world I'd been born into the second things had gone sideways, I'd developed a bitter taste in my mouth about everything and everyone connected to that world.

But a girl with no connections, no family fortune, and no ridiculous last name was someone I might actually be willing to consider in this deranged scenario. Gaining access to some financial freedom?

That was difficult to say no to.

"I'll think about it," I said after a long beat. "I'm visiting Ryan in New York next weekend. I'll get back to you after that."

"Alright, but think fast. Nothing good has ever come from giving someone too much time to over-analyze this sort of thing. Plus, I'm sort of on a roll here. I'd like to keep the streak going."

I groaned. "Go figure you'd find a way to make this about you."

Alex pushed to his feet and shoved the ball at me. "Nah, this is all about you. It's your decision, Holden. I'm just really hoping you'll make the right one. For your sake and hers."

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CHAPTER 8

ALICIA

Tasha hadn’t moved a muscle in at least three minutes. She just sat on the corner of my bed with her hands in her lap, her face completely blank.

Meanwhile, I wasn’t doing much better, sitting cross-legged against my headboard and swirling my wine like I hadn’t just dropped a bomb on her head, but it was like I was watching the countdown to nuclear midnight in her eyes.

“So, do you have any thoughts?” I asked finally before bringing my glass to my lips and taking another sip of wine. “I’d really like to get your take on this.”

She blinked slowly, taking a few seconds longer than usual before she managed to refocus on me, still sort of looking like she was trying to shake off a trance. “Let me make sure I understand.”

“Okay.”

“Alex Thayer—”

“Westwood.”

“Yeah, sure.” She inhaled a deep breath. “The billionaire named Alex offered you a deal that would save the house and then some?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding like all this was perfectly reasonable. “No more worrying about back taxes or my student loans. Hell, I could go back to school and get the master’s degree I’ve been lusting after if I want.”

“You’ll also be able to pay for it in cash,” she said, her voice dry. “As long as you marry someone in his family.”

“Or his wife’s family,” I replied lamely. “That part wasn’t really clear. He just said *the family.*”

“God, that sounds so *mafia*.”

I rolled my eyes. “Neither the Westwoods nor the Thayers are part of the mob.”

“They’re into *arranged* marriages, Alicia. That *screams* mafia.”

“You’ve read way too many of those books.”

“That’s precisely my point,” she said. “I’m an expert on this.”

“Okay, well, then tell me what to do.”

“I can’t, but I’ll tell you what you *should’ve* done,” she said, widening her eyes at me. “You should’ve raised my rent. I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me how far up shit’s creek you are.”

I groaned. “That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want you to think that I was going to raise your rent.”

It was like I could see her brain actively rebooting. She sagged back on my bed, looking around my room like she might never see it again. “I could’ve helped, Alicia.”

I fell silent for a beat, giving her a sad smile as I shook my head. “No, you couldn’t and you still can’t. We’re talking *years*’ worth of unpaid property taxes that have accumulated. The amount I owe is large enough to make your head spin and your ass drop right off.”

She laughed. “It’ll make my ass drop off, huh? I’ve never heard that one before, but I suppose if the fright is big enough, anything is possible.”

“Exactly.”

Her gaze finally met mine again, soft understanding clashing with worry in her eyes. “Are you sure about this?”

“No, but I’d get a million dollars just for trying,” I said, unable to believe that those words were actually coming out of my mouth. “There’s another cash payout after the first year of marriage, for the birth of our first child, and a whole bunch of other milestones. It’s unbelievable.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, visibly trying to compute what I was telling her. I watched her do it in real time, but honestly, I hadn’t processed it either. “Are you actually going to do it?”

I took another long gulp of my wine. Asked like that, the question was a little different than I’d been asking myself all along. This wasn’t a matter of whether I *could* it. Because I could. I was entirely unattached romantically, without even a potentially troublesome ex holding me back.

She also hadn’t asked whether I *should* do it. Honestly, I didn’t know the answer to that one. Financially, I absolutely should, but this was *marriage*. Money shouldn’t ever really factor into that particular decision.

“I’d be stupid not to at least consider it,” I finally replied, giving her the only answer I had right now. “If I marry this guy, whoever he is, I’d have financial security for the first time in my life. *Substantial* security, at that. I’d also have an ironclad marriage contract to protect me and a tidy prenuptial agreement.”

God, I hated the way it sounded. In the space between one heartbeat and the next, I’d reduced marriage to a list of financial benefits, but those benefits were very real. As I leaned back against the headboard and looked around my bedroom, my gaze lingered on the little crack above the window I’d never been able to afford to repair properly.

I glanced down at the floor next, the old wood worn and in desperate need of some tender, loving care. There was also work to be done on the plumbing, the electrical system, and the kitchen could certainly do with an update.

If I was being honest with myself, the house was the only thing I cared about. Paying off the back taxes would be a giant relief—and shit, settling my student loans would probably be the closest I would ever come to a spiritual experience—but getting to keep the house was the big one.

This place was mine, the one thing my parents had left me that couldn’t be spent or quietly disappear into someone else’s bank account. My mother had planted the hydrangeas out back and my father had built the shelves in my bedroom with his bare hands.

They’d brought me home from the hospital to this very house. It was the only home I’d ever really known, despite the years I’d spent with my aunt, uncle, and cousins.

This was where I’d learned to ride a bike, on the sidewalk right outside, and I’d lost my first tooth in the TV room. Every Halloween, my parents had sat on the porch and handed out candy to kids in the neighborhood, and every year, they’d volunteered at the school’s haunted house.

They’d loved this place and I would do anything to keep it. Even if that meant marrying a man I’d never even met.

Tasha stared at me as I thought it over, an unexpected grin spreading across her lips a moment later. “Okay, don’t kill me for saying this, but I think you should do it.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” she said. “It’s a great idea, Alicia.”

“A great idea?” I frowned. “Are you crazy?”

She shrugged, still grinning as she let out a dreamy sigh. “Maybe I am crazy, but just imagine it.”

Suddenly throwing herself down next to me on the bed, she practically had stars in her eyes as she launched into the possibilities. “We could spend next summer on a yacht on the French Riviera.”

“We could? I don’t think that’s how marriage works, Tash. Unless you’re suggesting we take my husband with us.”

She waved me off. “Nah. He can just fund our trip while he goes to, I don’t know, a casino or something with his mistress. Where do mysterious rich guys take their mistresses?”

“To bed?” I suggested dryly. “How the hell am I supposed to know and why is he already cheating on me in this fantasy?”

She shrugged. “Okay, I don’t care where he takes her. As long as it’s not on the yacht. With us.”

“Should I even bother pointing out that we don’t know if he, whoever he is, even has a yacht?”

“He’s a billionaire,” she said like that settled it. “Of course, he has a yacht, and if he doesn’t, he should get one.”

“That still doesn’t explain why he’s already cheating on me.”

“He’s rich.”

“Does that automatically mean he’s going to have a mistress?”

“Can you stop focusing on the cheating? You’d still get your money, right? So why does it matter what he does?” She sighed again, dramatically pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. “This could be the end of an era.”

“What era?”

“Our poor-girl era.”

I laughed. “We’re still poor.”

“No, *I’m* still poor. You don’t have to be anymore. Where your phone?”

On instinct, I glanced at my nightstand, but it wasn’t there. “I don’t know. It’s probably in the kitchen. Why?”

“Because you need to call Mr. Billionaire Man and tell him you’re taking his offer,” she said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

I chuckled, but something deep inside me pulsed with disappointment at the prospect. It was odd, really. I should've been thrilled, but I'd always imagined this particular part of my life to be different.

Whenever I'd thought about getting married, I'd imagined love. My parents had had that. In spades. At least, as far as I remembered, they'd had love. They'd always been together, as much as they possibly could, and in the end, they'd even left this life that way.

Together.

Neither one of them going anywhere without the other.

I'd always thought that maybe one day I'd find someone who would love me that way, but in the end, I supposed I would be getting one thing out of this deal. I'd get to *stay* here. My new husband could go on his yacht with his mistress. He could have whatever ridiculous life he wanted, but me?

I would be getting to sit by the fire this fall. I would hand out Halloween candy on the porch, and after that, I'd break out my parents' old Christmas decorations. I would put up our tree and sip hot cocoa after wrapping tinsel around the banister.

Ultimately, I would get to be *home* this Christmas and for every one that would come after that. *How on earth could I possibly say no?*

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CHAPTER 9

HOLDEN

Ryan and Maggie were, without a doubt, the strangest couple I'd ever met. If anyone was to see them side by side without context, they'd assume Ryan had kidnapped her—or maybe that *she'd* kidnapped *him*.

The fact they were a happily married couple was baffling, clear proof that sometimes opposites really did attract. Maggie was a whirlwind of energy and laughter, hell-bent on living life to the fullest now that she'd escaped the overbearing clutches of her parents, who'd tried to marry her off to this dude I'd never seen smile until after he *hadn't* ended up marrying her.

My brother, on the other hand, used to be bossy and bullheaded, focused entirely on rebuilding himself into a businessman who could never be mistaken for being his father's son. In other words, he'd taken himself very seriously, to the point of being a giant bore until the suit would come off and he'd walk into a bar. Then he'd turn into the life of the party.

I still didn't really get how he and his wife worked, but I had to admit, I vastly preferred Maggie's version of Ryan. Boardroom Ryan absolutely sucked. He wore Tom Ford suits like battle armor, a corporate predator who'd made grown men cry with a glare so intense it could probably freeze boiling water.

Maggie's Ryan was different. He lived in slightly faded hoodies, argued about the correct way to make boxed mac and cheese, and was so laid back, I'd even heard him crack a few jokes.

Watching them together in their kitchen earlier, trading dry banter before Ryan had laughed and kissed the top of her head, had made me wonder if maybe marriage wasn't only a miserable, soul-crushing trap after all. The weird and unsettling thought had crossed my mind without warning, but then I'd remembered that Ryan had actually gotten to *choose* Maggie.

He'd found her in the wild. *Well, sort of.*

We'd known the Pembrokes—Maggie's family—as kids, but they'd quickly pretended that wasn't true when the first news article had dropped about my father's arrest. Either way, after she and Ryan had been thrown into the same orbit again, they'd been like moths to a flame, unable to stay away from each other despite Maggie's father arranging her marriage to another man.

According to the depressing amount of legal documents sitting in my email inbox, I wasn't getting a choice. If I wanted to bury the agonizing piece of Thayer family drama that had been losing my trust fund, I had to marry whoever Alex was trying to help.

Hiding out in the backyard of Ryan and Maggie's new house in Todt Hill, up on Staten Island, I tossed a ball for Mickey, their gigantic Mastiff, the peace of their backyard rendered absolutely nonexistent by his deep, enthusiastic bark before he took off after the ball. I watched him go, chuckling as he loped after it with all the grace of a baby horse.

"Drop it, Mickey," I muttered when he finally brought the ball back to me.

He let out a low, rumbling whine, but his tail was wagging with a force I imagined was similar to that of a ceiling fan when he dropped the tennis ball at my feet. It landed on the grass with a wet, heavy thud, encased in a frothy layer of canine drool. I grimaced, kicking it across the lawn with only the very tip of my sneaker this time.

Mickey didn't care that he'd turned the damn thing into a biohazard, taking off after it again with so much enthusiasm that he kicked up patches of turf in his wake. I let out another chuckle, still wondering what the hell my brother had been thinking when he'd brought this beast home for Maggie.

As I waited for him to race across the yard, at least half the size of a football field in order to house a creature Mickey's size, a noise from the

back deck caught my attention. I looked over my shoulder, expecting Ryan, but seeing a newcomer stepping out of the house instead.

Nash, Maggie's youngest brother. They'd told me he earlier he would be stopping by to pick up something from her to take back to the city, where he lived. Maggie and Ryan had moved out here once it had become apparent that Mickey would break down their entire apartment building if they tried to stay.

Nash stopped at the top of the wooden steps, caught my eye, and gave me a single, slow nod. I returned it, and that was it. Honestly, it was as much as we'd ever spoken in recent years, but as far as I was concerned, it was the perfect exchange.

Clearly, both of us understood the sacred value of silence as opposed to meaningless small talk. Plus, if nothing else, the Pembroke boys were cool with us Thayers. They didn't treat us like social dynamite, unlike the rest of the old-money families suffocating the Eastern Seaboard.

Most of those people checked to see if their wallets and reputations were still intact after just passing us on the street, but Nash kind of looked like he wanted to go home and take a nap. I got that.

A minute later, the deck creaked again, and when I glanced at the place where Nash had been standing, Ryan was there this time. He dropped into a chair overlooking the yard, kicked his feet up on the little table in front of him, and extended one of the two bottles he was holding toward me.

"Fresh beer," he announced. "I thought you might be able to use it."

"Thanks." I strode backward and reached up between the wooden slats of the banister to take it from him, my tongue recoiling like a gun at the first taste of whatever the hell that was, but it wasn't beer. "Shit, that's disgusting. It tastes like a pine tree and a grapefruit had a bad breakup after a terrible relationship."

He sighed like I'd just offended our grandmother—maternal, not paternal. "It's an artisanal, small-batch double IPA from upstate. Expand your palate, little brother. You're not an undergrad anymore."

"My palate prefers liquids that don't double as paint thinner," I grumbled, but I took another sip anyway because, frankly, I needed the alcohol. "Why, are those hints of despair under the rotten citrus?"

Ryan laughed and turned his gaze toward Mickey, who was barreling back toward us with the biologically weaponized tennis ball clamped in his jaw. "So, do you really have to fly back out tomorrow? It's only Saturday

night. Maggie was planning on making some ungodly fall soup tomorrow afternoon."

"What's a fall soup?"

"I have no idea, but I'd prefer backup when she serves it."

"Sorry, bro. Duty calls. I have a class I can't miss at nine on Monday, and on top of that, Alex is firmly up my ass right now. He's sent three texts today alone."

"Did he use emojis?"

"No."

"Fuck, that's means he's in full-blown bulldozer mode." Ryan's easy-going expression sharpened into Boardroom Ryan face. "He's pushing the terms of the inheritance on you, then?"

"You know about that?"

He shrugged, staring out over the darkening yard. "You know how it goes in our family, man. We don't have secrets. Just delayed press releases."

"Yeah, that's fair."

"Look," he said after pausing for a beat. "I know what must be going through your head right now, but the inheritance thing is legit and the Westwoods are definitely onto something with how they structure these things."

I barked out a dry laugh. "Says the guy who doesn't have to comply."

"Sure, but Alex has this bizarre, completely legal way of moving money without causing a fuss with the IRS, or, you know, resorting to the black market. You should trust him."

I took another sip of my terrible craft beer. "This isn't about trust. Of course, I trust him. He's Alex."

"And yet, whenever his name comes up nowadays, you look like you swallowed a lemon," he said. "So what's really going on, Holden? You guys used to be so close."

Mickey's rumbling whine rang out at that exact moment and he crouched with his lower body closer to the grass, panting as he dropped the slimy ball directly in front of my sneaker. *Saved by the dog.*

Recognizing that he'd just given me an opportunity, I seized it with both hands, scooping up the disgusting, wet tennis ball and tossing it at Ryan. "What's going on is that I'm exhausted, so you can run your own dog ragged. I'm going to bed. Enjoy your grapefruit and despair."

“You asshole!” Ryan yelled as I walked away, frantically brushing the drool-soaked ball off his shorts.

I laughed, quickly sliding the glass door shut behind me just to delay him if he should be thinking about trying to catch up. After waving goodnight at Maggie, I went upstairs to their guest room, kicked off my shoes, and collapsed onto the mattress.

At least ten throw pillows separated my back from the headboard and a framed print of a bulldog wearing a monocle hung on the wall, but I still felt more comfortable in their house than I did most other places. It was rare for a Thayer to find a space where we could really just *be*, but to me, this was one of them.

As I reached behind me to swipe the throw pillows off the bed with one hand, I pulled out my phone with the other, immediately seeing a notification for a new email. I clicked on it, then promptly wished I hadn’t.

The subject line was blank and the body of the email from Alex was exactly four words long. *Is it a go?*

I nearly strained an optic nerve from how hard I rolled my eyes. *Is it a go? What is this, a covert military operation?*

After taking another swig of my warm, gross craft beer, however, I actually considered the question. I’d told him I would get back to him after this weekend, so I’d known all along that I would have to put some thought into it while I was here.

Okay, but really, how bad can it actually be?

It was just a marriage. A legal contract entered into by signing a piece of paper in front of a bored judge. My father had proven that the sanctity of the institution itself meant very little—or absolutely nothing, if I was being honest—so there was no reason for me to treat it like some holy, life-altering bond.

If I did this, I’d get unrestricted access to my new trust fund, which both Alex and Jane had assured me contained exactly as much money as I was supposed to have gotten. I would be completely, entirely free, and whoever my future wife turned out to be, she would get whatever the hell she wanted.

Whether that turned out to be a new car, a lifetime supply of expensive shoes, or a massive shopping spree at Bergdorf’s on my dime.

If she really was just a totally normal person like Alex claimed, maybe it wouldn’t be a total disaster. We could live in mutually agreed-upon

solitude together. We could buy a giant house, adopt a cat or something to occupy her time, and sleep in separate bedrooms on opposite sides of our mansion for the rest of our sorry, miserable lives. It wasn't a dream come true, but she'd get all the financial security she could ever need and I'd get my freedom.

Framed like that, this was just another transaction, a deal that equally benefited two consenting parties. And that? That was a lot more palatable to me. I'd made dozens of deals when I'd been working and those had all worked out great. There was no reason this had to be different.

Before I could start overthinking again, my fingers were flying across the glowing screen, and a second later, I hit *send*. Tossing my phone face-down on the bed beside me, I closed my eyes and desperately hoped the upstate double IPA wouldn't give me a hangover.

Lord knows, I'm going to need my wits about me when I get back to Chicago tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 10

ALICIA

Exactly one week after I'd spilled the beans to Tasha and wound up upending my entire life, I stood in a modern, pristine conference room on the top floor of the Westwood and Sons corporate tower. Looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the skyline of Chicago spreading out in every direction around us, I honestly couldn't tell if the past seven days had been a fever dream or if my brain had just blocked it out as a trauma-response coping mechanism.

"Now, remember, Alicia," Jane was saying in a low murmur as she flipped through a terrifyingly thick stack of paper. "I know we went over the prenup again this morning, but I just want to reassure you one last time that everything is locked in, except the caveat Alex discussed with you. It's not formally included because it's strictly between you and him."

I nodded and rubbed the back of my neck. It felt so stiff that it was threatening to give me a freaking migraine, but in reality, I knew it was just my brain struggling to process that any of this was real. "Right. I know. It's not a problem."

I glanced at the court clerk, who was chewing a piece of peppermint gum I could smell all the way from over here. Next to her was an ordained officiant, the man who would be marrying me today. A slightly hysterical laugh bubbled up from deep inside my soul, and in my attempt to keep it from escaping, a soft little squeak came out instead.

This is happening right now. I'd known it would. Obviously. I'd been told, but hearing it and then suddenly staring at the people who were going

to make it official were two very different things. *I'm actually here, standing in a skyscraper that belongs to a billionaire, about to marry a complete stranger for financial salvation.*

The sheer absurdity of the situation was catching up to me fast, my palms sweaty and my heart ricocheting around my chest. At this rate, I was going to need an ambulance before my mysterious husband-to-be even arrived.

At least I looked cute.

To distract myself from my impending heart attack, I focused on my clothes. Three days ago, Tasha and I had descended on our favorite thrift store, triumphantly digging an eggshell-white, vintage 1990s suit-and-skirt combo out of the clearance bin. It had seemed like a win at the time. I absolutely loved this outfit, but compared to Jane, I looked a bit ratty.

On the other hand, everyone would look ratty compared to her. She was, as always, immaculately put together. I adored Jane's sense of style, but it wasn't great for the old self-esteem.

Especially since I didn't even know yet who was going to be walking through those doors. I was sure his name would've been somewhere on the paperwork, but since I didn't really know either the Westwood or the Thayer families, I didn't know who was who.

Drawing in another deep breath when my hands started shaking, I glanced down at my shoes and immediately felt just a touch more grounded. The slightly scuffed but classic pumps had belonged to my mother. As had the delicate, slightly tarnished silver bracelet on my left wrist.

It was the only piece of my mom's jewelry I'd kept after she'd passed away. The rest had either been sold or donated. This piece had always been special to me, though. She'd worn it on the day of her own wedding after my dad had given it to her as an engagement gift, back when people had still done things the traditional way.

I, on the other hand, had not had a romantic engagement. There had been no man on bent knee, staring up at me with tears in his eyes as he presented me with a velvet box. I hadn't gotten to make any tearful phone calls to relatives or spent hours admiring my new ring.

Hell, I didn't even have a ring.

All I'd gotten had been a mountain of paperwork to sign, but because I had signed it all, there was a massive bank transfer coming up in my immediate future and a lifetime of back taxes that were about to magically

disappear. The whole thing had been dealt with very professionally. Alex and his lawyers had been extremely efficient, polite, and thorough in their explanations of every clause in every contract.

All of which had led to this moment, when I was waiting to legally marry a husband I hadn't even met yet.

The next thing I knew, the heavy glass doors of the conference room swung open, revealing Alex leading the charge. That wasn't much of a surprise. I had a feeling he was always in the lead, whether he was taking his family to dinner or to war.

The man who walked in after him, however, *that* was a surprise. So much of one that my internal GPS instantly and completely lost its signal. I suddenly didn't know where I was, what I was doing here, or even my own name.

My breath caught in my throat as I watched him walk through the door, wearing dark dress slacks and a deep blue button-down shirt, the top three buttons undone like he'd given up on it with only that many left to go. Completely of their own accord, my eyes dropped to the hint of collarbone he'd left exposed, and for a moment, I found myself wondering if he'd done it intentionally, but then my gaze snapped back up.

The face I found myself staring at still hadn't changed, though. I wasn't dreaming and I hadn't been hallucinating. *Holden Thayer* was the man who'd just walked through the doors behind Alex, broad-shouldered and tall, with that same piercing, sharp blue-gray stare he'd had when he'd snapped at me about the helmet.

No. Way. Just… no freaking way.

As that sizzling, intense gaze swept across the conference room, my blood instantly ran hot. *This is who I'm marrying? What the hell…*

The moment he'd cleared the threshold, those eyes locked onto mine, and if he was surprised to see the clumsy cyclist or the awkward roommate who'd fled his presence a little over a week ago, he didn't let it show.

There wasn't even the briefest flicker of shock. Instead, he wore a mask of aristocratic indifference and utter disinterest, and it didn't slip for so much as a second. He just eyed me coolly for a moment. Then his gaze drifted down to my thrifted 90s suit before he leaned slightly toward Alex.

Their heads bent together as they sat down at the conference table, but Holden's eyes didn't leave mine as Alex began murmuring something about

the marriage certificate resting in front of them. The document already bore my neat, shaky signature, but it still needed his.

He only glanced away from me when he reached over to pick up a heavy fountain pen Alex had set down, scribbling his own name next to mine with a practiced, fluid motion that definitely wasn't shaky. Once that was done, he rose slowly and raked a hand through that blond hair, so dark that it bordered on light brown.

For a second, I thought he might say something when his eyes met mine again, but instead, he just walked right over, stopping when he was right beside me. Alex remained where he had been at the table, his head bent over the twin stacks of paperwork as he pulled first one and then the other toward himself, paging through them like he was triple-checking our signatures.

Meanwhile, I stood there, trying to prepare myself for the most unromantic wedding ceremony in recorded history. This was absolutely nothing like I'd always envisioned my wedding to be, and yet, as the officiant cleared his throat and stepped forward, a very specific, completely suffocating tightness in my chest finally began to unwind.

If I could just get through this, it would all be over and the mere thought of that made the crushing weight of the debt, the fear of losing everything, and the endless sleepless nights evaporate. *It's going to be okay now. Everything is finally going to be okay.*

A wave of profound relief washed over me as I let that sink in. Sure, the fact that I was about to marry a guy I didn't know from a bar of soap wasn't ideal, but I could handle a few public appearances and a ring on my finger. *Whatever it takes, it'll be worth it for this feeling of finally being safe, right?*

"Are you okay?" Holden suddenly asked at my side, his voice a deep, low rumble that vibrated right through the soles of my shoes.

I blinked, immediately realizing that I was just about hyperventilating. My shoulders heaved up and down and I'd been staring blankly at the wall, but mercifully, the question effectively snapped me out of my panic-induced trance.

When I looked up, both the officiant and the court clerk were staring at me with varying degrees of concern. My cheeks flushed as I imagined what they might be thinking, especially since it wasn't inconceivable that they'd

already figured out I was pledging the rest of my life to some guy for money.

Holden gave my elbow a gentle, subtle nudge. “You’re supposed to repeat the vows now. Unless…” He trailed off and raised an eyebrow at Alex before he glanced back at me. “Have you ever been married before?”

“No!” I blurted quickly, my cheeks flushing even hotter, probably turning my entire face to a bright, mortified crimson at this point. Reaching down deep, I did my best to find even the faintest measure of composure. Then I tried again. “No, I haven’t. I’ve never been married before.”

A quick, barely perceptible smirk crept across Holden’s full lips, almost instantly vanishing again when he schooled his features back into his usual stoic expression, but that tiny crack in his armor made me feel a little more settled. At the end of the day, I wasn’t alone in this.

He and I might not know each other, but that was precisely why it made me feel better. We didn’t know *each other*. He didn’t know what he was getting into any more than I did, but clearly, there was an actual human being stuck behind that handsome face, and with time, I would get to know that person.

By hook or by crook, he and I were going to have to try together to make this marriage work. I didn’t really know what was in this for him, but it had to be *something* or he wouldn’t be here. Which meant that we really were in the same boat.

At that realization, I drew in a deep breath, squared my shoulders, turned to face the officiant, and repeated words that cut deeper than I’d expected. “To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed. For some reason, I hadn’t thought we would be making the traditional, heavy-weight promises of a real marriage. Although I wasn’t really sure what I had been expecting either.

Come on, Alicia. It’s not like they were going to make you promise to split time on the yacht equally or not to max out his black Amex card at the mall more than once a month.

Whatever I’d thought, the vows were over almost before the ceremony had truly even begun. I wasn’t even able to overthink the gravity of the words before Holden was reaching out and taking my left hand in his.

Warm fingers wrapped around mine, his grip steady as he slid a shiny, beautifully simple golden band onto my ring finger.

As he did, his gray eyes seemed to catch sight of the vintage silver bracelet resting against my wrist. He stared at it for a long, quiet moment, an unreadable expression crossing his face, but then he let go, slipped a matching golden ring onto his own finger without any ceremony whatsoever, and looked over at Alex.

"Is that all?" he asked.

Alex shrugged, clearing his throat as he gestured dismissively between us. "Technically, you're supposed to kiss the bride."

Instinctively, every muscle in my body braced as I wondered how a man who looked like an angry runway model was going to handle a mandatory kiss. I was half-expecting him to scoff, walk away, and tell me to call him in a year, but instead, Holden didn't even hesitate.

He took another step toward me, leaned down, and down, and then a little further down given the height difference between us, until his lips gently brushed the very top of my forehead. It was brief, chaste, and smelled faintly of expensive cologne and coffee, and then it was over.

Without even looking at me, he straightened back up, turned toward Alex, and fixed him with a long, unblinking, fiercely intense stare that practically screamed, *You owe me your life for this.* For his part, Alex just smirked, unflinching even under that stare. Then he stood up from the conference room table like this was simply the end of another meeting.

Jane, on the other hand, looked a bit uncomfortable with the mounting tension in the air. Obviously unwilling to let it fester, she clapped her hands together brightly and beamed at us. "Wonderful. That was beautiful."

No one else said a single word, but I saw Alex arch an eyebrow at her, pretty clearly amused by what she'd just said. She completely ignored him, taking a step toward Holden and me instead. "Well, now that it's official, I made reservations for a celebratory dinner this evening. Who's hungry?"

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CHAPTER 11

HOLDEN

Nora Thayer was fuming.

Seriously, my mother was *not* happy.

An outsider might not be able to see it, but in our family, livid didn't necessarily equate to screaming or loud arguments. What it looked like was her spending the last twenty minutes on the verge of tears while firing off a thousand questions a minute at my new bride.

At the cozy, ultra-exclusive penthouse restaurant where we had a standing reservation, she sat at our table with trembling shoulders and slightly watery eyes, laser-focused on interrogating Alicia. "Tell me, darling, what colors do you prefer? Oh, and satin or lace? We have a few gorgeous pieces left in the family vault. It's not nearly what we used to have, but Holden simply must take you sometime."

As I sat there and watched, I hoped this masterclass in the primary method of torture employed by high-society women would get all the rage out of her system. Although that was unlikely, seeing as Nora hadn't even known about the wedding until two hours ago.

Alex had finally cracked and called her just before we'd walked into the conference room, and if my mother was good for anything in this life, it was buying extravagant gifts and relentlessly doting on her daughters-in-law. The fact she'd been deprived of this one until *after* the vows had been said was a betrayal she'd probably take years of therapy to work through.

It wouldn't even matter that I hadn't known who my bride would be until two minutes before we'd said those vows. Mom would've expected to

be in the loop, which I guessed was fair.

“I just can’t believe you all kept this from me,” she repeated for at least the tenth time since we’d sat down, her voice trembling as she dabbed at the corner of her eye with a silk handkerchief.

Jane sighed behind the menu. She knew it by heart but was using the menu to shield herself from Mom’s theatrics. The corners of Alex’s lips tightened before he lifted his whiskey to his mouth and took a giant gulp. I just shrugged. None of this had been my doing.

If she was going to be upset with anyone, it couldn’t be me, but she still hadn’t turned her attention away from Alicia, even if she had been talking to us. Instead of even glancing at any of us for an explanation, she leaned across the candlelit table, her diamond bracelets clinking against the glassware as she reached for my bride’s hand.

Those bracelets, along with pretty much all of the jewelry left in the family vault she’d mentioned, had been passed down through generations of her own family, the Wyatts. It’d been years since she’d worn any of those old heirlooms until recently, probably too afraid the Feds would seize them, too.

I supposed it meant something she was wearing them again now. Perhaps a visual reminder to herself that the drama was over. As far as I was concerned, that was a little premature. I saw Alicia’s gaze drop to them as they clinked, and strangely, she didn’t seem to get dollar signs in her eyes at the sight. Instead, she looked a little apprehensive. Maybe even scared.

“Alicia, darling,” Mom said without a skipping a beat. “You must tell me what your mother said when you told her you were to be married. Is she okay with this, or was she terribly upset with Holden for skipping a proper engagement?”

“Maybe she would’ve been, but she’s dead, so I can’t ask her,” Alicia replied boldly.

In the wake of her response, Jane froze with her wine glass almost at her mouth and Alex tossed back the rest of his whiskey. Unfortunately, I’d been right in the middle of swallowing a generous gulp of Macallan and I nearly choked, sputtering as the burning liquid shot straight up my sinuses.

As I hacked up what felt like an entire lung, Colin finally smacked me on the back so hard that I nearly fell off my chair. Then he glared at me like forcing him into the line of fire he’d successfully been keeping out of until now had been a deliberate attempt to remind Mom he was here.

When my vision finally cleared and the burning subsided to a dull throb, I wiped my mouth and looked across the table at Alicia. She was beet red, staring right at me, and while I wasn't sure what those hazel eyes were screaming, whether it was rage, humiliation, or a plea for help, I could practically see the gears turning in my mother's head.

Now that the initial shock was wearing off, she was about to pivot into a highly invasive excavation of Alicia's personal life, and she wouldn't stop digging until she knew every detail of this girl's family tragedy as well as whatever other trauma she could unearth under the guise of offering comfort.

Fuck. I need to create a distraction. Fast.

I might not know this girl, but apparently, she was my responsibility now, and besides, as someone who'd endured a fair amount of family-related trauma myself, I knew how painful it could be when strangers started digging. It didn't make me some kind of white knight to protect her from that, especially when the person who was about to do the digging was my *mother*.

I leaned forward, resting my forearms on the crisp white tablecloth as I held her gaze. "Hey, I've actually been meaning to ask, who's your favorite author?"

While I absolutely had *not* been meaning to ask that, and frankly, really didn't care, this seemed like a good way to derail my mother. Since Tasha had mentioned that night at their place that Alicia worked in the library, it had to be a subject Alicia would be able to discuss at length. Hopefully long enough to dissuade my mother from bringing her parents back up.

Plus, it was literally one of the only things I knew about her. I fully expected her to mention some author who wrote the usual romantic fantasy trash or whatever the hell it was that Tasha and her friends raved about before every ethics lecture. My eyes nearly bulged out of my head when she went in the complete opposite direction.

She tilted her chin up, something akin to relief in her eyes as she held my gaze. "Actually, I'm reading the Odyssey again right now. It's been a while since my last pass through Homer. I don't know if it makes him my favorite author, but I'm certainly enjoying his work again at the moment."

I stared at her, my mouth opening slightly before I caught myself and clamped it shut. Not only was that definitely not a contemporary novelist who wrote smut with a few dragons, aliens, or wolves thrown into the mix

to be able to claim there was a plot tying all the sex together, but the Odyssey was also one of *my* all-time favorite books.

“What about you?” she asked, holding my gaze like she knew exactly where my head had gone. “Do you have a favorite author, or do you prefer TV?”

“Did you know that Alicia introduced Cameron to his favorite authors, Nora?” Jane asked, thankfully stepping in to save me from having to admit I actually had something in common with my wife.

Mom blinked rapidly but allowed herself to be swept up in the tide when Alex and Colin caught on to what was going on and steered the conversation firmly away from Alicia’s past. I watched them, noticing every time she cleverly ducked a question that might’ve pulled the focus back to her and every flush that colored her cheeks when Jane gave her a compliment.

Well, well. She’s really not the meek, fragile little creature I assumed she was when I first laid eyes on her. In fact, she’s turning out to be pretty fucking interesting.

We hadn’t spoken a single word to each other that night at Tasha’s place and we sure as hell hadn’t had a deep, meaningful conversation when I’d almost scraped her off the pavement, but after the way she’d fled the scene of the near-accident and Tasha describing her as the shy, bookish type, I’d concluded that she was probably a bit of a trembling little mouse.

Never in my wildest dreams had I expected she’d turn out to be the clever fox sitting across from me now, openly sizing me up as she spoke to my family. When I’d walked into that conference room, I’d had a brief flash of a future in which she’d quietly fade into the background, both of us navigating this arrangement without me ever even really knowing she was there.

Somehow though, I didn’t think that would be true. For the rest of our awkward, slightly tense dinner, I found myself growing more and more curious about her, listening closely when she spoke and noticing how she held her own with my family.

After we’d eaten, dinner came to an end pretty fast, no one even bringing up coffee or dessert, and ten minutes after the last plate had been cleared, she and I stood alone at the entrance of the restaurant.

Through the glass doors, I could see my mom follow the hostess to a private elevator, giving me a solemn wave before she finally disappeared

from view. I was going to have hell to pay when it came to her. Frantic, middle-of-the-night phone calls demanding an explanation seemed inevitable at this point, but right now, Mom was the least of my worries.

As it was, she'd been especially tense and highly emotional for the past few weeks. Ever since the legal teams had dropped the news about Dad's impending early release from his federal sentence. The thought scratched uncomfortably at the back of my brain, a cold, persistent itch.

That was happening soon. Too soon. And the fallout of my father walking free was going to be a disaster, but not even that was my great worry right now.

Left completely alone with my new wife for the very first time, I turned to look at her. The chilly breeze caught a few stray strands of her hair and blew them across her face. She looked back at me, her arms crossing tightly over her chest. I didn't know what I'd done to her, but she did not look impressed with the person she'd just legally hitched her wagon to.

She also didn't say a word, so I sucked my teeth, checked my watch, and pulled my coat tighter around my shoulders. "Right. Okay. Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Alicia frowned, her eyebrows knitting together in genuine confusion. "Tomorrow? Why?"

I turned when I heard the doors of the elevator slide open behind me and stepped into it, holding the door open with my hand as I looked out at her. "Your place is a hell of a lot nicer than mine. That's why. Since the contract we both just signed states we have to live together at the same address, that means I have to go pack a bag."

She opened her mouth, probably to argue, but I gave her a flat look. "We'll discuss our long-term options later, but for now, I'll see you tomorrow, wife."

The doors slid shut, cutting off the sight of her stunned, slightly indignant expression, and I dropped back against the mirrored wall, releasing a harsh, hard breath. This had been a really long, exceptionally weird day, even for me, but I had to admit, it could've ended a hell of a lot worse than finding myself married to Ramen Girl.

At the very least, she was hot. Not that it would matter since I would never touch her, but still. Looking at her for the rest of my life wouldn't exactly be a punishment. Plus, within a day, I would have access to more

money than I could spend in two and a half lifetimes and my father would never be able to touch a dime.

As of right now, my strings were cut, my future finally my own—and all I had to do was make sure that wherever it took me, I brought my not-so-meek, noodle-and-book loving wife along for the ride.

Fuck, I can't believe I'm even thinking this, but maybe this won't be the worst thing that's ever happened to me after all.

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CHAPTER 12

ALICIA

"He's living *here*?" Tasha stood with her hands planted firmly on her hips, blocking the doorway of the small room at the end of the hall.

The space had once been my father's oak-paneled study, but over the years, it had become more of a glorified storage room. As of today, however, it also housed a slightly rickety futon for my loving husband to sleep on once he moved in.

"Yes, Tasha. He's living here," I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose before lifting my gaze back to hers. "Stop looking at me like I'm suggesting we harbor a fugitive. He and I are *married* now. What did you think was going to happen, that we'd just sign the papers and go our separate ways?"

Well, to be fair, that's what I thought too. I just didn't say so. Honestly, even if I had seen the clause in the contract that required us to live together, I hadn't thought we'd actually do it, especially not right away, but apparently, billionaires weren't into taking things slowly. *For God's sake, Alicia. He married you without even taking you out for coffee first. Why would he start taking things slowly now?*

Plus, it was literally in the contract both of us had signed. He'd been right about that and I supposed billionaires were probably also very into taking those seriously.

"Well, yeah," she finally said, gesturing wildly at the saggy mattress. "Does that mean he's going to be bringing his mistress *here*? What happened to the casino?"

I groaned, but something twisted in my stomach at the thought of him bringing other women home. *To* my *house. Where he'll… do things to them on* my *futon.*

"There was never a casino," I said, snapping myself out of it before I could fall any further down that rabbit hole.

Holden and I were *not* together. We'd signed a piece of paper. That was it. Whatever he did in his *personal* life did not concern me. I certainly wasn't about to volunteer as tribute for him to *satisfy his urges*. Although—

"Have you asked him about the yacht yet?" Tasha's question mercifully invaded the extremely inappropriate thought I'd been about to have about all the ways in which I would let my husband satisfy those urges with me, and I fought a flush as she sighed. "If he's going to be living here, the least he can do is share the yacht. Where are we going to put all his stuff, though? What if he brings his own bed?"

"Then we'll make a plan," I said, exasperation creeping slowly into my tone. "Cohabitation was part of the contract I signed, Tash. The extremely thorough, extremely complicated contract drawn up by extremely expensive lawyers. I *have* to honor it."

Even if, as a Thayer, he would probably look at this room like it was a medieval dungeon. God, he was probably used to sleeping on a bed woven from the silk of endangered spiders and I was sure he was going to show up with an entire moving truck full of custom Italian leather furniture, but I'd cross that bridge when I got to it.

At the end of the day, this was a small price to pay for what I was receiving in return. I just had to keep sight of that.

Tasha looked at me like she was still expecting something and I sighed, raking my fingers through my loose hair as I shook my head. "No, okay? I haven't asked him about the yacht yet. It didn't exactly come up."

She smirked. "So what did come up? You've barely told me anything."

I almost winced, only just managing to catch myself from expressing any sort of external reaction. Tasha didn't know yet who I'd married.

Last night, after I'd gotten home from the most uncomfortable dinner ever, I'd managed to skirt the finer details with her. I'd practically sprinted through the front door, mumbled that it'd been a long day and that I was exhausted, and then I'd locked myself in my bedroom to hyperventilate over the crazy decision I'd made.

Even now, with the morning sun streaming in through the windows, it felt like I was completely losing my mind. I was a children's librarian, for heaven's sake. I organized puppet shows and read Dr. Seuss. I did not enter into marriages of convenience with angry, rich, runway models. I had no idea how I was going to handle this for a day, let alone a lifetime.

People like Holden had always intimidated the crap out of me—and not only because of the likely size of his bank balance. Naturally, knowing how much money that family probably had was intimidating in its own right, but there was so much more to it than that.

He was absolutely nothing like me. Neither were his sister and her husband, and the brother I'd met last night and his wife, and their mother, and probably the entire rest of all those families. They had the confidence of golden gods and the same sort of inescapable presence as lightning. They spoke with the authority of royalty and dressed like they had designers hidden in their closets.

As a group, they gave off this untouchable vibe, even if they were very kind individually. Except for the one I'd married, of course. Holden was a vibe all of his own, as dark as night and as walled off as a fortress.

Suddenly, the doorbell chimed from downstairs and my stomach plummeted to my shoes. Tasha froze, her eyes widening. "Is that him?"

"Probably," I squeaked, my throat suddenly drier than the Sahara. "He didn't actually give me a time, so it could be. I don't know. Are you expecting a delivery?"

"No."

"Neither am I."

We walked downstairs together, but my knees felt more and more like jelly with every passing step. By the time she pulled front door open, it felt like I was barely managing to hold myself up.

Holden stood on the porch wearing a black leather jacket with a gray hoodie underneath and a backpack slung over one broad shoulder. Dark blond hair slightly windswept and a sharp sort of edge resting behind those gray eyes, he looked both incredibly handsome and quite dangerous. One of those two observations elevated my heart rate a little more than I was comfortable with, but I refused to examine which one it'd been.

Tasha barked out a loud, surprised laugh. "Holden? What the hell are you doing here? I promise, I don't have your folder this time. If you lost it, that's on you."

As she kept talking, completely oblivious, his eyes flicked over her shoulder, instantly finding mine. “Bro, you’re not going to believe the week we’ve had. Get this, we’re getting a new roommate today. Alicia got married to a total stranger and basically saved our lives, but now, he’s moving in.”

Holden’s jaw rolled, a tiny muscle twitching near his cheekbone. He didn’t break eye contact with me at all, his gaze intense but also completely unreadable.

“Is that so?” he muttered, a dry edge to that deep voice as he arched an eyebrow at me. “Well, I suppose congratulations are in order, then.”

Tasha’s laughter died on her lips when she looked down and finally noticed the large, rugged duffle bag resting at his feet. As she spotted it, Holden bent down, effortlessly hoisted the heavy-looking bag into the air, and stepped past her into the foyer, stopping only once he was standing right in front of me.

“So, where can I put my stuff?” he asked smoothly. “I have class in exactly half an hour, so I’ve got to get going soon.”

Tasha gaped after us, her mouth hanging open so wide I was genuinely worried a stray bug might fly inside. But Holden was so close to me now that I caught the faint scent of cedarwood and something citrusy, and it made my brain shut down for a second.

“Uh, right this way,” I finally mumbled, turning on my heel and leading him up the stairs. “I hope this is going to be okay.”

He didn’t say anything as he followed me, the silence between us growing until it was thick enough to cut with a blunt knife. Downstairs, Tasha must’ve started pacing because I heard the rhythmic thud of her footsteps echoing as she walked one way and then another.

When I went back down there, I was going to be subjected to an absolute tribunal, but I would worry about that in a minute. For now, I had to get past showing my exceptionally wealthy husband his new digs.

Slowly pushing open the door, I stepped aside and waved him in. “This is you. I’m sorry about the mess. I can have it completely cleaned out and rearranged by the end of the day. I just, uh, I haven’t quite had time yet.”

Holden stepped past me into the room, his eyes scanning the oak paneling, the stacks of old magazines, and the sad little futon. “I assumed you worked.”

I bit back a sharp retort, a spike of irritation flaring through my panic. “I do work, but I figured getting married was a good enough excuse to take a few days off. Unlike you, who’s still going to class.”

Holden swung his backpack off his shoulder, dropped it on the futon, unzipped it, and started rifling through his things without another word to me. My eyes narrowed as I wondered if this guy had agreed to marry me simply because he’d thought he would get away with treating me like I didn’t exist, but I also wasn’t about to beg him not to go to class just so we could actually have a simple conversation.

“Alright,” I said finally. “The WiFi password is on the fridge downstairs.”

“Cool.” He didn’t look up from his bag, still furiously searching for something, but every time he withdrew his hand even slightly, I saw that flash of gold on his finger and my heart tripped over itself.

Being in such close proximity to him was so incredibly tense and awkward that if he wasn’t going to talk to me anyway, there was no way I was staying. I hurried back downstairs without even trying to say anything else myself. My feet had barely even hit the hardwood of the foyer when Tasha was there, practically vibrating with a mix of shock and rage, her eyes just about bulging out of her head. As she looked at me, it seemed she was about to completely explode.

“You married *Holden Thayer*?” she whispered in a quiet, but lethal hiss. “Alicia, he—”

Before she could even finish, my phone let out a loud ping in my hand. Usually, I heard that specific chime only on the day my salary was deposited, which was not today. I almost jumped out of my skin, but when my eyes dropped to my screen and I saw the automated alert from my banking app, I nearly burst into tears.

Sheer, overwhelming relief spiraled through me like a tornado, my chest heaving as a ragged sob threatened to tear its way out. Naturally, at the exact same moment, I heard the heavy thud of footsteps on the stairs, Holden coming back down.

He rounded the corner into the living room with a car key clutched in his hand, but he stopped dead in his tracks the second he saw me. We caught each other’s gaze for a fleeting second, but he took in my trembling shoulders and probably the tears clinging to my eyelashes too. For a fraction of a heartbeat, his cold mask of indifference disappeared and his

features twisted with genuine concern, his eyebrows knitting together as he took half a step toward me. “Alicia? Are you—”

“I’m fine,” I choked out, a sob bleeding into the words. “Just, uh, excuse me.”

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t fall apart in front of him. There was no way he would understand and he’d probably leave here thinking he’d married a total psychopath. So I turned on my heels and raced down the hallway toward the safety of the bathroom before either of them could stop me.

There would be time to figure everything else out later. If the study wasn’t good enough for him, I would make a plan. If he expected food on the table at seven every night or sex every other Saturday, well, I’d work that out eventually too.

But right now? This was the only thing that mattered. Despite what it had cost me, I’d done it. I’d saved my parents’ house and I just needed a fucking minute to myself to absorb the implications of that.

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CHAPTER 13

HOLDEN

I needed to blow off some steam before my afternoon lecture, so I ended up at the gym with Wyatt. After dropping a few hasty changes of clothes off at Alicia's house, my head was completely messed up. If I didn't snap out of it soon, I might as well have done what she had and taken a few days off, because fuck.

So far, being married was *not* doing good things for my productivity. All morning, I'd drifted from one class to the next, barely hearing a word of any of my lectures. The image of her standing in that living room kept flashing behind my eyelids on a constant, distracting loop. I couldn't get it out of my damn head.

She had *cried*.

When I'd gone back downstairs to leave for class after dropping off my bag, I had *not* expected to see her looking like she was about to start bawling her eyes out. Nor had I expected the sudden, severely uncomfortable twist I'd felt in my chest at the sight, but it turned out I genuinely hadn't liked seeing her upset.

Unfortunately, since Wyatt was the baby of our family, he had "fishing out the emotions of his older siblings" down to a literal science at this point. As much as I hadn't intended on talking to him at all while we worked out, somehow, I found myself grunting a few sentences anyway. I didn't give him much, but it felt like I owed him at least a basic explanation. Or maybe it was more of a warning.

“It’s not really a marriage,” I started when he just went about his set on the bench press, waiting for me to start the conversation instead of pushing. “It feels more like a legally binding roommate agreement, and it doesn’t mean I like her. That’s not what this is.”

Knowing exactly how to handle me, Wyatt re-racked the bar and sat up, but he still didn’t come right out with the big questions. “Okay, cool. So you married a literal stranger, like, yesterday, but do you think I could at least have your new address?”

“It’s in Hyde Park,” I said. “An old brownstone she’s renting with a friend. Shit, I suppose I should find out how much they pay so I can contribute my share.”

Now that he was post-college and officially working for Thayer Steelworks, I knew Wyatt had been looking around for places to rent too, and his eyes widened a little. “Hyde Park, huh? That’s nice. She must be doing pretty fucking well if she can afford a place there with just one roommate.”

As I loaded another plate onto the squat rack, I realized he probably wasn’t wrong. “How much do librarians earn? Actually, I don’t even know if that’s what she does for work. I just know she works at the library, but she could be the custodian there for all I know.”

Wyatt laughed and wiped his forehead with a towel, looking at me with an amused grin spreading across his lips. “That’s it? That’s your debrief? Come on, Holden. Give me the obvious answers here. How does it actually feel? Do you like her, even just a little bit? I don’t give a shit if she’s a librarian, a custodian, or the coffee lady. Just talk to me.”

“I told you how it feels,” I growled, stepping up to the rack. “It feels like I’ve moved into a new dorm or into an apartment with new roommates. Because that’s all I’ve done.”

“Well, no, not really,” he reasoned, apparently feeling like it was time to come at me directly now. “You also signed a piece of paper that allows her to change her last name and organize your funeral someday.”

“Great. Thanks. I’ll be sure to tell her that I fucking hate roses.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. If she’s met you, she knows, but my point is that you’ve done a little more than just get a new roommate. Have you talked to her yet, at all, about how you guys are going to do this?”

“That’s not necessary. We’re already doing it and it’s working.”

“It’s been less than twenty-four hours,” he said, deadpan. “I may not be an expert on marriage, but I doubt anyone gets to declare that it’s working less than a full day in.”

“I do, because like I said, it’s not a real marriage. It doesn’t matter if I like her, or if she likes me, or if she decides to change her last name or not. None of that shit matters. Alex came to me with a deal that made sense and I took it.”

“So you don’t like her?”

I shrugged. “She’s fine.”

To be fair, I didn’t have a problem with Alicia, per se. She was sharp, she read Homer, and she didn’t look at me like I was a felon in the making, but I was jaded. Years of watching the elite tear my family apart had changed the way I looked at the world, and the undeniable reality that she’d agreed to this charade purely to get a massive payout rubbed me the wrong way.

Wyatt had been too young to truly understand what had happened to our family when the scandal had hit. He’d been just an innocent kid back then and Jane had done everything in her power to shield him from the blowback, ensuring he had a normal, well-adjusted childhood regardless of the fact that we were losing almost everything we owned.

Because of that, Wyatt didn’t carry the same visceral repulsion to wealthy people—or the desperate pursuit of wealth—that I did. As he looked at me, I saw the gears turning in his head, little splashes of Jane’s undying determination, Colin’s analytical way of thinking, and Isaac’s optimism shining through one by one by one.

“Don’t say it, bud,” I warned, arching an eyebrow at him as I set the weights down. “This woman is in it for the money. She’s exactly like all those people we used to know who flocked around us when they thought they could get something out of it and went up in a puff of smoke when we lost it.”

He leaned back against the bench. “You know, you’re being incredibly hard on her. Didn’t you get married for money, too?”

“That’s different,” I snapped gruffly, picking the weights back up and descending into a deep squat, the heavy iron burning my shoulders. I pushed back up, my jaw clenched. “This was my inheritance, Wyatt. It was *ours*. I just did what I had to do to get it back. I didn’t steal it.”

“Is that what you think she did?” he asked, both eyebrows shooting up. “You think that by marrying you, she *stole* it?”

I re-racked the bar with a loud, echoing clang and turned toward him, my grumpy side taking full control. “She signed her entire life away to a stranger so she could move up in the world without actually having to work for it. She took the ultimate shortcut and I guess I have to respect the hustle, but let’s not pretend she’s a saint. This was a gold-plated elevator ride to financial freedom.”

Wyatt just shook his head, clearly realizing there was no arguing with my current mood. “Okay, then, but Holden?”

“Yeah?”

“Once you calm down a little and the dust has settled, do try to remember that she’s an actual human being who did, in fact, sign her entire life away to *you*. Not a stranger. *You*.”

I sighed, knowing he had a point, but I wasn’t in a place where I was willing to consider what that meant right now. Instead, I headed over to the treadmills and ran a couple miles to cool down. Wyatt jogged at a much more leisurely pace beside me, not really talking about anything in particular and simply catching me up on meaningless office gossip both of us knew I didn’t care about, but it worked.

Sort of. He left the gym with his balls still attached to his body, anyway.

After grabbing a shower, I left too and headed straight back to campus. To my absolute chagrin, my afternoon schedule placed me in the last place I wanted to be—my ethics lecture with Tasha, who I apparently lived with now.

To make matters even worse, she was already there when I arrived, leaning against the doorway and staring down the hall like a gargoyle waiting for its prey. I gave her a curt nod, purposely pretending I didn’t know she wanted to talk even as her eyes locked on mine.

Figuring I might as well give it a shot, I strode right past her, keeping my head down, and began climbing the steep stairs of the lecture hall to find a seat high in the back rows. This was my sweet spot, where I could brood in peace while my more enthusiastic classmates clamored around the front, asking questions and bouncing ridiculous scenarios off each other while we waited for the actual class to start.

Unfortunately, I underestimated Tasha’s determination to get the information she was after. Or maybe she was about to lay into me for

making her friend cry. Which I still wasn't sure how I'd managed that. I'd barely even said a word to the girl and yet the waterworks had come on.

Soft footsteps padded up the stairs behind me and I twisted. Tasha was following me. Her fist was angrily wrapped around the strap of her backpack and hers eyes drilled holes into my back. Usually, she liked the prime seats right up front, which meant I was definitely about to get yelled at.

"We need to talk," she whispered loudly, her eyes wild as she dropped into the seat directly beside the one I'd just lowered myself into. "Right now, Thayer."

"We're in a lecture, Tasha," I muttered, opening my laptop and staring forward at the professor, who was currently setting up a PowerPoint presentation on utilitarianism.

"I don't care about the class right now," she snapped, leaning in closer. "You married my roommate. How? Why? You two didn't even speak the night you came over."

For the first fifteen minutes of the lecture, she poked and prodded relentlessly, whispering questions under her breath and slowly breaking me down. My patience eroded until finally, I snapped.

"It means nothing, alright?" I whispered back, staring straight ahead so the professor wouldn't catch us. "It's just a legal arrangement. It's money for her and a closed loop for me. It was a business transaction, Tasha. We signed the papers, we share an address, and that's it."

Tasha went uncharacteristically quiet. Finally, she leaned back in her seat, staring at me with eyes that were suddenly filled with a strange, unsettling pity.

"You really are a piece of work, Thayer," she murmured softly, but the anger had left her now. "It might mean nothing to you, but it means a whole lot more than just money to Alicia. Believe me."

My fingers froze over my keyboard, my eyebrows mashing together as her words echoed in my ears. The image of Alicia standing on the rug with tears about to start streaming down her face flashed vividly in my mind once more.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked urgently. "What do you mean it meant more than money? What else could it possibly be?"

"Shh!" A guy sitting two rows in front of us turned around, glaring at each of us in turn and placing a finger over his lips. "Some of us are

actually trying to pass this class, assholes.”

Tasha gave me a pointed, knowing look but clamped her mouth shut tightly and turned her attention back to the lesson. Meanwhile, I sat there in the stifling silence of the lecture hall, my laptop screen remaining blank, with a heavy knot tightening in the pit of my stomach.

Maybe I should’ve asked more questions before I signed those papers. I suddenly had a feeling there were a few things I needed to know about my wife. But if I tried asking now, Alex would tell me to talk to her. So would Jane.

I had a feeling it was going to be a long time before Alicia herself would be willing to give me any answers. Especially after I’d made her cry just by fucking arriving at their house.

Day one of my new marriage was off to a great start.

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CHAPTER 14

ALICIA

Walking into the bank on the corner, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. My feet hit the linoleum floor, and while I could feel the slight impact of every step, I honestly wasn't sure if I was dreaming.

Given what I was here to do, the past couple weeks could very well have been an elaborate, stress-induced hallucination. Or maybe that car had hit me the night I'd first seen Holden after all, and in the real world, I was in coma, inserting his face into my dreams because it had been the last one I'd seen before the lights had gone out.

Discreetly reaching for my thigh, I pinched myself and a sharp burst of pain shot through me from the spot. *But maybe that's not decisive proof.*

Either way, I strode up the front desk, joined a line, and gave a polite smile to the woman behind it when I got to the front. *Never let it be said that good manners aren't a part of my core. I mean, I'm even polite when I might not actually even be conscious.*

"Hi," I said, my voice shaky. "Alicia Nettles. I'm here for Mr. Adams. I made an appointment this morning."

She returned my smile, then glanced at her screen and nodded. "You can go ahead."

"Ms. Nettles, hi." The bank manager stood up from behind his desk when he saw me striding down the hall, ushering me into his private, glass-walled office. "Have a seat."

I did as I'd been told, significantly less nervous today, even if I still wasn't convinced this was real. He gave me a cool, professional smile

across his desk, then turned to his computer. “Alright, let’s have a look here.”

After typing in a few things, he blinked hard. His eyebrows shot up so high that they almost disappeared into his receding hairline. He cleared his throat and looked back at me. “The transfer from Westwood and Sons has cleared. I just need to verify the nature of the transaction for our internal compliance records.”

I nodded, having expected the legally required inquiries about how a twenty-six-year-old children’s librarian had suddenly acquired a six-figure sum deposited into her checking account. All the same, my heart hammered against my ribs as I lifted my left hand and let the morning light catch the golden wedding band resting on my finger. “I married Holden Thayer a couple of days ago.”

The manager’s eyes dropped to the band and he smiled. “Congratulations!”

I forced a polite smile. “Thank you, Mr. Adams. It’s been a very exciting time in my life.”

“My sincerest apologies, Mrs. Thayer,” he said, suddenly a lot more respectful and efficient, his fingers flying across the keyboard as he spoke. “Your name change hasn’t been officially processed in our system yet, but we can get these cashier’s checks typed up for you under your current legal identification while the paperwork is on its way.”

Hearing him call me *Mrs. Thayer* sent an icy jolt of panic straight down my spine. Changing my name was the single biggest sacrifice of this entire arrangement. I’d always planned on carrying my parents’ name with me forever.

It was the last piece of them no one would ever be able to take away, the ultimate link to the life we’d shared for much too short. Yielding it to a family of strangers felt like a betrayal that would never stop stinging.

“There we are,” the bank manager said cheerfully. “Let me print that for you.”

I nodded, but as I sat there waiting for the printer to whir to life, a heavy cloud of guilt settled over me. *Have I gone too low to solve my problems? Was I wrong to abandon the idea of love, the messy, beautiful, organic love I always thought I’d find one day, just to get some money? Would my parents be proud of me for saving our home, regardless of the transactional, clinical way I went about it? Was I a heroine or a whore?*

As I stared at my hands in my lap, my chest tightened because the truth was that they probably wouldn't be proud. They would've wanted me to marry for the right reasons.

But an hour later, when I walked into the city administrative offices and handed over the first cashier's check to pay off the back taxes in one definitive swoop, the crushing feeling loosened a bit. The house was safe. Tasha and I would never be evicted. The second check was already stamped and ready to be mailed so I could wipe out my student loans.

Maybe my parents wouldn't have been proud, but I sure was. After they'd passed, my life had changed in ways they would never even have begun to understand.

My aunt and uncle had been there to take me in. I had never set foot in the foster system and I was infinitely grateful to them for that, but they had *five* kids of their own. The house I'd moved into had been desperately overcrowded even *before* they'd had to fit another bed somewhere. I'd done my best to stay small.

I'd barely been scraping by since the accident, and for the first time, there was light at the end of the tunnel. I could have a life instead of merely surviving. In the greater scheme of things, that meant something too. It meant my entire life wouldn't remain a struggle simply because my parents' lives had been cut far too short.

By the time I got to the house, my mood had lifted and I'd sunk into a fragile, relieved sort of peace. It was so novel that I wasn't sure what to do with it. I pushed open the front door and walked in, and that peace evaporated as soon as I reached the kitchen.

Holden was standing by the sink, sweaty and with his blond hair darker now that it was damp. It looked like he'd been working out, or running, or whatever it was billionaires did to maintain a physique like his. Lifting giant stacks of money probably.

He was also filling up a large plastic water bottle straight from the tap.

"Oh, be careful," I said quietly, my librarian instincts taking over as I set my keys on the counter. "That's city water and the house is pretty old, so the pipes are questionable. We have a filtered pitcher in the fridge."

Holden stopped but didn't turn off the tap. He just lifted the bottle, locked his piercing gray-blue eyes directly on mine, and took a long, slow drink of straight tap water. It was a bizarre display of masculine

stubbornness, like he was trying to posture or establish dominance over the kitchen sink.

Frankly, after the emotional roller coaster of the past week, the last thing I needed was him getting sick in my house. I didn't need to be blamed for making him live somewhere he got poisoned and I sure as hell did not need the mighty Thayers stepping in and telling me the house wasn't good enough for one of their own. So I snapped. Quietly but firmly.

"Look, I understand you didn't want to do this either," I said, stepping up to the opposite side of the island and crossing my arms. "I know you had your own reasons that made it necessary for you to marry me. So did I, but I don't regret it."

Holden set the water bottle down on the counter with a soft click, a slow, ridiculously arrogant smirk spreading across his face. Those intense eyes flashed with a cynical, mocking light that made my hackles rise instantly. One of his eyebrows arched.

"I'm well aware you don't regret it," he said, voice icy as he leaned against the counter. "I'm also aware you were probably paid a massive chunk by my family up front, and that our prenup is generous, to say the least. Honestly, I'm glad to hear you admit it. I'm glad we can agree this was just about the cash."

He paused for a moment, cocking his head as he held my gaze. "So, what's it going to be first? A shiny new sports car? A first-class vacation to the Maldives? A little golden Rolex to show off to your friends? Or maybe just some giant diamond earrings?"

My entire face went hot, a furious flush burning up my neck. "A Rolex? A vacation? No. Those are luxuries people like me don't have, Holden. Not even now. I've already done the first thing I was going to do, and that was paying off the back taxes on my childhood home this morning. Then I settled my student loans."

Fighting the sob I felt coming with everything I had, I swallowed the massive lump in my throat and gripped the edge of the counter so hard, my knuckles turned white. "I'm hoping to go back to school to get my master's degree next year, so I won't touch the rest of that money until I've paid for that, and *if* there's anything left, maybe I'll buy a bag of proper fucking coffee so I can stop scrounging for beans that ended up in the toaster."

Holden's mocking smirk vanished as he stared at me, his eyes wide and his jaw slack. I stared right back at him, this strange man who was living in

my house—my so-called husband—and finally let out the breath I'd been holding. I didn't know much about Holden Thayer or about whatever family drama had forced him into this contract. All I knew was that he was fabulously rich and judging me from a height I could never reach. So I shook my head, accepting that he could never understand where I was coming from but needing to set the record straight right from the outset.

"What's more is that I'm not sorry about it," I said, my voice still trembling but my chin lifting slightly as I looked him right in the eyes. "Money solved all of my problems today. Every single one of them. Problems I've had for years with no way out. So hate me if you want. Call me a gold digger. Think I'm lazy. I don't care. You don't get to look down your nose at me when you have absolutely no idea what it feels like to wonder if you're going to lose the roof over your head."

Holden didn't say a word, just stood there with this completely shut-off expression on his handsome face. Right now, he might as well have been a jagged rock for all the emotion he was revealing, all hard, sharp lines and absolutely nothing else.

I scoffed but stopped waiting for a response. Clearly, he was so far removed from reality that those specific words strung together, even when spoken in the English language, didn't make sense to him. What I'd said simply wasn't within his frame of reference, so he couldn't grasp it. At all.

After staring at him for another beat, I shook my head and marched out of the kitchen, hurrying up the stairs and firmly shutting my bedroom door behind me. As I leaned back against the wood, I realized I was shaking. My chest heaved as I tried to gulp in one breath after another in an attempt to calm my racing pulse.

I had no idea why just looking at Holden Thayer made it feel like every last drop of oxygen had been sucked out of the room, but his silent, simmering wrath was something else entirely. Something cold and dark that made me wonder if he was so spoiled that he'd turned out to be cruel.

When I finally caught my breath a little, I strode over to my bed and sank down on the edge of it, staring at the golden band on my finger. Holden didn't chase me down the hall or knock on the door. I supposed I hadn't expected him to, but as I fiddled with the ring, it suddenly occurred to me that my new living arrangement was going to be a total battlefield.

And against an adversary like that, I doubted I was going to win the war.

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CHAPTER 15

HOLDEN

Over the next few days, silence reigned supreme between Alicia and me, heavy enough to give me a tension headache and so deafening that even *I* was starting to miss conversation. On the other hand, at least it gave me time to fully wrap my head around the fact that the Hyde Park brownstone wasn't just a random rental they'd found on a college forum.

It was Alicia's house. According to Tasha, this was where Alicia had grown up, a place she loved so much, she'd legally bound herself to a cynical prick to protect it.

Naturally, that meant I probably should've apologized to her for being an asshole, but I didn't. Admitting I'd been wrong wasn't exactly in my wheelhouse, so instead, I just stewed in my own thoughts, ignoring the uncomfortable twist in my gut every time I passed her in the hallway.

Unfortunately, our forced isolation couldn't last forever.

It was Friday evening, and right now, we were begrudgingly climbing into my car to attend a small dinner party at my mom's. It was being held in honor of nothing in particular, other than the fact that our family gatherings seemed to happen less and less these days.

Alicia glared at me when she twisted to buckle up, blue-green-gold eyes burning with poorly restrained irritation. I rolled my own in response, not saying a word as I turned over the engine and pulled out of the driveway.

While I would never admit this out loud, she looked and smelled divine, the faintest hint of vanilla and something earthier wafting through the air as she settled back in her seat. Wearing a deep emerald dress that made her

eyes look like the inside of a forest during a storm, she was surprisingly beautiful, her golden hair pulled up into an elegant twist type thing at the nape of her neck.

That silence we'd fallen into stretched almost all the way to my mother's house, but she finally broke it while we idled at a red light a few blocks away. "We should put on a united front for your family tonight."

She said it so softly that I could barely hear her, her tone utterly without inflection. The first words she'd spoken to me in days and they were nothing more than painfully practical. She even turned a little in her seat to face me, obviously willing to bury the hatchet, even if it was just out of sight.

"I'm sure they'd notice any strife immediately, so I think it would be wise to let on that what we're experiencing is only the typical growing pains of an arranged marriage. Nothing more serious. I'm not sure exactly what that entails, but I imagine there would be some discomfort in the early stages of any arrangement like ours."

I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel, surprised by her pragmatism. The light turned green. "I actually agree with you on that front. So fine. As long as you can pretend to like me a little bit, I'll play the doting husband. Whatever the hell that looks like."

"Just… act like your own father when he was alive," she suggested casually.

I barked out a harsh, bitter laugh and Alicia started, her eyes suddenly wide. "What? Why are you laughing? I thought you agreed."

"I do, but my father isn't dead," I said, my voice flat. While I was perfectly happy to act like he was six feet under, if she was going to survive an evening with my family, she needed the truth. I gave it to her point blank. "Court Thayer is very much alive, unfortunately. He's just serving a federal sentence in a minimum-security facility upstate."

Alicia shrank back in her seat and made a tiny, mouse-like sound. "Oh."

"Oh," I parroted sarcastically, glancing over at her. "Yeah, oh."

She swallowed hard, looking out the window for a brief second before she finally sighed. "Well, maybe don't act like him, then."

I frowned, wondering if she was pretending not to know who he was. If she'd grown up in this city, she was absolutely sure to have heard about the scandal, but I supposed she would've been a teenager when the news had broken. Like me.

Maybe normal high-school kids hadn’t been as caught up in the news cycle as those who’d traveled in our circles. She’d probably been too busy practicing a cheer for a football game or studying for a quiz to care about some rich guy going to prison.

Even so, I found it hard to believe she hadn’t known, but as I held her gaze, I realized she didn’t look guilty or even defensive. Maybe she was just good at masking her emotions, but it really didn’t look like she was trying to hide anything.

Instead, there was a faint, unmistakable hint of mischief dancing in her eyes and it gave me pause. Clearly, she was amused by her own blunder and the sight sent an unexpected spike of adrenaline racing through me.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure why I was suddenly so desperate to get under her skin, to rile her up and see how far I could push until that stubborn spark of defiance flickered out, but the urge was almost overwhelming. I wanted to see her snap again. I wanted to push her buttons the same way she was unwittingly pushing mine and find out what it would take to snuff out that amusement.

But before I could say anything to provoke her, I pulled the car to a stop in front of my family home, a massive, sprawling house that had felt like a mausoleum for a long time after the scandal had broken. My mother had spent years slinking around the empty rooms, wailing over her ruined reputation and mourning the social circles that had rejected her.

Jane, our brothers, and I had done our best to stay strong for her and to carry on like normal at first, but eventually, the house had grown quiet. Lively family dinners had turned into muttered conversations over sandwiches or leftovers in our bedrooms.

Overnight, Wyatt and I had become pariahs at school, only attending our classes because Jane had insisted and then holing up here again. For months, we hadn’t even seen the inside of a grocery store, let alone a restaurant or a social gathering.

Jane and Colin had all but disappeared, thrust into a world we’d been woefully unprepared for. Their days had consisted of meeting with lawyers we suddenly couldn’t afford, cooperating with the authorities, and fielding endless questions none of us had answers to.

They’d turn up late at night or in the early morning hours, restock the kitchen with groceries they’d bought using Jane’s trust fund—the only

account a Thayer had ever even looked at that hadn't been seized—and then be gone again by the time we woke up for school in the morning.

Things were finally bouncing back for the Thayers now, but it wouldn't last long. We were back, the city pretending they'd never hated us. Soon enough, the fleet of luxury cars in the driveway tonight would disappear all over again, but for now, the time for bickering with my wife was over.

"This is it," I said, doing my best to keep my lips from curling into a sneer. In theory, there was nothing wrong with this house, but God, for the longest time, it had felt like a prison in its own right. Like we'd been locked up right along with our father. "Try not to talk too much with anyone who isn't family. Trust me, it doesn't matter how well you think a conversation has gone. They won't have anything nice to say about you after."

Alicia's light eyebrows swept up, but she nodded, seeming a little apprehensive as she stared at the house. Taking some comfort in the fact that she would obviously heed my warning, I climbed out of the car, and true to my word, the doting husband made his appearance the moment the valet opened her door.

I strode around to her side, extending a hand to help her out. Our eyes met for just a moment as she took it, but neither of us said a word. A strange buzz of awareness raced up my spine, though. I ignored it, but it had definitely been there.

As soon as she was on her feet, standing next to the car, I dropped her hand, only touching her again to press my palm against the small of her back as we walked up the grand steps to the front door. The warmth of her skin radiated through the thin fabric of her dress, a slight tremor running through her before she squared her shoulders, obviously trying to remain calm as we strode through the open doors and into the lion's den.

Part of me expected her to be intimidated by the soaring ceilings and glittering crystal chandeliers in the foyer, but she just drank it all in, quietly observant before she straightened up a little more and glanced at me. "This is where you used to live?"

I shrugged. "Sure, if you want to call it that."

Personally, I would call it the place where I'd been incarcerated, but hey. Before all that, I supposed I had lived here.

A slight furrow appeared between her eyebrows at my response, her gaze shifting from one of my eyes to the other, but instead of asking any of

the questions burning in them, she simply nodded, then smiled when my mother came toward us.

“Alicia,” Mom cooed, brushing air kisses to both her cheeks before pulling her into a hug. “I’m delighted to have you here, darling. Let me show you around and introduce you to some of my friends.” Mom grinned at me over Alicia’s shoulder. “You don’t mind if I steal her for a while, do you, honey?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, knowing full well it didn’t, but since we’d agreed to present a united front, I probably had to pretend to care at least a little bit. “Only if you promise to take care of her.”

“Of course.” Mom immediately took her arm and led her away, her head already bending toward Alicia’s and her free hand waving animatedly as she spoke.

Since I had zero interest in actually mingling with these people, I grabbed a drink and stuck to the edge of the drawing room, grateful Mom had chosen Alicia to parade around instead of me. I would’ve felt sorry for her, but as the evening progressed, Alicia seemed to take an actual, genuine interest in Mom.

Mom might’ve practically hijacked her, but she was absolutely doting on her now, and Alicia couldn’t seem to get enough. Watching them together even cracked some of the ice around my heart, but not because it was my wife and my mother. There was more to it than that.

After our first dinner together, I knew Alicia’s parents were dead, but she’d made it sound like it had happened so long ago that she’d learned to live with it. Now, however, I found myself wondering if there was a deeper, more painful layer of grief she was hiding.

She attached herself to Nora’s hip, listening intently to my mother’s endless, gossipy anecdotes, and on more than one occasion, when Mom reached out to pat her arm or rest a hand against her shoulder, Alicia didn’t pull away. Instead, she leaned into my mother’s touch, her expression softening in a way that looked a hell of lot like hunger for a mother’s affection.

“This is going remarkably well, isn’t it?” A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, drawing my gaze away from them.

I looked over to find Alex standing beside me, a glass of bourbon in his hand as he stared across the room toward the fireplace where Jane had

joined Mom and Alicia. I shrugged, blinking a few times as I tried to snap out of my musings about my wife's true emotional state.

"Yeah, it's fine, I guess," I said.

At that moment, Mom reached out with a gentle, maternal smile on her lips and lovingly tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind Alicia's ear. Alicia beamed back at her, her entire face lighting up.

"Its fine?" He laughed. "It's better than fine. This was a great match, even if I have to say so myself. Just admit it, Holden. I did well."

I blew out a heavy breath, that brief flicker of warmth in my chest freezing over once more. After all the cynical conditioning I'd endured during my upbringing, I was too broken and too thoroughly burned by the snakes I'd grown up with to believe a stranger could be this naturally kind.

People didn't just love my mother. They loved what my mother could buy them. What her name or her backing could mean for them.

As the thought hit, I narrowed my eyes at Alicia, who was laughing at something Jane must've said. *She's just sucking up to the family. She knows who holds the purse strings and she's trying to make sure they both like her so the money she has access to now doesn't run out.*

I took a long sip of my drink, trying to convince myself of that because the alternative, the idea that my wife was actually sweet, fragile, and utterly deprived of a family's love, was a reality I absolutely was *not* prepared to handle.

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CHAPTER 16

ALICIA

I stood by the front door, double-checking that I had my set of library keys when I heard the rhythmic thud of footsteps descending the stairs. Holden rounded the corner into the foyer a moment later, dressed in a dark charcoal sweater that made his broad shoulders look even broader, a clean pair of jeans, and his heavy backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder.

Tasha sat perched on a stool at the kitchen island, wrapped in her fuzzy bathrobe and nursing a giant mug of coffee as she scrolled through social media. As soon as he appeared, however, she abandoned her idle scrolling to look at us over the rim of her mug, her eyes darting between him and me like she was about to watch a potential train wreck occur on her favorite reality dating show.

Holden didn't pay any attention to her, not even to say good morning when he walked straight past her into the kitchen. He set his laptop case and backpack down on the island and turned those piercing gray-blue eyes directly on me.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I have work. My time off is officially over and I like to get there early to set up. Especially on Tuesday mornings. They're always a bit of a circus because we have the infant and parent reading hour at nine, then toddler story time immediately after that. If I don't get the foam mats and giant stuffed bears arranged before the doors open, it's chaos."

I had no idea why I'd told him all of that. I could've just left it at having to go to work, but for some inexplicable reason, whenever he questioned

my movements, I felt like I was being cross-examined by a particularly attractive, but disbelieving prosecutor. It just felt like I had to defend myself.

Especially with Tasha curiously observing our exchange, probably judging the heck out of me despite knowing exactly why I'd chosen to subject myself to this for the rest of my life. Or maybe it wasn't her who was judging me. Maybe I was judging myself, but it sure felt like there was a great deal of judgment doing the rounds.

Meanwhile, Holden seemed completely immune to the atmosphere stifling the entire house right now. He just leveled me with a flat, serious look and slid a glass bottle of water from the fridge into the slot on the side of his backpack.

"Okay, then," he said. "I'll go with you."

I blinked hard, my hand freezing on the doorknob and my extremities suddenly refusing to cooperate. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I have midterms coming up next week," he explained, swiping the heavy-looking backpack right back up like it weighed nothing and slinging it over his shoulder. "I need to log some serious study hours, and frankly, the city library is a perfect place to do it. Plus, if I stay here, Tasha will spend the entire morning harassing me either for my notes or about my family."

She let out a loud scoff from her spot at the island, setting her mug down so hard that she'd probably almost cracked the ceramic. "Excuse me? I do not harass you, Thayer. I provide necessary social commentary."

"Necessary to who?" he shot back without hesitation. "I never need social commentary. What I need is peace and quiet, and that's always in short supply when you're around."

She rolled her eyes, then shot me a tragic look. "That's it. I'm moving out. Clearly, I'm no longer wanted in this house, so I'll just go pack my bags and leave you two lovebirds to your own misery."

"Don't," I blurted immediately, a spike of panic shooting through me at the thought of being left alone with my husband.

"Please do," Holden said at the exact same millisecond, completely deadpan. "When can we expect you to be gone?"

Tasha shot him a lethal glare, but I didn't give her a chance to retaliate. They could have it out on their own time. I didn't want to her to move out

—obviously—but I also wouldn't have wanted to live with him if I didn't have to, and she didn't have to.

Plus, our situation was so entirely awkward that living with us was probably worse than living with actual newlyweds. Even so, I pushed open the front door and took a step toward the porch. "If you're serious about coming, we need to leave right now. I have a schedule to keep. Tasha, don't you dare move out while I'm gone. I know this is weird, but we'll figure it out eventually."

She arched an eyebrow at me, not saying another word as I held her gaze until she finally nodded. Holden followed me out to the porch, his hand disappearing into his pocket and coming out with a set of keys.

"Fine, let's just go," he muttered. "We'll take my car."

"No, thank you," I said, stopping on the sidewalk and gesturing to the old bicycle locked near the steps. "I usually just take my bike across town or, if it's raining, I use the green line."

Holden didn't even look at the bicycle. He walked straight toward his dark, immaculate sedan parked at the curb, pressing the key fob to unlock the doors. "You're not biking through city traffic when I have a perfectly functional vehicle sitting right here. Get in the car, Alicia."

"I have a routine," I said stubbornly. "It helps me wake up."

"Sure, but I don't have a bike," he returned, waving at the car again. "How about a compromise? We take my car, but we follow your route."

I opened my mouth to argue, but an icy wind swept down the street, biting through my cardigan like it wasn't even there. Plus, if he was willing to compromise and cave on the route, I supposed I could compromise on the method of transportation.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I marched over to the passenger side of the car and yanked open the door, climbing in without another word. As always when we were in his car together, I used the suffocating silence to wonder why he drove a vehicle this normal instead of some fancy SUV or sports car, and he brooded quietly behind the wheel.

As he pulled away from the curb and navigated the quiet, tree-lined streets, I stared out the window and muttered instructions, surprised that he stuck as close to my usual route as he could. Finally, I pointed toward a corner near the next set of traffic lights. "Since you insisted on crashing my morning commute, the least you can do is stop at that small coffee shop right over there. It's my regular spot."

Holden glanced at me, eyes eventually tracking the movement of my hand until his gaze landed on the slightly crooked sign hanging over the door. "*That's* your regular? It looks like a drug den."

I scoffed. "They're an independent place who's refused to sell out to some big franchise and their small drip coffee only costs a dollar. That's worth more to me than fancy wallpaper and strategic lighting."

He sighed but pulled up to an empty spot by the curb right around the corner and shoved the car into park. As I climbed out, I took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scent of freshly baked bread and pastries from the bakery next door, and waved at the owner of the small bookstore on the other side.

Holden followed me, but while I could practically feel him just a few steps behind, I didn't turn to look at him or wait for him to catch up. Instead, I just pushed through the door of the little shop, smiling at the soft tinkle of the bell from above.

"Good morning, Bobby," I said to the only barista behind the counter. "I'll just have my usual, please."

She looked up, giving me a warm smile as she nodded. "Hey, Alicia. Coming right up."

I pulled a crumpled dollar bill out of my pocket, but then Holden stepped up beside me at the counter. He took one look at my single dollar bill, let out a soft, disapproving grunt, and gently but firmly pushed my hand down, tapping his shiny, black credit card against the tabletop.

"Actually, we'll take two large dark roasts," he said, his deep voice carrying this effortless command that made Bobby stop in her tracks. "Give us two of the avocado and egg breakfast sandwiches as well, please. To go."

"I don't need a sandwich," I whispered as we moved to the pickup counter. "I never eat heavy breakfasts, Holden. I always just have a piece of toast at home if I'm hungry."

"Did you have one today?"

"No, I wasn't hungry."

He leaned with his back against the wooden counter, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked down at me. To my complete surprise, a sudden, passionate spark flared in his eyes and he launched into a completely unexpected tirade while Bobby went about filling the order I hadn't placed and completely ignoring the one I had.

“Skipping breakfast is scientifically idiotic,” he said, his tone weirdly animated for a guy who usually spoke in single-syllable words or grunts. “You’re about to spend the next four hours being crawled over by infants and shouted at by toddlers. Your body cannot sustain the level of energy required for that on nothing but water flavored with beans. The human brain requires complex carbohydrates and fats to maintain glucose levels. If you crash by ten, you’ll be useless to the children of Chicago and unable to effectively do your job.”

I stared up at him, my mouth slightly open as he continued to lecture me, sounding exactly like a grumpy, overprotective older brother or a very intense sports coach. “Eating a good meal in the morning supplies glucose to your brain and your muscles, and it also helps maintain your blood sugar levels. It’s downright dangerous to skip it, especially without a valid reason.”

He motioned vaguely toward the glass-fronted case containing a variety of sandwiches and pastries. “In our case, there is no such reason. There’s perfectly good food right there. It’s already been made and we can eat it on the way. It’s a no-brainer.”

I almost burst out laughing. This was so absurd that I honestly didn’t have the correct response, but at least Bobby handed over one of the cups of dark roast and I lifted it, taking a slow, cautious sip as he finally ran out of steam.

Those smoky blue eyes narrowed, like he was checking to see if I’d gotten all that, and a tiny, involuntary smile broke out across my lips. I didn’t even try to stop it though, just rolling with the outward expression of my surprise at his tirade. “Okay, then.”

For the briefest of seconds, it felt like there was genuine warmth between us, just a microscopic fracture in the icy wall we’d built around ourselves. Holden’s brow furrowed when his gaze dropped to my mouth, catching the smile there before he flicked it up to mine.

“What?” he muttered. “Why is any of that funny?”

“It’s not,” I said softly, tucking my purse under my arm as the barista handed over the bag of warm sandwiches. “Bye, Bobby. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” she replied, casting a curious glance at Holden but thankfully not asking who he was or why I suddenly had company for my morning commute.

As we pushed back out onto the sidewalk, he gripped the bag, falling into step right beside me. “No, seriously. Why were you smiling?”

“Because you’re right, Holden. Thank you for the complex carbohydrates. I just didn’t take you for being such a health nut.”

He let out another short grunt. “I’m not a nut.”

I smiled again. “Of course, not.”

Part of me expected him to grunt, snap, or engage in another manner of behavior that hadn’t been seen regularly since the days of the cavemen, but instead, as we strode side-by-side to his car, I could’ve sworn I saw the tight line of his jaw relax just a little bit.

Well, well, well, would you look at that? Holden Thayer’s inner human can come out more than once in a blue moon after all.

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CHAPTER 17

HOLDEN

The city library was *not* the quiet place I'd thought it would be. As far as I knew, public libraries were supposed to be sanctuaries of hushed silence, dusty shelves, and elderly women shushing anyone who breathed too loudly, but it turned out that I'd been wrong.

As soon as I pushed the doors open for Alicia, we were hit with a wall of lively, excited energy. I hadn't even had the chance to peel away from her yet before a middle-aged woman stepped out from behind the main circulation desk and opened her arms, striding up to us with a brilliant smile on her lips.

"Alicia! You're back," she cried, embracing her like a long-lost child. "How was the honeymoon?"

Honeymoon? My eyebrows hiked a little, but I schooled my features and decided to just watch instead of asking the many questions I suddenly had.

Alicia flushed and hugged her back, keeping her response short and sweet. "Oh, it was great. Thanks, Marge."

Within thirty seconds, three more library employees had appeared from various aisles, buzzing around Alicia like she was a returning war hero. A younger guy with a massive beard and a lanyard identifying him as some kind of researcher eyed me suspiciously from the corner of his eye.

"I still can't believe we didn't even know you had a boyfriend," he muttered. "Let alone one serious enough that you married him."

“I like to keep my personal life private, Marcus,” she replied smoothly as she hugged one of the other women. “This is our workplace, not the headquarters of a gossip magazine.”

The other woman chuckled. “I hope you have some wedding pictures for us. I bet you looked stunning.”

Alicia froze for the merest flash of a second, then flushed again. “I, uh, we don’t have any wedding pictures yet. It was a very intimate ceremony, but I’m sure someone will have taken a photo or two.”

As one of the others started asking her about her relationship with her husband, I shifted the bag on my shoulder and quietly backed away, still listening carefully, but not wanting to be too obvious about it.

From the staggered, slightly bewildered reactions of her coworkers, it was obvious that Alicia had dropped some vague hints that she was getting married, but it also sounded like she’d played it off like she’d had a long-term boyfriend-turned-fiancé. It didn’t sound like she’d given them a name, a date, or so much as a single detail about the wedding or the husband.

All of which made me realize that she was a quiet, insanely private person. Her coworkers clearly knew that about her and they respected her boundaries, but that reality only served to confuse me even more.

If she was truly this private, so averse to the spotlight that she seemed uncomfortable sharing personal details even with the people she worked with day in and day out, then why the hell had she agreed to a marriage that would inevitably thrust her into the formerly glitzy, intrusive world of our family?

What were her actual motives for chasing such perceived wealth and prestige?

A normal, quiet girl didn’t just sign her life away without a specific, usually calculated agenda. Alicia didn’t seem to have that, though.

When she finally broke away from them, she came back to my side, her hazel eyes apologetic as she lifted them to mine. “Sorry about that. It’s my first day back and I only told them the day before we, uh, signed the papers that I’d be taking a few days off to get married.”

“Right,” I muttered, glancing over at Marcus who was still watching me from the corner of his eye like he was about to demand identification. “I’m just going to find a find a desk upstairs. See you later.”

“The second floor is best for studying,” she said quietly, pointing at a sweeping marble staircase that cut through the center of the library. “You

might want to take a desk in the far corner if you really need to concentrate, though. It's going to be a busy day at the children's department."

"Yeah, thanks."

She gave me a curt nod, then spun on her heels and headed over to a counter beside a brightly colored corner. As I watched, she slid her purse off her shoulder and tucked it away in a drawer. Then she literally pushed up the sleeves of her knitted blue cardigan and went to work.

I climbed the stairs to the second-floor mezzanine, intending on following her advice about heading for the far corner, but instead, I took a desk near the historical archives. It was a spot that looked like it should be reserved for serious research, but it was empty and it would suit my purposes just fine.

As I flipped open my laptop and spread out my textbooks, I looked down at the children's section below, appreciating that I had a direct, unobstructed view. Alicia's blond hair shone like she had a fucking halo in the warm light streaming in through the windows, and over the course of the next three hours, I realized that she might as well be an actual angel.

Seriously, no one is that good of a person. No one.

I accomplished precisely zero studying as I watched her over the mahogany railing, her morning schedule every bit as packed and hectic as she'd made it sound. First, she set up the kids' corner exactly like she'd told me she would, then came infant and parent reading hour.

She sat cross-legged on a giant, bright green foam mat, holding up a picture book about a hungry caterpillar. Right now, she didn't look like the fierce, defensive woman I'd thought I was getting to know.

Instead, she was so gentle that I was completely fascinated. She smiled and laughed, holding babies while their mothers disappeared to the restroom and pausing to pull funny faces at furious tiny humans if they started wailing. I couldn't hear her voice through the glass partition, but it was clear that she was holding the entire room of mothers and babies spellbound.

Toddler story time was much less zen. In fact, it looked a little like a localized riot from up here. What was supposed to be an educational hour saw one kid trying to eat a plastic dinosaur while another did laps around a bookshelf. I would've lost my shit, but Alicia didn't even flinch.

She managed the chaos without ever losing her composure, gently redirecting the dinosaur-eater and catching the runner, and then going back

to her story like nothing had happened at all. I frowned, but kept watching her, especially surprised when some older kids started filing in once the toddlers had cleared out.

Alicia moved to a small desk, greeting the new arrivals one by one. While they weren't nearly as loud, they seemed just as excited to see her, lining up to proudly show her their chosen books or to hand her drawings they must've made. She took the time to talk to every last one, giving the kid who was with her at that moment her full attention before moving on to the next.

She'd be a great mom.

The thought popped into my mind out of absolutely fucking nowhere, hitting me like a bucket of ice dumped over my head. I shoved it away fast, slamming my textbook shut with a thud that drew a glare from a nearby student.

My jaw clenched. *Get a grip, Thayer.*

Thinking about motherhood and Alicia was a dangerous, complicated minefield I was nowhere near ready to even begin traversing. One of the primary contingencies buried deep within our marriage contract related to the production of an heir.

Explicitly stated in black and white was that the final, permanent release of my trust fund depended on a child being born to carry on the Thayer name and secure the legacy. Until that happened, Alex held a vise-like grip on that money.

Apparently, it was the same cold, clinical clause contained in his own trust documents and in that of every Westwood literally from here to San Francisco. Designed by lawyers over a century ago, it was supposed to ensure one's commitment to the contract that'd been signed, but thinking about it while watching Alicia tuck a lock of hair behind a little girl's ear made my stomach turn.

Desperate for a distraction, I checked my watch, realizing that I only had an hour to get to a lecture across town, which meant I had to get going. *Thank God.*

Quickly shutting my laptop and sliding it into its case, I stuffed that into my backpack along with my textbooks and marched down the stairs to tell her I'd pick her up after her shift. As I navigated the low bookshelves, trying to avoid stepping on a stray Lego, I noticed a cluster of about four preteen boys sitting at a table nearby.

When I got within a few feet of them, they stopped talking, just staring at me with wide, unblinking eyes. Annoyed, stressed about getting to class on time, and still disturbed by my own thoughts, I acted like the mature twenty-seven-year-old man I was and narrowed my eyes at them, favoring each of them with a glare that made one boy gasp out loud. The others started whispering to each other, shying away like I was a monster that'd just emerged from the woods.

"Holden, stop it," Alicia whispered furiously from my left.

I turned to see her standing beside a cart filled with books, her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised in disapproval. Shaking my head, I hooked a sharp turn in her direction and shrugged when she shook her head right back at me.

"What?" I asked. "They were looking at me funny."

"They're looking at you funny because you look exactly like the super-villain in the comic books they're reading," she said quietly, but I could still hear the amusement lacing her tone.

I scoffed and crossed my arms. "I do not look like a comic book villain. I'm wearing a hoodie, for crying out loud."

"Go see for yourself, Lord Doom." She inclined her chin toward the table. "Ask them to show you their comic."

Determined to prove her wrong, I walked over boldly, watching the boys freeze as soon as my shadow fell over them. Suppressing the urge to roll my eyes, I leaned down, bracing my palms against the wood as I glanced at the graphic novel spread out between them.

"Why aren't you guys in school today?" I asked, and the smallest one—the same one who'd gasped before—flinched.

Without waiting for any of them to stammer out an answer when it was quickly becoming clear that they were terrified of me, I reached out and swiped up the comic book. When my gaze dropped to the illustration of the primary antagonist, I almost started cursing. The guy was tall and broad, with sort of messy, light hair and piercing, intensely angry blue eyes. Even his wardrobe seemed to consist entirely of dark, tailored coats with *hoodies* underneath.

Damn it.

Unfortunately, the fictional mass-murderer in question did, in fact, look a lot like me. I slid the book back toward them, cleared my throat, and

walked back to Alicia with annoyance burning in my veins. She was leaning against her book cart now, a massive, triumphant smirk on her lips.

“Well?” she teased quietly. “What did you think?”

“At best, it’s a superficial resemblance,” I muttered. “Also, not for nothing, but his jawline is completely unrealistic. It’s worse than Johnny Bravo.”

I glanced back at the boys over my shoulder. “They should be at school anyway, not reading that trash illustrated by people who can’t even get a human face right.”

“They’re on a field trip from the middle school down the street, here on an authorized half-day,” she explained softly, her eyes still dancing with amusement. “So, cool it with the intimidation tactics. You’re going to give them nightmares and they’re children. You don’t have to make them shake in their boots just to prove a point.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, trying not to notice how much I enjoyed the sight of a smirk on her lips. “Look, I have to go to class, but I’ll be back to pick you up around four. Don’t take the train or walk home.”

“I’ll be ready,” she said, turning back to her book cart without another word.

Yeah. Okay, then. Goodbye to you too, I thought as I spun around and walked out, seeing two maintenance workers on tall ladders near the entrance.

They were hanging massive, navy-and-gold banners from the vaulted ceiling. My stomach swooped when I looked up and realized they were for Jane’s upcoming annual fundraising gala. Dread settled into my bones when I looked at the date and realized the event was only a week away.

It would be my first official, high-brow public appearance with Alicia as my wife and I’d rather attend my own open-heart surgery than spend an entire evening seeing, smiling at, and having to converse with the same hypocritical, blue-blooded socialites who’d shunned my family the second the scandal had broken—and were now shamelessly fawning over us again because of our rapid rise back into high society.

The gala was going to be a monumental test for Alicia as well. She was going to be thrown directly into the shark-infested waters of the elite. Once she experienced the outright nastiness, the fake smiles, and the suffocating pressure my life actually entailed, she’d probably realize that no amount of money was worth it.

When she realized the level of misery she'd signed up for, she was probably going to dip out of the contract and run as far and as fast as she could. Scoffing as I turned away from the banners, I marched to the doors and stepped out into the cool, fall afternoon, wondering why the idea of her leaving wasn't as much of a relief as I might've thought it would be.

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CHAPTER 18

ALICIA

Shopping with Tasha while I had actual money in my bank account was a wildly stupid, yet utterly intoxicating experience. Usually, our trips to the mall consisted of longingly staring through windows, checking price tags, and immediately putting back even items from the clearance rack.

Two weeks ago, even a twenty-dollar blouse would've meant sacrificing a week's groceries, but that wasn't true this time. She and I were here to shop for Jane's gala, and while I hadn't arrived intending to spend a ton of money, it didn't take much for her to convince me.

"You're a literal Thayer now," she said enthusiastically as she shoved a stunning velvet gown into my arms. "There's no way you can show up to Jane Thayer-Westwood's fundraiser looking like you got your outfit from the lost-and-found bin at a music festival. You're literally being paid to blend in."

Chewing on my lower lip, I glanced at the gown in my arms. It really was gorgeous, but this was a high-end boutique and a quick glance at the price tag just about made my eyes water. *But she's not wrong. I have to pass as Holden Thayer's wife. God, I* am *Holden Thayer's wife.*

"Yeah, okay," I finally muttered. "Maybe I'll just try it on."

If I was being honest with myself, I was actually really looking forward to the fancy event. I'd never had a reason to dress up the way I would be expected to for this and the thought of getting to feel like an actual princess —or even just a well-funded, grown woman—was exhilarating.

My wardrobe consisted almost entirely of cardigans, pleated skirts, and practical flats. While I did possess a few dresses, none of them were even remotely suitable for something like this. Hell, I'd barely even passed at Jane's informal dinner party.

There was no way I owned anything appropriate for a *gala*. Which meant that even if I didn't *want* to buy a dress, I had to. *So I might as well make the most of it, right?*

Tasha grinned at whatever look I had on my face. "Oh, you're so not just trying that on. You're getting it, aren't you?"

"That depends what it looks like when it's on," I admitted. "If it's good, then yes. I'll take it."

"Excellent." She clapped her hands, drawing the ire of an extremely snooty shop assistant, but then a calculated gleam flickered in her eyes, and when she spoke again, it was loud enough that there was no way the shop assistant wouldn't overhear. "This is your first public event as *Mrs.* Holden Thayer. The first of many, I'm sure. We simply must find a gown befitting that title, and when we do, we'll know which boutique to put at the top of our list for the future."

Internally, I groaned, knowing exactly what she was doing, but surprisingly, it worked. The snooty shop assistant schooled her features, turning from the very picture of judgment to charm and swooping down on us with newfound enthusiasm.

For the next few hours, we might as well have been part of the rehearsal squad for a movie montage. I tried on so many dresses, it made my head spin, but somehow, I also left the store with scarves, classy loungewear, and a few new outfits appropriate for work.

Already weighed down by several beautiful shopping bags, Tasha dragged me to a jewelry shop next and I walked out with a few delicate, thin gold bracelets that perfectly matched the classic gold of my new wedding band. The only thing I hadn't found was a pair of earrings. Everything I looked at was either too heavy or too gaudy, but the rest of the trip had been a resounding success.

The gown for the gala itself was an absolute masterpiece. The shoes that went with it somehow, magically, felt like I was walking on either air or sunshine, and for the first time ever, my wardrobe had received an update. I'd finally be able to get rid of some of the clothes I'd had since high school.

When we finally got back home, the house was blissfully quiet. Tasha checked her watch, realized she was almost late for a seminar, and flew out the front door with her backpack bouncing as she ran.

Left entirely alone, I carried my purchases up to my bedroom and took at least an hour carefully arranging my new things in my closet. I hung the clothes with the greatest of care, folding what had to be folded and extracting what could be donated.

As I worked, a warm hum lingered in my chest, that same relief I'd felt back at the boutique when I'd realized I could afford to indulge just the tiniest bit. Maybe it was silly, but I felt like a real person again, someone who worked hard and as a result didn't have to keep wearing clothes that were at least ten years old.

Now that I wasn't drowning in a sea of back taxes and student loans, my salary would actually allow me to live comfortably, if frugally. I definitely wouldn't be going on a shopping trip like that every month, but I'd finally be able to afford new underwear when I needed it instead of the same threadbare pairs I'd had for half a decade.

On that note…

I strode over to my dresser, emptying all my socks, panties, and bras and cringing at the state some were in. After throwing out what had been mended so many times that they were more patches than garment, I sat down on my bed and let out a relieved sigh.

It may not be spring, but literally cleaning out my closet feels pretty darn good.

Just as I was trying to convince myself that today had signified the start of a new chapter, one that definitely wouldn't be all bad, the thud of the front door closing downstairs echoed through the floorboards.

I glanced down at the watch on my wrist and sighed when I saw the time, my heart stammering in my chest. Tasha wouldn't be done for another couple hours, which meant Holden was home.

A sudden urge washed over me to talk to him. With the gala looming ahead this weekend, I had a great excuse to try to bridge the awkward gap between us. At some point, he and I probably had to talk about the future, but for now, I'd settle for just a civil conversation about what to expect at the fundraiser.

Maybe from there, we could work on actually being friends, but we had to start somewhere, and properly coordinating our united front seemed like

a good place. If I wanted to prove to him that I was taking this seriously, that I wasn't just a lazy gold digger, then I had to at least try.

Rising from the bed, I smoothed out my sweater, took a deep breath, and quietly padded down the stairs. The gown had fit perfectly, not a single alteration required, and I'd already decided to take that as a sign that everything was going to be okay.

So far, everything about this arrangement—except for my actual interactions with my husband himself—had gone smooth as silk. The paperwork had been compiled and filed without a hitch, Holden and I had both shown up on the day, the money had landed in my account exactly as scheduled, and my payments to the city and the bank had cleared. Our first dinner at Nora's house had gone well and even that day when he'd driven me to work hadn't been awful.

Surely, that has to mean something. It has to. Eventually, we're going to be alright. I know we are.

As I reached the landing, however, the low rumble of Holden's voice drifted from the living room. It sounded like he was on the phone, so I paused on the bottom step, not wanting to barge in on a private conversation, but before I could clear my throat to announce my presence, the next words sliced through the air.

"—don't think she has any idea what she's walking into," he was saying, his voice positively oozing that familiar, icy derision as he paced the length of the hardwood floor. A moment later, his heavy footsteps stopped near the window and he sighed. "It's going to be a clusterfuck and it doesn't have to be this way. We shouldn't have to go."

My grip tightened on the banister, my breath catching in my throat. I nearly scoffed out loud, but he went on, clearly oblivious to my presence. Or maybe not. Maybe he was letting me hear this so I would know where he stood.

"No, I'm serious," he said firmly. "This is someone who reads fairy tales to toddlers for a living. It's not fair. No one should have to be subjected to that without warning. We're talking about the upper class of the entire city here. Just think about that for a second."

There was a long pause as whoever was on the other end of the line replied. Then Holden let out a snort. "I don't care. You can put a suit on a shark too, but that doesn't make them… I don't know, not a shark. There's belonging and then there's not belonging. It's going to be a total

embarrassment and *I'm* the one who's going to have to pick up the pieces when the press—"

A hot wave of humiliation crashed over me, turning my ears to lava and my chest into a raging cesspool of rage and indignation. *A total embarrassment.*

He thought *I* was going to be an embarrassment to his precious, snobbish family name. Clearly, he thought that just because I worked at a public library, I was some delicate, uncultured blob who would burst into tears if anyone so much as looked at me wrong.

He hadn't even given me a chance, already writing me off as a liability. A piece of unwanted baggage he was being forced to hang around his neck and drag around.

I took a slow, silent step backward, retreating up the stairs before he could see me. No matter how hurt I was and how many choice words I had to hurl at him, I refused to let him see how deep he'd cut. I would *not* give him the satisfaction of knowing that he had the power to hurt me at all, actually, so I didn't confront him.

Not yet.

Instead, I marched back to my bedroom, closing the door with a quiet, deliberate click behind me and flicking the lock for good measure. While I doubted he'd come find me, I didn't want to see him right now. I needed to pull myself together first. Then—and *only* then—would I decide how to handle this.

I would not, however, do it on *his* terms. *And to think, I was ready to bury the hatchet.*

My hands shook with a volatile mix of anger and defiance as I stared at the closet where my beautiful, perfect new gown was hanging. *Oh, you think I'm going to embarrass you, Holden Thayer? You think I'm going to shrink into a corner and fall apart?*

If that was truly how little he thought of me, he had another thing coming. I was going to make absolutely sure that when we walked into that gala on Saturday night, the only person who was embarrassed would be him—for completely underestimating me.

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CHAPTER 19

HOLDEN

I'd always held a special kind of hatred for themed events, but a charity gala with a mandatory costume requirement was a unique brand of hell as far as I was concerned. Tonight's theme was a masquerade, some pre-Halloween bullshit cooked up by a committee of people who had too much time and money on their hands.

Naturally, I completely ignored the prompt, dressing in a classic, tailored black tuxedo instead of donning some ridiculous velvet cape or mask.

I wasn't a fan of Halloween. I never had been. The concept of people pretending to be something they weren't, even if supposedly just for fun, didn't sit well with me.

As it was, most people spent three hundred and sixty-five days a year wearing metaphorical masks to protect their reputations, status, or stock portfolios. Adding a literal version just felt redundant.

Standing in the hallway of the brownstone, I adjusted my bowtie in the mirror, deciding that it was fine just a little bit askew when Alicia's voice came from her bedroom. "Holden? Are you decent? I think I might need some help."

I frowned but strode down the hall to her door and pushed it open, the irritation vaporizing from my bloodstream as soon as I laid eyes on her. She was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking spectacular in a rich, ruby-red gown that fit like it had been sculpted on her body.

Slightly off-center from the nape of her neck, her blonde hair was in an elegant, intricate twist that exposed the delicate line of her throat. The deep red of the fabric made her skin look like porcelain, but the breathtaking, effortless elegance of the look was a touch ruined by the fact that right now, she was contorted into a weird, pretzel-type shape, her arms flailing behind her back as she tried to reach the zipper.

"It's stuck," she muttered, her cheeks flushing as she glanced at me in the reflection. "I can't get it past the middle of my back."

"Hold still," I said, my voice an octave lower than usual before I tore my gaze away from her and cleared my throat. "I can get it."

I stepped up behind her, that vague, intoxicating scent of vanilla and clean earth instantly invading my senses once more. *God, whatever perfume that is, it really does a number on me every fucking time.*

Even so, I reached out, trying not to look too clumsy as my fingertips brushed against the bare, warm skin of her upper back. The barest of shivers ran through her the second my skin made contact with hers and I nearly groaned, but instead, I let my eyes slide shut and gripped the tiny metal pull of the zipper, carefully guiding it up until it locked in place.

When I opened my eyes again, they landed on hers in the reflection, and in my periphery, I could see her chest heaving with shallow, short breaths. She focused on me, but neither of us said anything as we stood there, just staring at each other for a beat until I finally remembered to take a step back.

"There," I said gruffly. "You're all set."

She let out a long, slow breath. "Thank you."

"Yeah. No problem. Just, uh, what are you supposed to be dressed up as?" I asked. "According to the invite, this is a costume party."

Alicia turned around to face me, her jaw set into a firm, rigid line and her eyes suddenly blazing. "My entire life right now feels like one big costume, so I suppose I'm dressed as just another rich lady who's married to a future billionaire. How's my performance so far?"

I barked out a short laugh, caught completely off guard by the sarcastic bite in her tone, but shit. That had actually been funny. "It's incredible. You nailed it."

She didn't smile, instead just staring at me with a strange, guarded hostility that seemed off. While we were a long way from even friendly, I

hadn’t felt outright hostile vibes from her for a while until now. I also hadn’t seen much of her for the last couple of days, though.

Quickly skirting past me now that she was dressed, she strode out of the room before I could ask what was wrong, and a second later, my phone vibrated with a text from our driver. The car was outside, which meant the shit show was officially about to get underway.

Alicia was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, those hazel eyes carefully avoiding mine as I jogged down and pulled open the door for her. Tasha wasn’t here, which meant it was just the two of us, but she still didn’t say a word as she stepped across the threshold and made her way down to the car.

She didn’t say anything on the ride across town either, the atmosphere inside the luxury sedan Alex had sent thick and almost suffocating from the tension winding through the air. It sort of made sense, though. Tonight, the library would be a battlefield of sorts. Maybe this was what it felt like to prepare to enter one.

When we finally pulled up at the curb after waiting our turn in a long, snaking line of equally luxurious cars, I glanced out the window to see the entrance doors bathed in deep blue and gold spotlights, and I braced myself for the hit I knew would come the second the valet opened the door.

As always, cameras flashed behind the velvet rope as I stepped out of car, but I ignored them, simply offering Alicia my arm and marching her straight into the marble lobby without stopping to pose for pictures or answer any of the questions the press hurled my way.

Hundreds of Chicago’s wealthiest citizens were already milling about, champagne flutes in their hands and their faces hidden behind glittering, feathered masks. *All the better to hide behind, my dear.*

I sighed, but we’d barely even cleared the doors when Alicia let go of my arm and started turning away from me. Gently grabbing her hand mid-turn, I tugged her back to my side and frowned. “Where are you going?”

“To work,” she said, inclining her head toward the edge of the room where a few library staff members were coordinating the catering trays. “Marcus told me earlier that they’re going to need help tracking the silent auction sheets.”

“Alicia, no,” Jane interrupted out of the blue, appearing between us with a warm smile on her lips. “You’re not an employee tonight, remember? You’re a guest, attending the gala as a patron. Marcus can handle the

clipboards. I'll send someone from the foundation to lend a hand if he needs it, but you're coming with me. I want to introduce you to the board."

A flicker of genuine hurt and regret crossed Alicia's features before she masked it behind a tight, polite smile. She nodded at my sister, allowing her to lead her away toward a cluster of people standing near the center of the room.

Strangely, seeing her so obviously upset made a pang of guilt strike through me. I actually felt bad for her, which was a highly unexpected development, but she'd simply wanted to do her job instead of being paraded around like a trophy wife.

"Look who crawled out of the family bunker," a drawling, arrogant voice sneered from behind me. "I'm surprised to see you here, Holden."

I closed my eyes for a second, inhaling a deep breath to keep my temper from redlining at the mere sound of that voice. Carter Wainscroft had always been a total shithead. The heir to another legacy powerhouse, his family had made their money in energy, and ironically, he'd never really had any.

The only energy Carter had ever given off was *please hit me. Hard.*

Tonight, he was holding a velvet mask on a stick, looking at me with a lazy smirk on his lips. Ryan and Wyatt had been standing only a few feet away, but as soon as Carter made his appearance, they anchored themselves to my flanks.

"Wainscroft," I said. "It's my sister's party. Where else would I be? I'm surprised they let you in, though."

He ignored the jab, still smirking as he took a slow sip of his champagne. "Tell me, are you guys the caterers tonight or was Alex just feeling charitable? I suppose he probably had a few complimentary passes to hand out."

I snapped my fingers. "Oh, so *that's* how you got in."

Carter's eyes narrowed. "You know, with your dear old dad getting out of his federal cage soon, I figured you'd all be waiting upstate, ready to help him pack his bags for the big day. I mean, I guess I'm just shocked you're all still in the city."

I didn't even blink, so used to being picked on for our father's catastrophic failures that he was going to have to try a lot harder to get a reaction out of me. Over the past decade, I'd developed a thick, impenetrable armor against the legacy trash talk. My father was a criminal

who was going to be released soon. Dealing with the fallout of his impending release was simply the natural progression of our situation.

Unfortunately, Carter's haughty gaze drifted past me then, tracking across the floor until it locked on the far side of the room where Alicia was standing with Jane. She was nodding along to a conversation, navigating the sweet-talking of wealthy patrons like she'd grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth.

Carter let out a disgusting whistle under his breath. "Then again, maybe the Thayer name still has some currency after all. Who's that delicious morsel in the red dress? Because damn, if she's looking for an upgrade from bankruptcy, tell her to come find me by the bar. I'm more than happy to show her what actual liquidity looks like."

A blinding wave of fury erupted in my chest and I saw red, stepping directly into Carter's personal space and deliberately blocking his view of her. He took a stumbling step back, the smirk finally faltering as he stared up at me with the color draining from his cheeks.

"Say that again," I rumbled quietly, a cool, dangerous warning in every word. "Repeat exactly what you just said."

"Holden, chill," Ryan hissed from my left shoulder, his hand clamping onto my forearm with an iron grip. "Don't do this. Not here."

"Back off, bro," Wyatt warned in a low, tense murmur. "The press is right outside."

I didn't care about the press, the gala, or doing any more damage to our family name. God knew, it had taken a few hits and we were still here.

If I got labeled as the resident thug, then so be it. I took another step closer, my jaw clenching so hard that I felt a muscle jump in my cheek as I glared down at Carter, so much raw malice coursing through me that it could probably stop my heart—or his.

Hopefully the latter.

"Are you sure you want to talk about *liquidity*, Carter?" I growled. "Say one more word about the woman in the red dress and let's see what happens to your teeth. You might just become intimately acquainted with a different kind of liquid for the next three to six months."

His face went completely pale, that insufferable arrogance vanishing as he finally seemed to realize that I was perfectly willing to lay him out on the marble floor. "Look, Thayer, it was just a joke."

“That is my *wife*,” I growled, the word tearing out of me with an intense, possessive finality that shocked even me. “If I ever hear your pathetic mouth open about her again, I will personally ensure that you become a sad little footnote in your family’s history.”

Carter bowed his head, turned on his heels, and practically sprinted to the safety of the crowded atrium. My hands curled into tight, shaking fists as I watched him go, adrenaline roaring through my veins and the rage still burning hot.

“Fuck, Holden,” Ryan muttered as he patted my shoulder. “You really need to work on anger management.”

“Nice delivery, though,” Wyatt said, grinning like he was impressed. “I thought you said you didn’t like her.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring both of them as my gaze cut across the crowded floor. Alicia must’ve escaped from Jane at some point because she was standing only a few feet away, staring directly at me.

Our eyes locked, and from the pale, stunned expression on her face, she’d heard at least the last part of that unfortunate exchange. She’d heard me claim her in front of the entire city, but she didn’t look relieved or even a little bit happy.

Instead, those hazel eyes filled with a profound sadness that crushed whatever sense of victory I’d just felt. Then she slowly turned her back to me and started striding toward Jane and her group again. A knot formed in my stomach, tightening into an agonizing vise as she disappeared into the crowd.

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CHAPTER 20

ALICIA

While everyone else was being directed to their seats in the main atrium that'd been set up as a ballroom, I managed to slip away. Earlier, I'd been going over to grab Holden so we could walk into the room together—in the interest of presenting a united front, of course—when I'd witnessed whatever the hell that had been.

Walking up the grand old staircase at the back of the foyer to the second-floor mezzanine, I slipped into a shadowed alcove where I knew it would be quiet. Slinking back against the wall, I took a slow sip of my gin and tonic, gazing over the mahogany railing at the floor below.

Overlooking the gala from up here, the event appeared to be another massive success for Jane and her team. The crowd was a glittering, moving mosaic of silk and velvet clamoring around the silent auction tables.

While they ebbed and flowed to and from the atrium, I heard a booming, charismatic voice announce over the microphone that dinner would be served shortly and reminding people that bidding was still open. As I watched the swirling masks below, however, I felt a conflicted ache settle deep in my chest instead of relief over all the money that was inevitably being raised.

For the last three years, I'd been part of the invisible machinery of this annual spectacle. I'd always been here, doing what had to be done to make the night a success, but working from the shadows. Now, I was attending as an official guest, wearing a gown that'd cost more than a payment on my

loans, and rubbing elbows with the people I'd previously only admired from a distance.

It was exciting, of course, to actually be part of it instead of being relegated to the back rooms, but at the same time, it felt like I was closing a chapter on a massive part of my life. No longer just Alicia, I was now Mrs. Alicia Thayer, the wife of one of the aristocrats who arrived once a year, dressed to the nines, and generously donated money to keep the institution I relied upon to make a living alive.

"There you are," Holden's voice said from somewhere way too close. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I clammed up instantly, feeling my spine go rigid and my shoulders cave when he stepped into the alcove with me. Without even casting a glance at the crowd below, he didn't stop moving until he was only about a foot or so away, those gray-blue eyes intently focused on mine. "Are you having a good time?"

Memories of the phone conversation I'd overheard flashed vividly through my mind, bringing with them a sharp sting of humiliation and a reminder that I'd resolved to address those comments tonight, now that we were here and I'd proven I could hold my own.

"I am, actually." I took another sip of my drink and tilted my chin up, arching a steep eyebrow as I held his gaze. "I just hope I haven't embarrassed you too much out there. I mean, I know I'm just someone who reads fairy tales to toddlers for a living, but I don't think I've done anything that requires you to pick up the pieces of the total clusterfuck this evening was sure to become."

Holden blinked hard. Then it was like I could see the realization hit him, those eyes widening before his brow furrowed in sudden frustration. Thankfully, he didn't pretend not to know what I was talking about.

"You were listening when I spoke to Alex," he said, and it wasn't a question. "That's unfortunate."

"I was coming down to talk to you," I shot back, my voice trembling slightly despite my best efforts to keep it even. "I'm sorry you think it's so unfair, being married to someone who's just a, what was it again, a shark dressed in a suit? That doesn't even make sense, by the way. I'm not a shark and I—"

"I wasn't talking about you," Holden snapped, then blew out a long, harsh breath and rubbed a hand over his face. When he dropped it, it was

like he'd wiped off that defensive, arrogant veneer he always wore, and for the first time since I'd met him, he actually looked vulnerable.

I glanced down at the gin in my hand, wondering if it was making my eyes play tricks on me, but when he took another half step closer and I lifted my gaze back to his, he genuinely seemed torn up about this.

"I had the first twenty minutes of that conversation outside, Alicia," he explained quietly but urgently. "Everything you heard was completely out of context."

My eyebrows shot up. "Oh, so you talking about how you shouldn't have to come here with me because I was going to embarrass you so completely no matter what I wore was out of context?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "I wasn't talking about being embarrassed *by* you. I was talking about being embarrassed *in front of* you. This godforsaken circus has a way of drawing in a crowd that absolutely despises my family, Alicia. All their smiles and bullshit are for show. *They're* the sharks."

I blinked rapidly, the grip I'd had on my gin loosening. "What do you mean?"

He looked out over the railing for a second, his eyes narrowing at the crowd below before sliding back to mine. He'd never been this open with me, but I could suddenly see it now, the turbulence churning behind that arrogant, aloof facade.

"I mean that I didn't want you to see it, Alicia. The way they look at us when they think we aren't paying attention. The whispers. That world down there might be pretty, but it's also vicious and I knew they would try to pick at you just to get to me. *I* was the one who was going to be embarrassed and you don't deserve to be caught in the crossfire."

Warmth bloomed deep in my chest, melting the icy fortress of spite I'd been building inside all week. Tingles swept through my body as I realized he hadn't been ashamed of me. He'd been trying to protect me. To shield me from whatever *vicious* tactics he'd thought those people down there would employ to hurt me.

"Oh," I breathed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Clearly." A faint, genuine smile touched one corner of his lips. "You're the only real thing in this building tonight, Alicia. So now that you have the context, think back to what you overheard. I was trying to get us both out of this because I didn't want those vipers down there scaring you off."

"Because I read fairy tales to toddlers for a living?"

He shrugged, but his mouth curved into a little more of a smile. Almost like he couldn't quite stop it. "That too, but mostly because you're a good person and I know the library needs their money, but it doesn't have to come with a side of condescension."

The air between us seemed to charge as he looked down at me, his features and his gaze softer than I'd ever seen. All those sharp edges were gone, a lock of dark blond hair across his forehead, and his bowtie sitting just a bit askew.

"We don't have to stay, you know," I murmured as I stared into those blue eyes, noticing amused light in them for possibly the very first time. "People have seen us, they know we were here, and I doubt they'd look for us if we just disappeared. They'd just probably think we're making small talk somewhere."

"Say no more." Holden grinned and pulled his phone out of his inside pocket, firing off a quick text before offering me his arm. "The driver will meet us at the back entrance."

I drained my drink and wrapped my fingers around the crook of his elbow, leading him down a hallway to a set of stairs usually only used by staff. We emerged just down the corridor from the exit, stealing out into the night without a soul being any the wiser.

Holden actually laughed as he climbed into the back seat of the waiting car beside me, the sound so warm and unlike him that for a second, I just stared. He arched an eyebrow at me. "What?"

"Nothing." I burst out laughing then too, feeling like the weight of a hippopotamus had been lifted off my shoulders at the knowledge that he hadn't been bad-mouthing me after all.

While my husband was still a complete enigma, I felt like we'd taken several big strides tonight, and because of that, I accepted a glass of celebratory champagne he handed over as the car pulled away from the curb.

Two more glasses of champagne deep by the time we got home, I was feeling blissfully relaxed and even Holden's edges seemed to be smoothed over. He looked around when we walked in. "Where's Tasha?"

I shrugged and kicked off my heels. "It's a Saturday night. She's never home on the weekend."

Holden let out a low chuckle and tossed his tuxedo jacket onto the banister. "So we're finally alone in the house, huh? I didn't think that was

ever going to happen.”

My eyes rolled. “We’ve been here alone plenty of times. You probably just don’t notice because you always storm straight to your room.”

He considered that for a beat, then shrugged and wandered into the living room instead. “That’s probably true.”

As he began to poke through the built-in bookshelves, I collapsed on one of the couches. Those shoes might’ve been comfortable in the store, but it turned out no heels had been made to wear for hours on end. Not even the pretty, seemingly soft ones.

I watched Holden look around until he suddenly reached for a dusty, leather-bound photo album on the bottom shelf. Panic flared deep inside and I almost told him to stop, but he’d been sleeping in my dad’s old office for the past couple of weeks. He’d obviously already seen the framed diplomas, the old fishing caps, and the faded family pictures I hadn’t been able to bring myself to tuck away yet.

Gently pulling back the worn leather cover of the album, he glanced at the picture on the front page and then looked back up at me. “Your parents seem so happy in every photo I’ve seen of them.”

“They were happy,” I said softly, speaking past the old, familiar ache rising in my throat. An hour ago, there was no way I would have told him anything about them, but now, that felt different. Like I could trust him with my truth in small measures too, just like he’d trusted me with a tiny part of his at the gala. “We used to have so much fun together. You’d probably never think it now, but once upon a time, I almost never stopped laughing.”

A surprisingly understanding, faraway sort of expression crossed his features before he nodded. “Yeah. I can relate.”

He shut the album again, his thumb tracing the embossed lettering on the cover. I didn’t need to see it to know what it said, **Nettles Family Memories.**

“What happened to them?” he asked quietly.

“A car accident,” I said. “I was sleeping over at my aunt and uncle’s that night with my cousins. It wasn’t even a special occasion, but it changed everything.”

Holden glanced back down at the album, then carefully returned it to its slot on the shelf. Once it was back in place, he walked over to me, eyes on mine as he hooked a finger in my direction. “Come here. Let’s get you out of that dress.”

My breathing hitched, but I stood, thankfully not stupid enough to think this was about anything other than him remembering the trouble I'd had with the zipper earlier and wanting to help me, but holy heck.

I turned around, my heart hammering frantically against my ribs as I presented him with my back. As I felt his long, warm fingers at the top of the zipper, the air suddenly seemed different, zinging with another intense charge that threatened to steal the air from my lungs.

It got worse when he didn't rush, slowly guiding the zipper down and exposing my skin only a fraction of an inch at a time. When his knuckles slid lightly against a bare part of my spine, I trembled, gripping the fabric of my skirt to keep my hands from shaking.

He was standing a lot closer than he had earlier in my bedroom, his chest nearly brushing my shoulder blades and his warm breath ghosting across the back of my neck when he spoke.

"Do you need help with anything else, Alicia?"

He whispered the question, but it still sent a jolt of pure electricity through me. I let out a breathless, nervous laugh, trying to break the moment before I did something completely reckless, like turn around and throw my arms around his neck.

"No," I said finally. "I'm think I'm okay, but if I change my mind, I'll write you a list."

Holden lingered in my space for one more heartbeat before he finally tore himself away, taking a big step back and allowing the air to return to my lungs. "Okay, then. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Holden."

He turned and walked up the stairs, disappearing down the hall seconds later. While I meant to head to my bedroom too, I just brought a hand to my racing heart instead, unable to convince my feet to move just yet.

For what was supposed to be a business arrangement, tonight had felt extremely, deeply personal. I knew it was too early to be optimistic and that Holden was too volatile emotionally to believe he'd keep opening up and letting me in, but for the first time since we'd said our vows, I was starting to feel like they might actually grow to mean something one day.

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CHAPTER 21

HOLDEN

The morning after the gala, I woke up to my phone screeching. It took me a solid few seconds to realize the god-awful sound was actually just my usual ringtone and the angry vibration of the device against the old, wooden desk I'd left it on.

Groaning as I rolled over and buried my face in my pillow, I swore to myself that I would never drink champagne again. My mouth tasted like rotten grapes and something sour, and there seemed to be a construction crew remodeling the inside of my skull.

Beer, I could drink entire kegs of. Even wine was okay, but squirt some bubbles in there and I was fucked. Completely.

Blindly reaching out, I fumbled across the wood until my fingers finally crashed into the device. When I lifted my head, I squinted against the bright screen, then sat up way too fast when I realized it was nearly eleven in the morning.

I'd overslept by more than four hours and I would've kept doing it if not for Ryan, who appeared to be hell-bent on getting hold of me. A low growl tore out of my lungs at the pain in my head when I lay back down and took the call.

"I swear, if this isn't an actual, life-or-death emergency, I'm going to find you and rip off—"

"Wow. Remind me never to wake the beast before noon again," Maggie said cheerfully over the line. "Rough night, huh?"

I rubbed my eyes but didn't even try reopening them. "Maggie? Why are you calling from Ryan's phone? He's okay, right?"

"Oh, from the sounds of things, I'd say he's about as okay as you," she explained lightly. "Although he's been in the shower for about fifteen minutes, and whenever I go in there, he just makes these noises like he's dying."

"Yeah, I know the feeling."

She laughed, the sound slicing through my brain like an icepick. "Why is it that you boys can handle anything other than champagne? Give any Thayer outside of Jane more than a glass and you're down for the count."

"I think Isaac does okay on the stuff," I muttered, my mouth drier than the desert. "Maybe Colin too."

"Fair enough." She paused for a beat. "That makes it even funnier. I would've thought that you younger Thayers would be able to handle more, not less."

"Is there a purpose to this call?" I asked. "Other than giving me shit about evil bubbles, I mean."

"Oh, yes," she said brightly. "Of course. Look, Ryan and I are still in town for the next few days. I didn't want to fly in only for the gala. That seemed like such a waste. Did you know the carbon footprint of a—"

"Mags, I love you, but for the love of all things hungover, land the plane."

She laughed again. "Fine, I've been conspiring with your nephew while everyone else is trying to hydrate and we both agree that it would be a crime against humanity to miss the Halloween festival happening just outside the city tomorrow."

"Okay, have fun."

"No, not just have fun. We're *all* going. Cameron and I want the whole family there. No excuses will be accepted."

A harsh sigh rattled out of me. Maggie had an insatiable, almost alarming appetite for all things weird. The more eccentric, the better.

While personally, I'd rather swallow a handful of thumbtacks than go to a Halloween thing, the thought of disappointing Cam was like a tactical weapon used directly against me and Maggie sure knew how to wield it.

"Is there going to be food?" I mumbled. "I'll only go if there's food."

"There's funnel cake, Holden. That's even better. I'll text you the address. Just bring your wife and don't you dare die between then and now.

It’s only a bit of champagne. You can do this.”

Before I could argue, she hung up and I groaned but accepted my fate. I also accepted that I must’ve developed a severe allergy to expensive champagne at some point, because if I didn’t get a gallon of water and at least two gallons of coffee into my body very soon, tomorrow’s family outing was going to be visiting me in the hospital.

It took a minute to convince myself to climb out of bed, but I finally managed to do it, padding down the hallway thinking I was going to win the prize for being the most hungover in this house today until I heard loud snoring coming from below. When I got downstairs, I located the source and smirked, deciding that I might not win that prize after all.

Tasha was passed out on the couch, still wearing a glittery black cocktail dress and high heels strapped to her feet. Her mouth was slightly open, makeup smeared across her face, and she seemed to have her bathrobe wrapped around her shoulders like a cape.

“Whatever you do, don’t make any sudden moves,” Alicia stage-whispered from the kitchen. “If you wake her, she’ll demand greasy food, strong coffee, and an explanation for why the world is spinning.”

I turned to see her standing by the island, wearing a giant, ratty pink sweatshirt that swallowed her whole and a pair of fuzzy, plaid pajama pants. Her hair was gathered into a birds’ nest of a topknot and she was blinking against the light streaming in through the windows.

Like me, she looked completely worse for wear, but unlike me, she was beautiful even as a hungover mess. I strode toward her, leaning my forearms against the counter as I held her gaze. “Good morning, wife.”

Alicia froze with a scoop full of coffee grounds hovering precariously over a battered, plastic coffeemaker. She blushed, an alluring, pink flush spreading across her cheeks that made me wonder if that was what her ass—

She cleared her throat and dumped the grounds into the machine. “Good morning.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been hit over the head by an entire French vineyard.”

I stifled a surprised laugh. “Yeah. Same.”

“I’m glad to see you’re alive.” She finally glanced at me again, those red-rimmed hazel eyes watery but not as hard or defensive as they used to

be when she was looking at me. “I’ve been wondering when you were going to emerge from your cave.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot later than I realized,” I murmured quietly. “I would’ve still been fast asleep if not for my overenthusiastic nephew and sister-in-law, though.”

Tasha let out another particularly loud snore and I glanced back at her on the couch. “How long does she plan on living here? Do you think she’s a permanent fixture, or…”

I trailed off, realizing that my curiosity finally getting the better of me didn’t mean she owed me any answers. Alicia’s shoulders dropped a little and she averted her gaze from mine to stare at the machine, gnawing on her lower lip until she eventually just shrugged.

“It’s complicated. Tasha is my best friend and—”

Before she could finish, the ancient coffeemaker let out an ear-piercing, metallic shriek. My spine snapped straight and I took a step back, already rounding the island to grab her so we could take cover.

Alicia, however, didn’t move. “Oh, it’s fine. It does this all the time.”

The next moment, the plastic lid blew open with a sharp pop, a geyser of scalding hot, brown liquid spitting all over the counter and hissing angrily as it splashed against the wall, pooling around the electrical outlet.

“Fuck,” I snapped, lunging across the short distance and snaking an arm gently around her waist to pull her away from the boiling liquid. “Stay back. I’ll get it.”

Reaching around the side of the spitting death trap, I grabbed the thick rubber cord and yanked it out of the wall outlet. The machine let out one last, pathetic hiss, sputtering a glob of wet coffee grounds onto the counter, and finally went dead.

Once I was sure it was over, I let go of her waist, my pulse hammering from the sudden burst of adrenaline, but at least the hangover was long gone. “What the hell was that?”

“It’s fine,” she said quickly, grabbing a roll of paper towels stashed close enough that I suspected this was a regular occurrence. “I’ll clean it up and start a new pot in a minute. We just have to hold the lid down with a heavy book. I forgot this morning because my brain is fried, but we’ll have fresh coffee in no time.”

“This happens all the time, huh? That’s what you said?” I shook my head and glanced back at the seemingly harmless appliance. “That thing is

an improvised explosive device. If you try to make fresh coffee, it's likely we're going both to be taken out by a rogue bean-bullet."

"It's a classic," she argued, wiping at a brown puddle before it dripped to the floor. "It just has character, is all."

"What it has is a body count," I reasoned, snatching the paper towels from her hand and taking over the wiping duties because hungover, she didn't seem to have much coordination. "When we're done here, we're going to the store to get a new one."

Alicia shook her head immediately, the defensive spark in her eyes fading as she glanced down at her pajama pants and started fidgeting with the tie. "I, uh, I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just, uh, I don't think I can afford a new one right now."

I frowned but tossed the wet, disintegrating paper into the trash and leaned against the edge of the island. "Are you really so hungover that basic mathematical logic is failing you?"

She finally looked back up at me, confusion clouding her eyes as they moved from one of mine to the other. "What?"

"You *can* afford it," I said, stepping closer until she had to tilt her chin up to maintain eye contact. "In fact, we both can. We're rich, remember? You have money, but you also have a card linked to my accounts, which means if we need a coffeemaker that won't try to assassinate us every morning, we'll go get one. On my dime. Or yours. Whatever makes you happy."

Alicia stared up at me, her lips parting like reality had only just broken through. A moment later, a slow, beautiful smile lit her entire face. Watching it happen felt like seeing a piece of iron melt, effectively mending one of the many cold, hard cracks that had been living on my heart for the better part of my adulthood.

I swallowed hard, backing away before I gave into the urge to make her forget all about coffee, and tried to remind myself that while we were newlyweds, we weren't *those* kind of newlyweds.

"Right," I said, "Let's go put on some actual clothes and maybe some shoes too. I refuse to be seen in public with a wife wearing fleece penguins on her feet."

"They're puffins, Holden," she muttered, laughing under her breath. Then she turned and started heading toward the stairs.

I followed, grabbing a quick shower and changing to meet her by the door once she was ready. It wasn’t lost on me that as many problems as money had caused—for my family and for Alicia—in a ridiculous situation like this, being filthy rich actually wasn’t so bad after all.

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CHAPTER 22

ALICIA

Holden and I stood in the home goods store, bickering like an old married couple. In all my idle fantasies of what it would be like being married one day when I was all grown up, I'd never have guessed that a place like *this* would be the location of my first official marital dispute with my husband.

As it was, however, we stood in the brightly lit appliance aisle, facing off in front a gleaming monstrosity made of polished chrome and covered in digital touchscreens. Holden motioned toward it, digging in his heels as he shook his head.

"It connects to the *internet*, Alicia. We'd be able to start grinding the beans before we even leave our beds in the morning," he argued passionately. "Plus, it has a built-in milk-emulsifying chamber and it comes with an app. Think about walking into the house out of the freezing cold this winter and finding a piping hot, fresh cup of coffee waiting for you after a long day of work."

As good as that sounded—and it really did sound amazing—the machine looked like a state-of-the-art piece of equipment stolen from a NASA laboratory, and it had a price tag to match. "It costs the same as a brand-new, mid-range SUV, Holden. I refuse to spend that much money on a *coffee machine*."

Playfully moving his hand away from the pristine keypad he was flicking through options on, I pointed it toward an appliance on the other side of the aisle. "Let's get the drip machine. It's red, which is pretty funky,

and it’s got a clock. That’s fancy enough for something that only needs to put caffeine in a cup.”

“It’s forty-five dollars,” Holden said.

I shrugged. “That’s the beauty of it. When it breaks, we’ll get a new one, and in the meantime, we won’t have to worry about it attempting to gain sentience and overthrowing the household.”

His eyes narrowed in what appeared to be genuine bewilderment. “Why are you fighting me on this? I’m trying to give you a machine that creates liquid gold and here you are, campaigning for a plastic bucket with a heating coil.”

“That plastic bucket with the heating coil is perfectly sufficient for our needs,” I shot back, crossing my arms. “Unless you have a plan I don’t know about to start a high-end coffee shop, we do not need the fanciest espresso machine in the history of mankind.”

He stared at me for a long moment, surprise registering on his features before he sighed. “You really are this frugal, aren’t you?”

“I am.” I felt a smile I didn’t want to fight start on my lips. “Did you really think I was so much of a gold digger that I’d marry you for a coffee machine smarter than the both of us combined?”

Holden sucked his teeth, but he didn’t deny it. “Honestly, I don’t know what I thought, but I definitely expected more than a forty-five-dollar drip machine.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you.” I grinned and bumped my shoulder against his bicep. It was as close as I could get to bumping it against his shoulder. “Think about it this way, if we get the cheap one, we can always have this argument again in a year or two.”

I’d meant it as a joke, but a strange gleam entered his eyes, like he was only just realizing he and I might still be together in that amount of time. Then he shook his head. “Only a fool pays twice. We’re getting the big one. Consider it in an investment in our future.”

“How about we start with a little investment and work our way up from there?” I asked, but Holden had already waved over a sales assistant. “Seriously, we don’t need—”

He spun back toward me, those blue eyes suddenly vibrant and alive. *God, I didn’t know a coffee machine meant that much to him.*

“We don’t need it, but we both want it, so why not?” he said. “You can afford it now, Alicia, but so can I, so I’m buying it for us as a wedding gift.

Happy belated I-do day.”

As I gaped at him, he motioned at the machine, and a few minutes later, the sales assistant was helping us load it into Holden’s car. I shook my head, but there was no use arguing. It was already done.

For the rest of the afternoon, although neither of us spoke about it, we ran errands like a real married couple would on a crisp Sunday afternoon. We went to the dry cleaners, stopped by the post office, and eventually ended up at the grocery store, pushing a squeaky metal cart through the produce aisle. Holden squinted suspiciously at the green sprigs I’d tossed in, bending over to read the label.

“Why are we buying fresh rosemary?” he asked. “Are we landscaping the kitchen?”

“No, but I’m making garlic-herb roast chicken tonight,” I said, picking out a bag of fingerling potatoes. “I like to cook. It helps me unwind after a long day of reading fairy tales to toddlers.”

He tried, but failed, to hold back a laugh. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Fine.” He started pushing the cart forward again, dutifully pausing whenever I did and waiting for as long as it took before I’d selected whichever item I’d been after. “You know, you like to cook and I like to eat. I hate having to admit it, but from where I’m standing, that makes us a match made in heaven.”

My heart gave a tiny, elated flip, but I picked up a lemon and dropped it into the cart, not wanting to read too much into anything. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Thayer. You haven’t tasted my food yet. You might still want to divorce me by dessert.”

“I have a remarkably high tolerance for bad food,” he countered, his voice carrying a gentle, teasing tone that made my ears burn. “I doubt that’ll be an issue. If you had any idea what I’ve eaten, you’d know that even burned chicken that tastes like dust is a marked improvement.”

He flashed me a smirk that edged us into flirty territory, and weirdly, it didn’t stop there. We were both restrained about it, but we kept tossing little quips back and forth, treading carefully while also falling into a surprisingly easy, fun rhythm together.

On the way home, Holden drove through the familiar streets of Hyde Park, slowing slightly when we passed a modern, high-rise apartment

building near the lake. “That’s where I was living until I moved in with you. What’s this neighborhood like, anyway? You grew up here, right?”

“I did. Well, until I was seven, at least,” I replied, glancing out at the park my parents used to bring me to after work. “My folks bought the brownstone when they got married, so it was the only home I’d ever known until the accident.”

Holden kept his eyes on the road. “Shit, that must’ve been tough.”

“It was, but I got through it. I begged my aunt and uncle to let me stay at the house. I tried insisting I could take care of myself, but…”

When I trailed off, he nodded like he understood, then reached out and gave my hand a quick, gentle squeeze. It was basically nothing, the same type of thing old ladies gave a child to calm them down, but coming from him, it was practically an open-mouthed kiss for all the emotion it displayed.

“Do you still talk to them?” he asked quietly a moment later. “You aunt and uncle, I mean.”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged. “On holidays, mostly.”

Holden didn’t push, simply reaching out again and taking my hand firmly in his much larger one. Realizing that he meant to comfort me with the gesture, and that it was actually working, I wrapped my fingers around his and finally let myself imagine what it might be like to stay married to him.

Ever since the moment Alex had made his pitch to me that first time after I’d run into him at the bank, I’d felt like I was stuck in limbo. Like all of this was some weird, temporary twilight zone I could be yanked out of at any moment.

While I’d never intended on reneging on the agreement or asking for a divorce, I couldn’t pretend like I’d felt *married* after signing those papers. I hadn’t felt like I was starting to build a life with someone. I certainly hadn’t felt like I had a husband I could rely on.

But slowly, that was changing.

With every minute Holden and I spent together, I was realizing more and more that he didn’t see this arrangement between us as temporary either. It was weird as heck, sure. Unexpected. Unconventional. Hell, probably even unsustainable, but on the other hand, Alex and Jane’s marriage had apparently been arranged too.

It was a little known fact, but she'd told me the day Holden and I had gotten married. They'd started the same way we had and they were deliriously happy now, completely in love with two children running around.

Maybe it can be the same for us. Who knows?

When we finally got back home, I was quietly optimistic. Holden and I unloaded our groceries and he wrestled his towering spaceship of a coffee machine into the kitchen. As he tried installing it, I got started on dinner.

Meanwhile, Tasha sat at the kitchen counter, still nursing what she claimed was a truly spectacular hangover. A pair of dark sunglasses covered her eyes despite the fact that we were indoors and she was wearing her softest pajamas with her bathrobe.

"It requires a direct water line, Thayer," she groaned, evidently not too hungover to bully him. "You can't just plug it in and expect it to work, but our plumbing is older than the entire state of Illinois, so we don't have what you need."

Instead of arguing, he took off his royal blue sweater and rolled up the sleeves of the fitted white t-shirt he had on underneath, then dragged a toolbox out of the pantry. It used to be my dad's and it hadn't seen daylight in twenty years, but minutes later, Holden was flat on his back on the floor, half-hidden inside the lower cabinets, surrounded by loose screws, wooden brackets, and a cloud of sawdust.

I sat on the opposite side of the counter watching him work, so incredibly happy right now that it felt like I could just start floating. While the kitchen was in absolute shambles, cabinet doors leaning against the fridge while more and more bits and pieces appeared on the floor, I'd genuinely enjoyed spending time with him today.

On speakerphone with his brother, apparently an engineer who lived in Egypt, of all places, Holden kept arguing about water pressure and copper pipes. Tasha groaned every time he banged a wrench against the metal, muttering about the sanctity of her eardrums.

But to me, this felt like family. It felt like a future. It felt like the beginning of something that could actually be good, so I smiled and I kept doing it for much too long.

Holden suddenly grunted and shimmied out from under the sink, wiping a streak of gray dust from his forehead before he grabbed his car keys from the island. "I need a brass compression coupling, so I'm going to the

hardware store. Alone. No girls invited. A hardware store is a sacred, silent place for men and neither of you can handle the energy."

Tasha let out a weak laugh and flipped him the bird, but I just kept smiling and shook my head. "A sacred, silent place, huh? I'm sure what you mean is that you're going to need advice and you don't want us to hear you asking for it."

Holden brushed past me to the back door, so focused on plumbing schematics that he completely slipped up, bending down to press a warm, lingering kiss to my forehead. "Do you need anything while I'm out, baby?"

The words weren't even cold yet when he froze, his eyes flying wide open like he'd just stunned himself as much as he'd stunned me. My heart fluttered like a trapped bird, but I didn't move away from him. "I, uh, no thanks. I think we're all good."

He nodded but didn't say another word as he spun and practically sprinted out the back door, slamming it shut behind him. Tasha slid her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose, her bloodshot eyes finding mine.

"Oh, you are so completely fucked, girl," she groaned, letting out a gravelly laugh before she buried her face in her hands. "Now, where the hell did the Tylenol go? I don't think I'm going to survive the rest of the soap opera your life has become without it."

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CHAPTER 23

HOLDEN

After spending the entire night waging war against that godforsaken espresso machine, I *still* hadn't gotten it to work yet. By five this morning, I'd flooded the area beneath the sink, so the water was definitely working, but the touchscreen kept mocking me with a flashing error code about low water *pressure*.

So even after I'd given it the water it'd wanted from the beginning, it was still winning the war. *Low water pressure. What absolute bullshit. Just suck it up and make coffee with the pressure you've got, asshole.*

At dawn, I'd considered hiring a high-end installer from the home goods store, but I'd dismissed that idea almost immediately. I, Holden Thayer, was going to finish installing the overpriced caffeine factory myself, even if it killed me in the process.

It was now mid-morning, however, and my brain was completely fried, so I took my coffee, which had been brewed from a cheap French press Tasha had dug out of a closet, and retreated to the overgrown backyard to take a break.

I hadn't really been out here before, though I'd seen it from the window and I'd skirted the edge whenever I'd left the house through the back door, but the state of the garden was slightly worse than I'd realized. In certain places, fingers of ivy crawled up the brick walls while the grass stood so high, it could easily be housing a population of wild animals.

As I sat on the weathered wooden steps of the porch, I looked out at the lawn that so desperately needed to be mowed. Normally, I wouldn't give a

shit about landscaping. Growing up, our lawns had been manicured by teams of professionals who'd arrived in unmarked trucks and vanished before breakfast.

After that, Isaac and Colin had taken turns keeping it from getting out of hand. Then Alex had appeared in our lives, and suddenly, the professional teams had been back.

Staring at the unruly grass now though, it seemed to me that mowing a lawn was a traditional *husband* activity. *It's probably a normal weekend task a guy performs while the wife is inside cooking… or something.*

When I realized how absurd my internal monologue was becoming, I muttered a curse under my breath and stood, setting my mug down on the step beside me. Instead of thinking about it, I could just mow the damn lawn and get it over with. I walked over to the small, detached garage and peered through the grime-streaked windows.

I had to squint past the dust to be able to see what was inside, but I still managed to make out the faint outline of something that could possibly be a lawnmower. After a few minutes of yanking at the rusty metal door handle, I finally made my way inside.

Inhaling a deep breath that smelled like old gasoline, motor oil, and more dust, I looked around for a beat to get my bearings, but my gaze snagged on three bicycles against the far wall. Like everything else in here, they were covered in a thick layer of dust, two large, adult road bikes with a little girl's bicycle tucked between them, its purple paint now faded and the white streamers hanging from the handlebars almost completely disintegrated.

Previously, Alicia's parents' deaths had registered in my brain as a generic tragedy, something that had happened long ago and was sad, but not heartbreaking. Looking at the tiny frame of that bicycle now though, the reality of it hit me like a punch from a cage fighter.

It hit so hard that it stopped me right in my tracks.

When she'd lost them, she'd been nothing but a kid. A really little one, at that. One day, she'd been riding a tiny purple bike with training wheels, and the next, the floor had been cruelly ripped out from under her entire life.

I swallowed the sudden, dry lump forming in my throat, my head shaking as I forced myself to keep going. To keep moving. But I was

starting to realize that there might've been more to Alicia's motivation to marry me than simply taking a shortcut.

Finally, across the garage, I spotted the green lawnmower I'd seen from outside and I dragged it out a few inches, unscrewing the cap to check, but unsurprisingly, it was bone dry. It would need gas before I'd be able to do anything with it.

Since I was already in here, I began picking through the shelves of old tools left behind by her father, looking for a fuel canister. As I reached past a support beam near the back wall, however, I froze again.

Carved directly into the wood were a series of neat, horizontal pencil marks. My heart gave an uncomfortable roll as I read the faded handwriting beside them, realizing what those marks were for.

Alicia - 4. Alicia - 5. Alicia - 6.

The lines climbed up the wood in steady increments, tracking her growth while none of them had known what was coming for them, and stopping abruptly at number seven. It fucking hurt to see it, if I was being honest.

For a long second, I just stared at the blank space above the final mark, guilt creeping up from the pit of my stomach. The first night I'd met her, I'd written her off as rude. Back in the kitchen, I'd heavily implied she was gold digger and I'd told Wyatt she was just another user who'd taken the easy elevator ride to wealth.

But now, I felt like the biggest dick in the entire city of Chicago. Maybe even in the whole state. *Shit, I really have been an asshole.*

Determined to channel the unexpected wave of remorse into productivity, I decided to check over the lawnmower to see if it needed any new parts while I'd be going out for gas anyway. Grabbing the handle, I hauled the heavy machinery out of the garage and into the grass, but I was still hunting around when Alicia suddenly spoke up from behind me.

"What on earth are you doing?"

I jumped slightly, twisting at the sound of her voice. Watching me from the back porch, it looked like she'd been there for a while, leaning against the railing with her fingers wrapped around a mug of coffee and her blonde hair loose around her shoulders.

In a cream-colored sweater that looked soft and new, mild amusement twinkled in her eyes even as her brow furrowed in confusion. My brain turned to mush at the sight of her looking like that. On zero sleep, she

looked so soft and pretty that I just sort of wanted to cuddle up with her in front of a fire and go to sleep.

“I wanted to mow the lawn,” I muttered, averting my gaze before I tackled her into the overgrown grass and went to sleep with her as my stuffed animal right here in the garden. “Nature is going to reclaim the house soon if we don’t.”

She walked down the steps on bare feet, a smile spreading across her lips. “It’s fall, Holden. The grass is completely dead anyway. Why are you trying to landscape at this time of year?”

“It looks untidy,” I lied gruffly, feeling so bad about being mean to her that I just kept fiddling with the choke valve on the engine like I knew what I was doing. “Besides, this old thing needs a little maintenance. Now is as good a time as any to do that, right?”

“Right,” she said slowly, but I practically felt that amusement leaking from her as she watched me.

“Oh, uh, when Maggie called yesterday, she asked if we wanted to go to the Halloween festival with them this afternoon,” I said, changing the subject with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. “My whole family will be there. Apparently, Cameron is insisting. I think it’s really Maggie who wants us all to go, but she won him over to her side. Anyway, do you want to go?”

“Cameron?” Alicia blinked, clearly caught a little off guard. “Well, I suppose if he’s insisting, then yes. We should go.”

“Yeah?” I frowned up at her. “You heard the part where I said my whole family is going, right? I wasn’t exaggerating either. They really will all be there.”

“I heard you,” she said with a spark of genuine excitement lighting her eyes. “I’d love to go. I haven’t been to a real fall carnival for years and it’ll be good to catch up with the Westwood kids.”

“It will?”

“Yes.” Her smile slowly faded as she watched me strangling the choke valve with my bare hands. “Why? Do you not want to go? You look like they’re asking you to march into a battle you don’t believe in rather than just wanting you to go eat some carnival food and maybe go on a few rides.”

I blew out a long, heavy breath, the weight of the Thayer family legacy pressing down on my chest like a rhinoceros. Cool autumn air bit at my

bare forearms now that I'd stopped moving for so long, the breeze rustling the dry grass as silence fell between us. I watched it move for a beat before I shrugged and looked back up at her.

"Truth? I'm just having a hard time navigating this new era with my family right now," I admitted, the confession tearing out of me before I could stop it.

That was the absolute truth, though. Ever since the lawyers had dropped the news about my father's release, I'd been struggling with that same, suffocating sensation that the world was about to rearrange itself again, like it had when he'd first been arrested.

Soon, Court Thayer would walk free and the social and financial structure of our family would be hit by yet another massive, catastrophic ripple effect. Yet, no one seemed willing to actually sit down and talk about it. They were all just floating through galas and dinners, smiling and pretending it was a perfectly normal, predictable thing that would have always eventually happened. Like this was a logical next step that wouldn't blow us out of the water all over again.

It was driving me insane.

Alicia studied my face, her hazel gaze sweeping across my features like she was trying to figure me out. On the other hand, she was entirely unaware of the fact that my father was about to get out. She probably just saw a grumpy dude overthinking a family outing.

"It's not another gala, Holden," she said gently, like she'd come to the conclusion that my trouble with my family lay with their affinity for stuffy events rather than their nonchalance over Court's impending freedom. "This is a Halloween carnival. There will be a few oversized pumpkins, some rides, fried food if we're lucky, and maybe a few kids in costume, but that's it."

She made it sound so simple that the words cut through my existential dread and I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling a deep, slow breath. "Yeah, you're right. Nothing to navigate there except the food trucks."

"And maybe a house of mirrors," she suggested excitedly, like she hoped there might actually be one. "Leave the dead grass alone and go wash your hands. We have a carnival to prepare for and don't worry, okay? It'll be fun."

She flashed me another brilliant smile, seriously seeming disproportionately eager to spend the afternoon with my family, and then

disappeared back into the house. Hell, she practically danced her way up the stairs before the screen door clicked shut behind her.

I sighed, but the longer I stood in the overgrown yard, realizing I definitely wasn't going to get around to fixing the lawnmower or mowing the grass today, the more certain I became that I'd been wrong about her. From the beginning, I'd completely misread Alicia. She wasn't an obstacle, a transaction, or a gold digger. She certainly wasn't a weak, timid little mouse and there was absolutely no way we would ever cohabitate without me being hyper-aware of her presence.

I just wasn't sure where that left me. So far, I'd figured out all the things she *wasn't* and I was willing to admit I'd gotten her all wrong, but as for the rest of it? I was stumped. All I knew was that I was even more curious about my wife now than I'd ever been before—and that was actually starting to feel like a good thing.

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CHAPTER 24

ALICIA

One thing I was starting to learn about the Thayers was that when they said they were doing something together, they really did mean they were doing it *together*. When Holden had told me his brother's wife wanted us to go to the festival with them all, I'd jumped at the opportunity to get to know them better—and to attend a proper Halloween festival for the first time in forever.

What I hadn't realized was that we'd also be getting there together. Ryan—the middle brother, if I remembered correctly from the hasty introductions that'd been made at the gala—and his wife, Maggie, sat in the back seat of Holden's car, and she hadn't stopped talking the entire forty minutes we'd been on the road.

I loved it.

I hadn't expected people like the Thayers to be so loud and normal when they were together as a family, but Ryan and Holden had spent most of the drive bickering while Maggie spoke to me in one long stream of consciousness, almost without taking a single breath.

"We found out we were pregnant just over a month ago, but I was eight weeks along by then," she was saying, her eyes wide and brimming with excitement. "Can you believe that? I always thought I'd somehow magically know the moment there was a baby conceived, but nope. For eight whole weeks, I had no clue."

"I knew," Ryan suddenly interjected mid-argument with Holden about something to do with Egypt. He smiled when he met my gaze in the

rearview and slid a hand to her mostly still-flat belly. “She’s been glowing from day one.”

Her eyes rolled, but a loving smile spread on her lips as she covered his hand in her own. “I wasn’t glowing. I was ready to flush you down the drain when you looked at me wrong, which you were doing all the time. God, are we almost there yet? I’m starving.”

“Her metabolic system is operating at the speed of light,” Ryan said knowingly, laughing when she shot him a glare. “What? It’s true, but you’re eating for t—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Ryan Thayer,” she threatened, her expression suddenly completely serious. Until she winked at me when he sighed.

Even so, the moment Holden pulled the car into the muddy parking lot of the festival grounds, Maggie practically kicked her door open, grabbed Ryan by the front of his jacket, and dragged him toward the bright neon lights of the food trucks. Ryan gave us a half-wave, stumbling to catch up as he called to us over his shoulder. “We’ll find you guys later!”

Holden turned off the engine and leaned back in his seat. “Well, I suppose that means we’ve got some time to breathe before the others track us down. He was wrong about the Sphinx, by the way. It’s totally worth seeing.”

“What?”

“The Spinx,” he repeated slowly. “Egypt. That whole argument about the touristy sights that are worth seeing?”

“Sorry.” I shrugged as I unbuckled my seatbelt. “I was too busy learning about every minute of Maggie’s pregnancy from when they first found out to the start of the second trimester.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to see for yourself some time.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “You want me to see the Sphinx for myself some time, but it’s in Egypt, where I don’t live?”

“Yeah,” he said, finally opening his door and climbing out like suggesting international travel wasn’t a massively big deal. As I climbed out too, he came around to my side of the car and shrugged. “We go there every so often to see my brother and his wife, or my other brother and his wife.”

“Right,” I said slowly, my head shaking when I suddenly remembered that Colin and Deja, who I’d met at dinner on our wedding night, *also* split

their time between here and Africa. “You guys are just regular jetsetters, aren’t you?”

He frowned. “Not really.”

Sliding his hands into his pockets, he turned toward the carnival, a sprawling, massive sea of flashing colored lights and people. “Since we’ve been left to our own devices, is there anything in particular you’d like to do or should we just walk?”

“Let’s walk,” I said immediately. “I haven’t been to one of these in so, so long. I can’t wait to see if it’s the same.”

“Nothing is ever the same,” he muttered.

I nudged him with my elbow as we started forward. “Hey, there’s no being grumpy or pessimistic at a festival, husband. There’s only cheer.”

“And burnt sugar,” he said.

I smiled, inhaling the glorious scent on every breath I took. While I was rather partial to it, Holden didn’t seem to be, but even so, he stopped complaining for the next hour or so. We just wandered around the grounds, sampling little bites of food and walking so close together that our arms occasionally brushed.

Around sunset, the sky turned a deep shade of purple and we finally regrouped with the rest of the Thayer clan near the center of the fairgrounds. Cameron seemed furious as we approached, engaged in a full-on, foot-stomping tantrum.

“I want to go in. I’m big enough!”

He stood at the entrance to the primary attraction, this year’s haunted house. Aptly named the *Slaughterhouse*, it was a massive, elaborate structure constructed from old shipping containers. Heavy-metal music blasted from hidden speakers, and around it, actors were revving chainsaws trying to set the mood.

Jane stood in front of her son with her hands on her hips, her gaze tracking across the fake-blood-splattered facade. “No, Cam. You’re definitely not old enough. If we let you go in there, you won’t sleep for a week.”

“*I* wouldn’t sleep for a week,” Alex muttered at her side, then lifted his hands in surrender when she rolled her eyes at him. “Hey, I’m just being honest. That looks terrifying.”

And therein lies the problem.

None of the adults actually seemed to want to go in themselves. Alex, Jane, Ryan, Maggie, Colin, Deja, and Wyatt were all standing in a protective semi-circle around the kids, every last one of them muttering an excuse about why it was a bad idea.

I looked at Holden, and when I noticed his broad shoulders were completely rigid, I realized he didn't want to go in either. A spark of mischief flared up in my chest and I stepped forward, flashing a smile at Jane.

"You know what?" I said casually. "Holden and I will go in and check it out for you, Cam. That way, we can let you know if it's too intense and no one will have to have any sleepless nights."

Holden's head snapped toward me so fast, I was fairly certain I'd heard something pop. Those blue eyes widened, his jaw clenching as he leveled me with a glare that told me exactly what he thought about this plan. I smiled sweetly back at him, pretending not to notice how much he hated me right now.

"That's an excellent idea," Alex agreed almost instantly, pushing us toward the line. "Have fun, kids. We'll meet at the playground."

Without waiting to see if we'd actually follow through, he rallied the troops and led the rest of the family toward a set of swings not far away. Holden's lips hardened into a tight line as he turned toward the dark curtains covering the entrance.

"Remind me again why we're doing this?"

I grabbed his arm and started pulling him toward the ticket booth. Since there wasn't much of a line to speak of, we were on our way up the wooden ramp toward the entrance in no time.

"We're checking it out for Cam," I said. "What's the matter, Thayer? Are you scared?"

"No." He scoffed. "I'm a grown man. I'm not scared of underpaid teenagers wearing liquid latex and spirit gum. Why would you even ask me that?"

He was lying. I could practically feel the tension rolling off his frame, so I leaned my shoulder against his arm and smiled up at him. "Just relax, okay? There's a bunch of plastic skeletons and strobe lights. Besides, this is nothing. I basically grew up in a haunted house, so I'm entirely desensitized. If push comes to shove, I'll protect you."

Holden froze on the ramp, his eyes cutting down to mine. “What do you mean you grew up in a haunted house? I mean, the brownstone is old, but it’s not exactly an abandoned asylum.”

Shit. Stupid mouth.

I hadn’t meant to say anything to him about that part of my life, but now, I’d forced myself into having to explain. Before he called a priest to perform an exorcism at our actual home.

“Oh, uh, no. I wasn’t talking about that house. I meant the place where I lived outside of the city with my aunt and uncle after the accident.”

“Next group, you’re up!” the man responsible for collecting the tickets shouted and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

Holden glanced at me like he knew there was a lot more to the story, but we were pushed forward before he could ask, and as soon as we stepped inside, I had a feeling he forgot all about it. Whoever had designed the Slaughterhouse had gone all out, artificial fog hanging thick in the air while blinding lights flashed at erratic intervals.

The floor beneath our feet was squishy too, made of some kind of spongy material that made it feel like we were walking on liquid. Holden’s protective instincts flared up immediately, practically turning him into a human shield trying to protect me.

When a guy dressed as a deranged butcher burst out from behind a hidden panel revving a bloody chainsaw, Holden let out a guttural roar, grabbing me by the waist and forcefully yanking me out of the way. He shoved me behind his back before turning on the guy like he was about to steal the chainsaw and use it to cut the actor into pieces instead.

I’d never laughed harder in my life.

Two rooms later, we were in a narrow hallway lined with hanging sheets, and when someone dressed as a decayed, rotting zombie lunged out from behind the fabric right in front of us, Holden let out a startled shout and once again thrust me backward. The zombie must not have expected a massive, six-foot-something man to scream directly in his face because he let out an equally terrified shriek and dropped his prop limb, scrambling backward into the curtain.

Tears of pure, hysterical laughter spilled out of me at how badly they’d scared one another. Holden shot me a tight-jawed glare. “It isn’t funny, Alicia.”

“No, you’re right. It’s not funny. It’s hilarious.” I took his arm again and pulled him forward, laughing with every turn we took until my luck ran out in the final chamber.

It was decorated like a twisted, decaying circus ring and a giant actor dressed as the deranged circus ringleader stood right in front of the exit. He held what appeared to be a heavy wooden cane, leveling us with a theatrical, menacing glare.

“Halt, travelers!” he boomed. “The only way to pass the gates of the circus is to seal your bond with a kiss.”

I expected Holden to launch himself at the guy and physically tackle him out of the way, but instead, he didn’t waste a single second. Before I could even blink, he grabbed my jaw in a large, warm hand, tilted my face up, and brought his lips down on mine in a kiss so fierce and possessive that it stole the oxygen from my lungs.

My eyes flew wide open before fluttering shut, my fingers instinctively reaching for the soft fabric of his sweater. Holden leaned into it too, his free hand sliding around my hips to pull me so close against him that I swore he could feel the pounding of my heart.

“Uh, alright then,” the ringleader suddenly interrupted, his theatrical booming totally gone. If anything, he just sounded uncomfortable now. “You guys can go. Exit is on the left.”

Holden broke the kiss slowly, his eyes dark and focused on my face for another beat before he let go. I was breathing hard, my entire body tingling from the contact. He reached for my hand without saying a word, long fingers twining around mine before he guided me out into the night.

When we finally rejoined his family at the swings, Holden immediately shook his head at Cam. “I’m sorry, buddy. That was way too intense for you.”

“It was too intense for Holden,” I said, trying to hide the fact that my heart was still racing behind a sweet smile as I batted my lashes at him. “Tell them how you almost gave a zombie a heart attack.”

Holden grunted, but Cameron let out a furious groan, crossing his arms as he pouted, “This is the worst night ever!”

Before Jane or Alex could try to soothe him, Holden effortlessly scooped Cameron up into the air, hoisting the little boy onto his shoulders. “Come on, kid. The mirror maze is way cooler. That Slaughterhouse is for

amateurs. Trust me. The mirror maze is where you want to be. I'll show you how to navigate it like a pro."

Cam's face lit up with a joyful smile when Holden started marching toward the maze. Alex, Colin, and Ryan followed, leaving me alone on the grass with the Thayer women. Deja let out a sigh as she watched Holden retreat. "You know, despite the grumpy exterior, he's going to make a wonderful father one day."

The word *father* rattled around my brain with no place to land. *Right. Because that's part of the contract too.*

I was supposed to help produce another Thayer heir. While there was no set time limit within which it was supposed to happen, the way the girls were suddenly looking at me made me think they suspected it would be soon.

Shit. Never mind the kiss. I should be focused on when and how my dear new husband is going to want to knock me up, and whether I get a say in it at all.

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CHAPTER 25

HOLDEN

Our drive back from the carnival had been pretty quiet. Especially after dropping Ryan and Maggie off back at Jane's house, where they were staying for this trip. From what I'd heard, Jane had refused to let them stay at their apartment in the city after finding out Maggie was pregnant.

Something about picking through her kids' old baby stuff to see what she could have delivered to Ryan's place here so they'd have it when they were in town. I hadn't really been listening.

What'd struck me was that the silence in the car hadn't been as hostile or awkward as before. Instead, it'd just been that exhausted kind of quiet that came after hours of chasing after Cam in the mirror maze, trying to keep up with Deja at the prize booths, and inhaling way too much fried food.

Alicia seemed to have used the drive to recharge her batteries, however, since she was now sitting at the kitchen counter with a mug of chamomile tea in her hands, giving me grief about my performance in the Slaughterhouse.

"I'm just saying, you almost took out a minimum-wage actor," she teased with a wicked little smirk playing at her lips. "The poor guy was just trying to do his job and you *roared* at him. Like a cornered grizzly bear."

"Where I come from, if someone is shoving a chainsaw in your face, they're considered a threat," I argued, my hip cocked against the counter across from her. "In any civilized society, it's unacceptable to wave chainsaws around. My body responded appropriately."

She rolled her eyes, trying to hide a smile behind her mug as she took a sip of her tea. “It was a prop, Thayer. It didn’t even have a chain on it.”

“And yet, it had the auditory signature of a real weapon,” I countered, but there wasn’t much of a bite to my voice anymore. “I still don’t get why Maggie didn’t go in with you. She lives for that sort of stuff.”

“The guy at the ticketing booth advised against it,” she explained, clearly knowing things I didn’t about my very own family. “I asked while you were in the mirror maze. She said there was a sign asking people to let the operators know if you’re pregnant, and when she did, they told her she could go in, but they would recommend she didn’t. With all those props around, there’s a real risk of tripping or getting knocked over. It was a *rather safe than sorry* situation.”

While I got all that, my brain had gotten stuck before the actual explanation had started. “You *asked*? Why?”

She shrugged. “I was curious about how, out of a whole group of fully grown adults, we were the only ones willing to go in and check it out.”

“Oh.”

She smirked again. “Deja said Halloween isn’t a thing in Egypt, so she doesn’t really understand the draw. She also told me there are enough things that scare her about the world their little girl has to grow up in that she doesn’t need manufactured fear.”

“That’s fair.”

“Which brings us to you,” she said, curiosity burning in those hazel eyes when she brought them back to mine. “Why did none of the *Thayers* want to go in? You’re big, strong boys and Jane is probably the toughest of you all, yet I didn’t see any of you volunteering.”

I stared back at her, considering making up some bullshit excuse, but at the end of the day, we were married now. At some point over the next fifty years, we wouldn’t only have to replace another kitchen appliance. She was also going to find out everything there was to know about me.

It seemed more dignified to tell her the truth myself instead of having her piece it together from the stories she’d hear from others. “We didn’t exactly have a typical childhood. Our parents would never have taken us to a local Halloween festival.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“Let’s just say that walking through mud to buy a deflated pumpkin balloon was considered way below our *station*. If we celebrated at all, it

was at a catered gala in a ballroom where the children were expected to sit quietly in formal suits and not speak unless spoken to."

Alicia eyes softened as she looked at me over the rim of her mug, the teasing light in them fading. For a beat, she looked at me like I was a book she was reading and trying to figure out the plot twists still coming.

While I'd never wanted anyone to open that book, the truth was that I'd had a great time tonight. I tended to steer clear of family events. Whenever I could, I avoided them like the plague. I loved my family, but any time spent with them usually meant dealing with poorly disguised tension, legal stress, and my mother's social anxieties.

Having Alicia there tonight had flipped the script for me, though. Knowing she was excited about it had made me *want* to go, want to stay, and more surprisingly, made me actually want to contribute. I'd genuinely enjoyed myself, even if my nervous system had believed she was in mortal danger the entire time we'd been inside that stupid haunted house.

Naturally, as soon as I realized tonight had turned out to be pretty fucking good, an intrusive thought crashed into my brain with all the subtlety of the grizzly bear Alicia had accused me of acting like.

Did my parents ever have a night like this? Once upon a time, did Court and Nora Thayer have a happy, easy relationship that made them look forward to their future together?

As soon as the thought landed, my good mood crashed and burned, that familiar darkness rolling back in that that made me want to shut myself off from everyone and everything. It was like a thunder cloud, reminding me that my father was walking out soon and when he did, whatever peace or happiness we were pretending to have right now would be gone.

Immediately, a switch tripped inside and I had the sudden, almost overpowering urge to fall back into old habits. Unfortunately, locking myself in her dad's old office upstairs would mean leaving my perch against the kitchen counter. More to the point, it would mean walking away from *her* and I wasn't really ready to say goodnight just yet.

I cleared my throat and looked back at her again. "What about you? Did you go to a lot of Halloween festivals when you were growing up?"

For some reason, it was her turn to look uncomfortable. She'd been so enthusiastic about the festival that I'd assumed she had fantastic childhood memories of Halloween, but she shifted on her stool and glanced at the tea in her mug.

“Uh, yeah,” she finally said, but her voice was soft and she still hadn’t looked back up at me. “For a while there, anyway.”

Oh. Right. I felt a quiet sigh sliding out of me at the realization that Halloween happiness was yet another thing the accident must’ve taken from her. *Shit*.

For a few long seconds, she just sat there staring at her tea and I stood with my arms crossed over my chest, torn between feeling like an idiot for bringing it up and wrestling with my resentment toward my parents for never taking the time to do normal stuff like that with us.

Alicia visibly rallied, however, drawing in a deep breath and sitting up a little straighter when she finally looked at me again. “You know, the neighborhood association around here hosts a Halloween block party every year. It’s coming up next Saturday and it’s a huge deal. The whole street gets shut down, there’s a parade for the kids, and everyone decorates their porches.”

“They decorate their porches?” I repeated slowly, raising an eyebrow as I tried imagining it. “Why?”

“There’s an official *best decorations* competition. A few members of the neighborhood association are the judges and they go around at midnight, deciding who wins.”

“Is there a prize?”

“Yep.” She grinned. “A hundred-dollar gift card to Sammy’s Pizzeria down the street.”

My brain grabbed onto that piece of information like it was a life raft. There was going to be a competition, and not just a silly little *everyone wins* kind of situation but a structured event with a clear winner and definitive losers.

My jaw tightened as I let my hypercompetitive instincts take the wheel. They’d been bred into every Thayer from birth, and when we competed, we won. This would be no different. “Okay, then. We’re getting that gift card this year. Guaranteed.”

Alicia laughed. “Trust me, I’ve tried in the past, but it’s pretty hard. People on this block take it super seriously. They go *all* out.”

“Now that I know about it, so will I,” I said firmly. “I don’t participate in *anything* to lose and it’s mandatory, right? If your house is on this block, your porch gets judged.”

“Yeah, but thrift store decorations won’t cut it,” she explained lightly. “Stringing up fake cobwebs and carving a couple of sad pumpkins won’t even get us in the top ten. When I say people take it seriously, what I mean is that they throw a ton of money at it.”

I stood up straight and nodded. “That’s fine. We’re still going to win that gift card.”

She laughed again, her head shaking as she set her tea down on the counter and looked up at me with an expression that suggested she didn’t think I understood what it would take. “Mr. Henderson across the street won’t allow that to happen. He’s a retired engineer who’s won the past six years in a row. He builds his own animatronics from scratch and has a synchronized light show, Holden. A *synchronized light show*. There’s no competing with that.”

“All that means is Mr. Henderson has had his turn,” I said, feeling a slow smirk spread across my lips. I probably looked cocky as hell right now, but I didn’t give a shit. This was my first Halloween on the block and I had money now. “He’s going down, Alicia. Isaac is an engineer too. I’ll call him tomorrow and get some ideas. We’re going to destroy Mr. Henderson’s light show and everything else he’s got.”

“You do realize he’s just an old man, right?” she said, deadpan, but the brilliant smile that broke out across her face contradicted the words. “You’re insane if you think we’re going to out-Halloween him, but more than that, you can’t talk about destroying him and sound like you actually mean it.”

“Why not? I’m bringing the fight to him. From now on, *we’re* going to be the house to beat for this thing. Is it the same at Christmas? I just need to know so I can start planning.”

She chuckled and stood up as we kept bantering back and forth. As we turned off the kitchen lights and headed upstairs to get tucked in for the night, the dark haze lifted from my mind. Not even thoughts about my father were able to distract me from planning the total annihilation of our elderly neighbor.

The easy, playful banter began to change once we reached the landing, though. Suddenly, as soon as our bedrooms came into view, tension soared between us, the realization sinking in for me that it was just her and me in the house tonight.

Tasha was out again and there were beds up here. Right behind those doors only a few feet away.

While I'd deliberately avoided thinking about it until now, Alicia and I had kissed tonight. In the heat of the moment, when that circus freak had told me to do it, I'd only been thinking about getting the hell out of there, but as soon as my mouth had touched hers, whatever intentions I might've had to just get it over with had gone straight to shit.

That kiss had taken on a life of its own, so fierce and deep that my body still pulsed at the memory of it. When we stopped in the space between our respective bedroom doors, that pulsing need became like a physical weight pressing down on me.

Alicia paused at her door to look up into my eyes, and unless I was fully losing my mind, she seemed a little out of breath. Definitely more winded than normal after climbing just that one, single set of stairs.

"Goodnight, Holden," she whispered even though there was no need to speak softly.

I inhaled a deep breath, trying to convince myself that I was imagining things. We hadn't switched on the lights up here. She was probably just whispering because it was dark. *That's a thing, right? An instinct. It doesn't mean anything.*

"Goodnight, Alicia," I replied, suddenly realizing I should've whispered too, because there was a definite husky quality to my voice that didn't belong there.

Fuck.

Every piece of logic and every defense mechanism I had were screaming at me to step back, open my door, and maintain the boundaries of our arrangement, but neither of us moved. We just kept standing there, staring at each other in the dark corridor, and then, just as I was about to lift my hand and reach for my door handle, I saw her lips part.

And just like that, something between us snapped, and the next thing I knew, I was on the move.

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CHAPTER 26

ALICIA

My heart hammered a frantic, uneven rhythm against my ribs as I stared at Holden standing less than two feet away. His head was tilted slightly. Moonlight filtered in through the window at the end of the hall, casting shadows across the sharp angles of his jawline. While I couldn't make out the expression in his eyes, it felt like he was staring at me like I was a high-level math problem he couldn't solve. Or maybe I was just projecting my own feelings onto him, Holden Thayer, my enigma of a husband.

Right now, however, that enigma didn't feel as untouchable or as off limits as he always had. In fact, there was something about the tension in the silence between us that told me he'd very much like to be touched.

Or, again, maybe that's just me projecting.

Because after that kiss? Holy hell, *I* wanted to be touched. By him, of course. I'd managed to keep my body from going up in flames back at the carnival because I'd had to. We'd been with his family. Children had been present, for heaven's sake. It wasn't like I could climb him like he was my very own personal playground while his siblings and their families ate their funnel cakes and simply shielded the kids' eyes.

But now, it was only the two of us, and when my lips parted in disappointment as his hand twitched toward his door, it was like the tight restraint in his shoulders just… broke.

Without a word of warning, Holden took a sudden, lightning-fast step forward, erasing the space between us with just one stride of his long legs.

Before I could even begin to comprehend what was about to happen, his large hands came up. One wrapped firmly around the curve of my waist and pulled me flush against the hard planes of his chest while his other slid up the side of my neck.

As he buried his fingers in the loose strands of my hair, he brought his lips down on mine without hesitation, kissing me as deeply and as hard as he had back at the Slaughterhouse. Only this time, there was no actor watching us and no chainsaws roaring in the background. So, it was slightly more romantic.

This kiss wasn't for show or because someone had told him to do it. It was just for me—for *us*—and my world tilted on its axis as I leaned into him. Holden's mouth devoured my own with an urgent kind of hunger I didn't think I'd ever felt before, and a soft whimper caught at the back of my throat in response.

Men of the world, take note. This is how a girl wants to be kissed.

My knees were already turning to jelly and he'd barely even gotten started. My hands flew up to his chest, my fingers curling into his sweater, and I tilted my head back to give him better access.

He tasted faintly of the sweet, dark cider we'd had at the festival, but underneath that, there was only the pure, all-consuming heat of Holden Thayer. His thumb traced the line of my jaw, and his grip on my waist tightened until I was so close to him that I could feel the vibration of the ragged groan he let out in his chest.

A shiver raced down my spine at the desperation in the sound and my knees finally buckled. But his arm was banded so tight around my waist that I didn't fall. He must've felt me sag against him though, because he moved us back until I was caged between him and the wall, penned in like he could do whatever he wanted to me.

The thought brought a giddy, mindless smile to my lips and Holden paused, breaking the kiss to look down into my eyes. His blue eyes were an almost transparent silver in the moonlight. Tension was etched in his handsome features, but a slight smirk curved his lips.

"Something funny?"

I shook my head, but I couldn't wipe away the smile just yet. "I've never been pressed up against a wall before, is all. I've never been pressed up against anything, actually, but I've always wanted to be. It's just, uh, it always looks so hot, you know? In the movies?"

His eyebrows swept up a fraction of an inch as he stared back at me, blinking a few times until the slight smirk became a full-blown, completely too confident grin. “Oh, it looks hot, does it? Let’s see what we can do to make the fantasy come true for you, then.”

Without another word, his lips crashed back into mine, but this time, the full weight of him followed. He pressed his body flush against mine until I could feel the solid, hard heat of him *everywhere*. Dwarfing me with his tall frame, it felt like he was completely consuming me now, like the entire world had been reduced to nothing but Holden, his body enveloping mine, the taste of him in my mouth, and the sounds of his deep moans in my ears.

Meanwhile, his mouth moved against mine in a practiced, devastating rhythm that made my head spin. It suddenly felt like he was trying to strip away all the noise surrounding our arrangement and all the defenses we’d built around ourselves to leave us as nothing but two people and the raw desire we felt for each other.

When he slid one big thigh between my own, tingles of pleasure shot through me. My entire body turned to liquid heat. It spread from the very core of my being to the tips of my fingers and toes, leaving my nerve endings buzzing with need.

I felt him against me, the hard bulge behind the fly of his jeans pressed up against my lower belly, and I moaned wantonly. Suddenly feeling so bold that it was like he’d stripped away my inhibitions too, I ground against his thigh to relieve the ache building between my legs, but he broke the kiss again, his sharp intake of breath loud in the quiet hallway.

His chest was heaving, his lips parted and shiny in the moonlight. “We shouldn’t let this go any further tonight, Alicia.”

“Why?” I whispered, not even trying to find my voice as I panted in the aftermath of what had been the most spectacular kiss of my entire life. “We’re married, Holden.”

“Yeah, but if we keep going, I’m going to lose control,” he murmured. His eyes slid shut as he dragged in a deep breath and eased his weight off me, but he still didn’t take a step back or put any real space between us. “Right now, you might be tempted to say it doesn’t matter or that it’s okay if that happens, but it’s like you said, we *are* married. We have time. I don’t want to fuck it up by falling into bed together.”

I stared up at him, beyond surprised that he cared about the possibility of fucking things up and even more surprised that he’d told me so point

blank, but he wasn't wrong. Things were complicated enough right now. We probably didn't need to add intimacy to the mix when we were only just managing to get through civil conversations with one another.

"Alright," I murmured, sliding one of my hands up to his face and cupping his jaw gently in my palm. "As long as you tell me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Do you want to?"

His eyes widened. Then he scoffed and dropped a chaste kiss on my forehead before finally taking a big step back. "More than anything. That's the problem."

Without another word, he strode the short distance down the hall to Dad's old office and disappeared inside, the door clicking shut behind him. My entire body was still trembling, but when I was sure my knees were going to hold me up, I finally pushed away from the wall and stumbled into my own bedroom.

My skin was still tingling with the memories of having him pressed against me, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh, cry, or bang my head against the wall for how stupid that had been. There was this fluttery sensation in my chest and I felt all warm when I thought about how earnest he'd sounded when he'd said he didn't want to fuck things up.

Part of my brain was already building castles in the sky about the fairytale life we could have together if he felt the same way I did. The more logical part of me kept blaring warnings about the fact that this was, in a very real way, still a business arrangement. For a few long minutes, I just stood there, trying to catch my breath, but then I finally started moving through the motions of my nightly routine on autopilot, changing into a pair of flannel pajamas before drifting into my small adjoining bathroom.

When I reached my vanity and squeezed a dollop of toothpaste onto my brush, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, my cheeks still flushed bright pink, my lips slightly swollen, and my eyes wider than usual. *God, what a kiss.*

Business arrangement or not, the only thing I could think about was Holden, currently going through these same motions just down the hall. I suddenly wondered what brand of toothpaste he preferred and whether he liked sleeping on the left or right side of the bed. A soft giggle came out of me when I thought about seeing him again in the morning, wondering if he might kiss me good morning.

Oh, God. Tasha was right. I am utterly and completely fucked. Is this what it feels like, the terrifying, precipitous drop of falling for someone?

I'd spent years convincing myself that love was a luxury I couldn't afford, a romantic myth that belonged to people who had choices, and now, there was a possibility I was actually falling for my arranged husband. A man who was so entirely closed off that there was no telling what I'd get from him from one moment to the next, who looked at the world through a lens of cynicism and suspicion, and who still hadn't even told me why he'd agreed to this arrangement in the first place.

I sighed, rinsing out my mouth before reaching for a makeup wipe. *The important thing is he was right about us having time. We do have time. We don't need to figure it all out tonight and he stopped us from crossing a line we couldn't uncross.*

Honestly, I didn't know if I should be feeling this way about him or if he felt anything—other than lust—for me at all, but as I wiped off my makeup and got started on my skincare routine, I thought back to one of my most treasured childhood memories. The one I always revisited when I thought about love, marriage, and the possibility of building a future with a man.

It had been Christmas morning and I'd crept out of my room at the crack of dawn, a six-year old desperate to see what Santa had left under the tree.

I remembered padding down the stairs in my socks, not making a sound as the living room had come into view. Bathed in the warm glow of the multi-colored string lights on the tree, my mom and dad had already been down there, kissing in front of the hearth.

My dad's arms had been wrapped around her waist, my mom's fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of his neck, both of their shoulders shaking with quiet laughter. It had looked like a scene straight out of a movie about a genuinely happy family.

I'd felt so safe in that moment, knowing that nothing in the world could ever hurt us while they were kissing like that in front of the fire on an icy Christmas morning. The memory tugged painfully on my heartstrings as I finally finished up in the bathroom and slid under the covers on my bed.

Holden was cynical, grumpy, and he'd clearly been raised by wolves in tailored suits, but despite all that, he had moments of genuine joy. Flashes

of time when he was warm, and fun-loving, and determined to really make this house his home.

He and I definitely had a long way to go before what we had between us would even begin to resemble a real marriage, but as I flicked off the light, I wasn't as afraid of the fact that I was potentially falling for him. Come what may, he was my husband now and we were both determined to try.

It still wasn't exactly an epic romance, but there might still be love in our story yet. One day. Hopefully, from both sides.

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CHAPTER 27

HOLDEN

By the afternoon after the carnival, I felt like I was in way over my head, which was a feeling I'd always thoroughly detested. In my world, control was *everything* and I'd spent too many years not having it over *anything*.

I hadn't been able to stop my father from doing stupid shit or getting caught for it. I hadn't been able to redirect the news cycle when his mistakes had been the only thing they'd talked about for months on end. I hadn't been able to protect my family from getting torn apart by the public, or from losing everything, or from spending the years that had followed as cash-strapped outcasts.

I slid my laptop into my bag and walked out of my final lecture of the day. My phone buzzed in my palm with a calendar notification from Colin. *Great, and now I have to go to a meeting with my brother on top of everything else.*

Objectively, however, the timing was actually pretty good. I was in the weeds trying to secure an official work-study placement and I'd decided to lean into the nepotism of being a Thayer a bit. With what we were facing, I didn't want to work for a stranger, and gaining more experience in the company I'd probably end up at eventually anyway seemed like the path of least resistance. Taking that path was my plan.

As I strode across the parking lot to my car, I gripped the strap of my backpack so tight that my knuckles blanched, but seriously. Losing control again had my head feeling all kinds of messed up.

Once I'd gotten to know Alex and realized how he was always somehow one step ahead, I'd immediately known *that* was the answer to staying in control. No matter what, I always had to stay at least one step ahead.

Until now, I'd managed it okay, but this whole thing with Alicia had blown my carefully laid plans straight out of the water. So much so that I'd spent the better part of the morning desperately trying to avoid thinking about her lips against mine last night, alternating between kicking myself about putting a stop to it and thanking my lucky stars that I'd found the strength to keep my dick from taking over.

Wanting my wife had *not* been part of the plan, not in any way, shape, or form. Especially not wanting her that badly. It felt like I was drowning—or falling—and I didn't know which was worse.

Maybe it's a good thing I'm going to talk to Colin right now. Maybe he'll be able to give me a clue about how to make sense of this. God knows, I haven't been able to make heads or fucking tails of it by myself.

As I walked into the sleek corner office on the fortieth floor of Thayer Steelworks, however, I realized my big brother hadn't called me over for a meeting about my work-study placement or the state of my marriage. My Spidey senses started tingling as soon as I walked in to see him standing by the windows with a glass of whiskey in his hand at four in the afternoon, his shoulders stiff as he looked out at the city below.

Colin wasn't the type to drink on the clock. Hell, he was barely the type who drank *off* the damn clock. He was always too busy working, calculating, or preparing to board a flight back to Egypt, where he, his wife, and his child lived half the year.

Simply put, the guy never had time to stare absently out the window, nursing a drink that was filled to the brim. I shut the door behind me but didn't walk further into his office, simply crossing my arms and leaning back against the door.

"What is it?" I asked without any prelude. "What's happened this time?"

Colin finally turned away from the windows, lifting the bottle of whiskey from his desk and pouring a generous amount into the tumbler he'd had waiting beside it. Wordlessly picking it up, he held it out toward me and inclined his chin at the glass when I didn't move to take it from him.

“Trust me,” he said. “You’re going to want this.”

Bitter anger shot through my veins like poison, my muscles tensing to lock up, but I forced myself to push away from the door and woodenly accepted the drink. I tossed back half of it in one long swallow before I met his gaze.

“Given the welcome I just got, I know this is about Dad,” I spat quietly. “Just tell me. When is he getting out?”

Colin didn’t deny it. He took another long sip of his own drink before he sat down on the chair behind his desk and motioned me into the one across from him. “Sit down, Holden.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want to.”

His eyes moved slowly from one of mine to the other, but he nodded and smoothed his tie before finally setting the glass down. “I know this is a sore subject for you, but we really do need to talk about him.”

“I’d really rather not.” I held his gaze. Court Thayer had never been a positive influence in either of our lives. First, he’d been the demanding, exacting, yet unreachable patriarch. Then he’d become the architect of our ruin. “Say what you need to say, but don’t expect me to be happy or to contribute to the conversation in any way.”

“Fine. Here it is. The board finalized the logistics this morning,” he said in the same tone he used to defuse any crisis before it started. “Thanks to our legal team, the paperwork is being expedited. We still don’t have an exact date, but it’ll be a matter of weeks now.”

Sharp pain radiated through my jaw from how hard I clenched my teeth. “That’s a matter for the state, not me. If they want to release him early, it’s their problem.”

“No, it’s not,” he countered gently. “The terms of his probation are incredibly strict. Moves are being made for his immediate release back into society, but the courts require an ironclad transition plan. That’s why we don’t have a date yet. Until we can present an acceptable plan, there will be no release.”

“I say we let him rot.”

Colin eyes closed for a brief moment. Then he picked his drink back up and took another long sip. Once he’d swallowed it, he finally looked at me again. “It’s either a state-sanctioned halfway house downtown or a privately funded residence that will be Jane’s and my responsibility to secure and monitor for at least the next three to five years. We can’t just let him float,

Holden. The press will have a field day if a Thayer ends up in a municipal shelter."

"Then let them have their field day," I snapped. "Put him in the halfway house. Let him see what bankruptcy actually feels like. A little dose of reality might do his character some good."

Colin slowly shook his head, the gravity in his expression suddenly making it hard to breathe. "I went to see him last week."

"Good for you."

He ignored the jab, carrying on like I hadn't said anything at all. "I spoke to him for nearly an hour. He asked about you, you know. Specifically. He wanted to know how you were doing at school."

"How I'm doing at…" I scoffed down a dry, bitter laugh, feeling my old, destructive mindset returning in full force as I shook my head. "He has no right to know that or anything else about me."

Everything that had been warm, good, or peaceful about my life sank into the dark wave rising up from deep inside. It felt like my father was reaching out from his cell, his shadow stretching across the distance to brush against the edges of my life, and even though I knew it was an illusion, I could almost feel the invisible strings pulling tight.

Right then and there, I decided against mentioning the possibility of coming back to work at Thayer, even for a free work-study placement that would count toward my school credits. My pulse slammed against my veins, my blood pressure soaring when it turned out that the rest of the reason my brother had called me in here was even worse.

"Dad also suggested to Jane and me that once he's settled into whatever residence we find for him, he's going to have a massive amount of time on his hands. He'd like to act as an external consultant for the company."

A cold sweat broke out across the back of my neck. Despite the disastrous financial crimes that had landed him in prison, unfortunately, Dad was a corporate genius. Before him, Thayer Steelworks had spent several generations operating as a quiet, old-money, Gilded Era stalwart with very little modern growth.

As soon as he'd taken over, he'd started building it into the absolute powerhouse of an empire it was today. Of course, he'd also driven it almost all the way into the ground, but before that, he'd known the market better than anyone alive.

If he stepped back into the architecture of the company, even as an advisor, he would methodically claw his way back to the head of the table. “He’s a felon, Colin. He’d be on parole. Legally, he can’t hold position with us.”

“An advisory role doesn’t require a board vote, Holden,” Colin said quietly. “He also wouldn’t have access to anything even remotely related to our finances and he’s wholeheartedly accepted that. Hell, he was even the one who brought it up.”

I snorted. “Of course, he did. The man isn’t stupid, Colin. He knew you’d both shut him right down if you thought he was going to so much as look at the money. He’s manipulating you.”

“Perhaps, but Jane is considering it. She thinks it might keep him occupied and out of the public eye.”

“Then Jane is as naive as you.” I swigged down the rest of my whiskey and set the glass down on his desk with a loud thud. “If you two want to entertain the man, then have fun, but leave me the *fuck* out of it.”

Colin’s brow furrowed as he watched me back toward the door. “You’re leaving already? What about the email you sent this morning about the work-study application for your thesis? I have the approval forms right here. We can get you set up in the analytics department by Monday.”

“I got ahead of myself,” I lied. “I need more time. Don’t sign anything. In fact, delete the email and shred the papers.”

Before he could ask why, I pulled the door open and marched out of the office, in a terrible fucking mood as I left the building. Whatever happiness I might’ve thought I was feeling before had been yanked away, just like I’d known it would.

This always happened. Just when I’d think that maybe there was light at the end of the tunnel, my father would do something. It was as good as feeling an icy, supernatural hand at my collar, yanking me back into the abyss.

Desperate to lock myself into Alicia’s dad’s old office and stew in my own misery until my brain cleared again, I drove straight back to the brownstone, but as I turned into the driveway, I had to slam my foot on the brakes.

There was an unfamiliar car parked in my spot and the dark cloud in my chest turned into a raging storm. In all the time I’d lived here, I’d never once seen a car that wasn’t mine or Tasha’s parked in this driveway, and

while it was technically possible that she’d simply invited someone over from class, I had a sinking feeling that more bad news had arrived at our doorstep—and that somehow, things were about to get even more complicated.

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CHAPTER 28

ALICIA

After work, I walked along the sidewalk, excited about the plans I had to make dinner for Holden and Tasha before they got home from class. Over the course of the day, I'd decided that Holden had been right to slow things down and that I wasn't going to overthink things between us anymore.

That feeling of family I'd gotten with them in the kitchen the other day had been at the forefront of my mind when I'd made the decision. As far as I was concerned, that level of happiness and the sense of belonging were sacred and worth protecting.

I knew that better than most, so before I worried about romance or being in love, I was going to do everything I could to bring something much more valuable to all three of us. Peace. Domesticity. The joy of a simple, home-cooked meal prepared by someone who cared.

Unfortunately, when I turned the corner to find a woman standing next to a sleek, luxury SUV parked outside the house, all the air got sucked straight out of my lungs and icy panic hit my stomach instead.

Aunt Nancy. What the hell is she *doing here?*

When I'd told Holden I still talked to my family on the holidays, I'd lied. While I liked to pretend I had relatives, I'd hadn't seen the woman who'd raised me since I'd been eighteen. Almost ten years ago. We never talked, we didn't write, and while I got the occasional text from my cousins, I hadn't kept in contact with my aunt and uncle at all.

Which meant I wasn't even remotely prepared for her being here, but I did know her presence meant bad things. Bad, *bad* things.

My fingertips turned to ice, my ears suddenly rang, and my vision swam with shock. For a second, I thought that maybe I could run, but Nancy turned around at the sound of my footsteps, sweeping a critical gaze over me before offering a thin, fake smile.

"Alicia, darling," she drawled. "I'm glad you finally decided to show up. I've been waiting for hours. I must say, I'm shocked this old place is still standing."

"What are you doing here, Nancy?" I asked, brushing past her while rummaging around my canvas tote for my keys and praying she'd stay far enough behind me that I could barricade her out of my house.

"Word travels fast, my dear." She marched past me as soon as I'd unlocked the door, pushing it open and striding in without waiting for an invitation. "Do you remember Mrs. Jackson, our old neighbor? Well, she moved into a retirement home in the city a few years ago. Arthritis, you know. She couldn't keep up with that big yard next door anymore."

I stared at the back of Nancy's head as her high heels clicked across the foyer, her hair shot through with silver highlights now, but still as immaculately cut into a short, sharp bob as always.

"Oh," I said, swallowing another wave of panic. "Well, I'm sorry to hear about her arthritis."

My aunt waved a manicured hand and my stomach twisted. Back when they'd first taken me in, the woman never even used to wear nail polish, but things sure had changed once they'd gained access to what was supposed to have been my nest egg.

"Never you mind about that," she said dismissively. "She's fine, but we keep in touch. Do you know they still get actual, paper newspapers delivered to the home every day?"

Nancy finally spun to face me, poison green eyes cold as they locked on mine. I didn't bother responding. It didn't even matter than it had been a decade since I'd last seen her. I still knew when she was only interested in hearing the sound of her own voice and this was one of those times.

"They get magazines too," she said lightly, like it was an afterthought, but it definitely wasn't. "When she told me she'd read that you'd married Holden *Thayer*, I nearly fainted, but then I looked it up for myself and here

you are. The rumors were all true. You managed to save the house *and* marry into money."

As she kept staring at me with that icy gaze, the atmosphere in the room became thick enough to choke on. I dropped my tote at my feet and moved to the kitchen, putting the island firmly between us.

"You still haven't told me what you're doing here," I said, gripping the edge of the counter when it felt like my legs were about to give out. "Neither the house nor my husband are any of your concern."

"Well, I'm not sure that's true." She strode toward me and lowered herself onto the stool on the other side of the island, her gaze instantly flicking to that top-of-the-line espresso machine. There was no doubt in my mind she knew what something like that cost, and that seeing it had cemented the reason she'd come here. "Your uncle and I carried an extreme financial burden after the accident, Alicia. We took you in when you had nothing and gave you a roof over your head. We fed you. We clothed you."

My stomach flipped, but as soon as I'd seen her, I'd known this was why she'd come. There was no other reason for Nancy to have shown up out of the blue. "Are you implying that I owe you something?"

"I'm not implying anything. I think it's only fair you recognize the debt you owe us, is all. A hundred thousand dollars would barely scratch the surface of what we spent raising you."

Before I could even find the words to begin to explain how ridiculous that was, the front door slammed shut and Holden strode in, his jaw tightly set and his eyes dark and already raging. I had no idea what had caused his mood, but he looked like a walking firestorm until he stopped dead in his tracks, his piercing gaze landing directly on my aunt.

"Who is this?" he asked with absolutely no pretense of politeness or even civility.

Nancy didn't even flinch, extending a hand toward him and leveling him with her best attempt at a smooth smile. "You must be Holden. I'm Nancy, Alicia's aunt. My husband was her father's brother."

Holden glanced at her outstretched hand but didn't take it. Instead, he looked at me and I didn't know what he saw on my face, but whatever it was made him brush past her and walk straight to me. He slotted in behind my back like he belonged there, hooked one strong, heavy arm around my hips from behind, and pulled me flat against his chest.

“Alright, Nancy,” he said, his voice as cold and hard as an iceberg. “How much?”

“Excuse me?” Her nostrils flared with indignation, but that was the only outward sign of discomfort. “I don’t know what she’s told you about us, but we—”

“Actually, she hasn’t told me a single thing, which tells me everything I need to know.” He cut her off with zero apology or remorse, then proved once again that he had Tony Stark level brilliance and powers of deduction when he chose to employ them. “You raised her, but she still almost lost the house and had student loans. Since it was back taxes that nearly cost her the place, the house must’ve been paid off, which means that her parents had to have done alright for themselves before the accident. At least well enough to have left her with some money for school and all that. How am I doing so far?”

I’d frozen against him as soon as he’d started talking, but with the solid presence of him behind me, I felt the mask starting to slip. Tasha was the only person on earth who knew the truth of what these people had done, what they’d stolen from me, and even she didn’t know everything.

“Well?” Holden asked, tightening his grip on me. “Am I wrong, or did they leave her with enough money to set her up for a decent start, anyway? So, what happened to it, Nancy? Why is it that Alicia had to settle back taxes and pay off student loans when all those things should’ve been taken care of?”

Nancy scoffed, but before she could deny it, I felt the ugly truth of my childhood bubbling up from deep inside. I knew she was about to lie again. I’d heard all their excuses before, but I’d never spoken up.

That stopped now. I couldn’t allow Holden to believe the lies, so I laid out the reality of life after my parents had died, looking up at him instead of into the greedy eyes of my aunt.

“You’re right. They did leave money, a small but stable trust fund. If it’d been administered properly, it would’ve been more than enough for my needs and education, but Nancy and John drained it,” I said, my voice shaky, but I kept going. I needed to get this out while I had the strength of him at my back as fuel. “They also took the monthly social security survivor benefits that were legally mandated for my care and used the cash for family vacations, country club memberships, and brand-new vehicles. For themselves, of course. I never saw a dime.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Nancy snapped. “We had six children to take care of. Six! Do you have any idea how expensive that is?”

“Yes, but five of them were your own,” I said quietly, still not looking at her. “Five boisterous, golden children who occupied every ounce of your love and attention. I fell through the cracks, the quiet orphan who slept on a cot in the corner and who was expected to be invisible while you gave me hand-me-downs to wear and bought your own kids designer labels with my parents’ money.”

A hot, mortified flush crept up my neck as I finally shut up, realizing what I’d just said. Holden stood stiff as a board behind me, and when I managed to steal a glance at Nancy, she was staring at me with a vicious sneer on her lips, looking completely unbothered by how utterly exposed I felt right now.

“We gave you a family, Alicia.” She crossed her arms. “You were ungrateful then and you’re ungrateful now, but you owe us for the food we put in your belly and you know it. Perhaps that wasn’t good enough for you, but it was there. We kept you safe. You could’ve ended up in foster care. We’re the only reason you didn’t.”

As I stared back at her, I felt myself starting to fold. Years of being told I was a burden had conditioned me to agree with anything she said just to make the hostility stop. *Just to make her love me.*

“Fine,” I whispered. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’ll write you a check. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. Holden asked you how much, so just give me a number and if I can—”

A hand suddenly squeezed my shoulder, the gentle application of pressure reminding me he was still there. Warmth swept through me when I glanced up to see him step out from behind me. He drew himself up to his full height, then jerked his head at the door. “Get out of my house.”

Even though he hadn’t yelled the words, they came out as a low, authoritative command that resonated around the room with such malice that it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Nancy let out a surprised huff, then scoffed. “Excuse me? I don’t know who you think you are, young man, but you have no right to speak to me—”

“I will speak to you however I damn well please,” he said, stepping into her personal space without any regard for the way she slunk back. “You are a thief, a parasitic white-collar criminal who stole from a grieving child, and if you don’t turn around and march out of that door in the next ten

seconds, Thayer's legal team will spend the next five years turning your life upside down."

She finally took a step back, her face turning as gray as her hair. I considered defending her, but Holden leveled her with glare that was pure disgust, not breaking eye contact with her as he pointed toward the door.

"If I ever see your vehicle parked on this street again, or if I ever catch your name on a caller ID in this house, I will make you regret it. Do you understand me? Move."

Nancy scooped up her expensive handbag from the counter, her hands shaking with either rage or fear, but she marched to the foyer and yanked open the door. Before she walked out, however, she turned to throw one final, poisonous dart at me across the room.

"Your parents would be ashamed if they knew this is how you treat family, Alicia," she shrieked. "You're a disgrace!"

The front door slammed shut behind her with a deafening bang, and for a second, I just froze, but then I clamped my hands over my face and a ragged sob tore out of me. My past had just been dragged into the light kicking and screaming, all those memories crashing into me at once even as absolute humiliation washed over me.

It felt like I'd been stripped bare in front of a husband who obviously had his own demons, but still. Holden's heavy footsteps approached. Then his long, warm fingers were gently pulling my hands away from my face. "Look at me, Alicia."

I desperately didn't want to, but I lifted my eyes anyway, my vision blurry with tears. Strangely, all the rage from before had left his gaze and it was soft now, as gentle as I'd ever seen it. "Forget about her. Screw your aunt and your uncle. It's over. They have no power over you anymore."

"She… she said my parents would be ashamed," I choked out. "And she's right, Holden."

"No," he said firmly, tenderly wiping away the tears that were starting to fall. "They would be proud of you. They wanted *you* to have what your aunt and uncle stole and we can't get that back unless you want to fight and go after them for it, but this house? It's yours. Ours. You and I will live here forever, and your parents will be here too, watching over us every step of the way. That's not shame. It's love."

Hearing him say *forever* fixed a crack deep inside me, the uncertainty of the future finally melting away. My aunt and uncle really were gone. The

past ten years had proven that. Her appearance today had only been to get more money from me, but Holden was still here.

I wore his ring and he wore mine. No matter how that had come to pass, it was still true. From now on, it was him and me against the world, and as much as I didn't trust that yet, I wanted to try.

Holden held my gaze for another beat before he extended a hand toward me. "Come on. I want to get the hell out of this city for a minute. Do you want to go somewhere with me?"

I didn't even ask where we were going. I just took his hand and nodded. "Yeah, that'd actually be pretty great right now."

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CHAPTER 29

HOLDEN

I'd fully intended for this trip to be a quiet escape for just the two of us. Hitting the highway always cleared my head and I'd hoped it would do the same for Alicia, but Wyatt and Tasha had both shown up at the house just as we'd been leaving, and when they'd found out what I had in mind, they'd promptly decided to come with us.

Now that we were here, however, I was regretting my decisions with everything I had inside. As we walked around the massive, sprawling warehouse in an outlet mall down south, I genuinely felt like we were in Hell.

Alicia, Tasha, and even Wyatt seemed to be in seventh Heaven, but to me, the place looked like it had been designed by Satan himself. Like a Halloween store had mated with a liquidation center and had dozens of ghastly children, all of which were worse than the last, but I'd driven forty-five miles to this fluorescent hellscape for one reason and one reason only.

I was going to blow Mr. Henderson's decorations out of the water and win the block party decoration contest.

"Look at this!" Tasha squealed, a pair of plastic vampire fangs shoved into her mouth as she poked at an animatronic werewolf. "If we put this on the porch, it'll totally scare anyone walking past there at night into early retirement."

"Buy two," I said immediately, pushing a flatbed cart that was already close to its maximum weight capacity and I was only just getting started.

Alicia walked beside me with a beautiful, amused smile on her lips and the crushing sadness of her aunt's visit evidently forgotten. For now, anyway. I wasn't naive enough to believe those demons weren't still there, but it seemed the comedy of watching us navigate a discount Halloween warehouse were keeping them at bay.

"You're out of your mind." She laughed as I added an entire box of synthetic cobwebs to our cart. "We already have four crates of strobe lights, two industrial fog machines, and a projection mapping kit. Mr. Henderson is going to think the military is invading."

"He brought a synchronized light show to a knife fight," I said. "I'm simply retaliating in kind."

"Alicia!" Tasha squealed again, waving her over to a display of plastic tombstones. "Come check these out. Some of them *glow*!"

Alicia rolled her eyes but went to join her friend and Wyatt stepped up beside me, watching her walk away. Once she was out of earshot, he finally spoke. "You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?" I asked as I tossed a pack of heavy-duty zip ties onto the flatbed. "All I'm doing is shopping."

"No, the other thing. The one where you throw yourself into something completely meaningless so you can avoid dealing with the fact that our family is sitting on a tectonic fault line."

I sighed, drifting over to an entire wall of witches' cauldrons. "You talked to Colin."

It wasn't a question. Honestly, I'd been wondering why he'd shown up at the brownstone for the first time ever a mere hour after I'd left Thayer Headquarters. Now, I knew.

"I did," he admitted without any shame whatsoever, even shrugging as he pulled a box of mid-sized cauldrons from the shelf. "After you left his office, he called me in. I'm sure he had the same conversation with me he had with you, except he mentioned that you totally shut him down when he started telling you about the legal transition plan for Dad."

It felt like the temperature in the warehouse dropped ten degrees as soon as he brought it up. "That plan has nothing to do with me. I have a neighborhood association to terrorize. Colin and Jane will be Colin and Jane. It doesn't matter what I say. They're going to do what they're going to do, so it's a moot point. I didn't shut him down. I just left because listening to that bullshit was a waste of my tine."

“Holden, come on.” Wyatt sighed, reaching out to stop me from dumping a bunch of outdoor extension cords into the cart. “Look, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but he’s getting out whether you like it or not and the press is going to start circling us like vultures the moment they find out.”

“Yeah. Exactly. They’re coming for us no matter what we do, so until we have to become shut-ins again, I might as well decorate the fuck out of my porch and win a gift card.”

“We’re down here, buying industrial-grade holiday decorations like the world depends on it, for a *gift card*?”

“No, we’re buying it for the title of *Best Decorations*,” I said. “The gift card is just a bonus.”

Wyatt sighed. “Competitive urges aside, why does this matter so much to you? According to Tasha, your greatest rival for this thing is a nice old man across the street. Beating him can’t possibly be all this is about.”

Against my better judgment, I glanced across the aisle to where Alicia was laughing with Tasha, both of them holding up ridiculous plastic pumpkins. She looked so vibrant and alive, so happy, and it was such a stark contrast to the sobbing, defeated girl from just a few hours ago that my heart rate kicked into higher gear.

I’d done that. After her aunt had left, she’d been a trembling mess and *I’d* lifted her out of that slump. *I’d* made her happy again.

“This is the only thing that matters to me right now,” I muttered, but I wasn’t referring to winning the contest.

What I meant was her happiness. And mine.

For the last decade, my family had been stuck in survival mode. We’d gotten through every day by taking it one day at a time, and slowly, my siblings had broken out of that horrible fucking cycle. Jane and Colin had kids now, Isaac was living his best life in Egypt, and Ryan finally had a personality again outside of *Corporate Raider* and *Party-Boy Ken.*

Frankly, I wanted to get out of survival mode too. For the first time in my entire adult life, I felt actual fucking happiness when I was with this girl, and right now, securing a future with her was the only victory I wanted to claim.

Wyatt tracked my gaze and a slow, knowing smile appeared on his face. “Alright, then. Message received. If we’re going to terrorize the neighborhood, we might as well do it right. What’s the plan?”

Before I could answer, Tasha came sprinting down the aisle toward us. “I found it, Holden. I found the holy grail!”

My brother and I exchanged a glance, then followed her through the maze of plastic skeletons to an open courtyard at the back of the building. Towering over everything else out here was an absolute masterpiece of holiday engineering, a thirty-foot-tall, LED-illuminated skeleton.

Its joints were motorized, something was pulsating in its ribcage, and its glowing purple eyes seemed to track movement. Alicia stared up at it. “Oh my God. That is magnificent. I mean, it’s ridiculous, but how cool is he?”

“We have to buy it,” Tasha said. “We’ll put it in the middle of the yard so poor Mr. Henderson has to look at it every time he leaves his house.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, glancing at a store clerk hovering nearby with a clipboard. “We won’t have space for it in the car, though.”

“I can arrange a flatbed truck to move it for you, sir,” the clerk said immediately. “Depending on the distance, delivery takes anywhere between one to three business days. I’ll just need your address.”

As I reached out to take the clipboard to write it down for him, Alicia’s hand flew out to stop me. “Holden, no. We were joking, for heaven’s sake. There’s no space in our yard for a thirty-foot skeleton. It’ll block out the sun for the entire block.”

“It’s a knife fight, wife,” I reminded her, feeling a slow smirk spread across my lips. “Mr. Henderson’s light show doesn’t stand a chance against a plastic colossus.”

Those blue-green-gold eyes held mine for a beat. Then she smiled and let her hand slide away. “Okay, then. We’re taking Gigantor home.”

The store clerk was practically brimming with excitement over the sale, shoving the clipboard toward me again while waving us—and our completely overstuffed cart—to the cashier. It took nearly another hour trying to figure out how to get all our stuff back to Chicago in a standard-sized vehicle, but in the end we duct-taped a bunch of stuff to the roof rack of my car while the rest of the boxes took up the whole trunk as well as the space between Tasha and Wyatt on the back seat.

When we finally got back home, the sun had already set. Tasha checked her phone and groaned. “Alright, lovebirds. As much as I want to stay and help assemble all this stuff, I have a statistics mid-term next week and my study group is calling an emergency meeting, so I’m out.”

She disappeared into the house and came out before Wyatt and I had even finished unloading the trunk, her backpack slung over her shoulder and her phone in her hand. “I’m calling an Uber. Where do you live? I don’t mind sharing if you don’t mind me being dropped off at the library first.”

For a second, I frowned, thinking she was talking to me, but Wyatt suddenly spoke up from my side and I realized then that she’d been focused on him. “Yeah, that sounds good. I need to get going anyway. Hot date.”

“What?”

He winked. “Some of us aren’t married. Yet. I’m still squeezing the life out of being single, thank you very much.”

A few minutes later, a car pulled up and Wyatt and Tasha both disappeared, leaving Alicia and me to haul our Halloween explosion into the house by ourselves. Once we were done, I reached into my back pocket for my phone, wanting to call Isaac for some advice, but before I could even unlock the device, Alicia’s hand wrapped around my forearm.

“You need to cool it with the decoration war for tonight,” she said quietly, looking right into my eyes. “I love that you’re taking this so seriously, and I love that you want to win so badly, but Tasha mentioned earlier that you have a massive paper due in a couple days.”

“Yeah, it’s for my thesis advisor, but I can write it tomorrow night.”

“No,” she said firmly, her fingers tightening around my arm. “Go upstairs, get your laptop, and work on your paper tonight. Halloween and the contest aren’t for a week yet. We’ll have time to get back to it once your paper has been turned in.”

The simple, casual way she was touching me sent a jolt of energy sizzling through my veins, my heart doing a strange, flopping kind of thing between my ribs. I glanced down at her fingers, wishing that what she’d said wasn’t true, but it was.

While I wanted her to keep touching me, and to spend the rest of the night working on the decorations together, and banishing that awful woman from her mind for good, that paper was too important to half-ass.

Letting out a long sigh, I finally lifted my gaze back to hers and nodded. “Yeah, okay, but if Mr. Henderson launches a preemptive strike with his pumpkins tomorrow, I’m holding you responsible for our early losses.”

“Deal.” She laughed, genuine warmth filling her eyes as she held my gaze for another beat before turning toward the kitchen. “I’m not worried

about a preemptive strike. As soon as that skeleton gets here, we've got this in the bag."

"Plus the werewolves," I said.

She chuckled. "Let's not forget about the werewolves. Now, go get your stuff, Thayer. I'm going to throw together some pasta for dinner. Then I've got some work to do myself."

As she headed toward the kitchen, it was like I could still feel her touch against my skin, and while I knew I wasn't going to get much done feeling the way I was right now, I jogged upstairs to grab my stuff anyway.

If she had work to do, I wasn't going to be responsible for keeping her from doing it.

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CHAPTER 30

ALICIA

Silence reigned supreme outside of the rhythmic clicking of our two keyboards, but the air between Holden and me was so charged, it felt like we were about to trigger a thunderstorm. After we'd eaten, we'd crammed ourselves onto the couch together. While it was well past midnight now, we were still at our computers, both of us still trying to get some work done.

I stared at my screen, doing my best to complete a massive winter book order for the children's department, but it genuinely felt like the air was vibrating with an invisible current of tension. Beside me, Holden was furiously typing away at the paper he had to finish, but every so often, he'd shift, or sigh, or groan, and it made me suspect he was feeling whatever this was as acutely as me.

Every time one of us got up to stretch or grab a glass of water, we ended up closer together once we sat back down. A few minutes ago, I'd shifted my laptop on my knees and the movement had caused Holden's thigh to press up firmly against mine through the fabric of his sweatpants.

The heat of his leg radiated straight through my pajamas, making my skin tingle at the contact, but I didn't move and neither did he. It felt like we were both hellbent on torturing ourselves, or maybe he was simply as unwilling as I was to shatter the moment because it also felt too damn good to finally get this close.

At this point, I wasn't working as much as just staring blindly at my spreadsheet, trying to remember the last time I'd had sex. Honestly, I had

no idea why it suddenly seemed so important to figure that out, but the harder I tried to dismiss the thought, the more space it seemed to dominate in my mind.

All I knew was that it had been so long, it felt like the event belonged to a different lifetime. Moving my fingers across the keyboard to at least *pretend* I was still focused on what I was supposed to be doing, I caught sight of the golden band around my ring finger and sighed.

Not only did I *want* my husband *badly*, but I was also extremely aware of the fact that eventually we were actually going to have to do *it*. We still hadn't discussed that part of the contract. The heir. But basic biology dictated there was really only one way to achieve that particular goal. Easily, at least.

But apparently, we were taking things slowly. Not that we'd discussed that yet either. Or the kiss.

God, we really have to start talking to each other, don't we? This is getting a little ridiculous.

Suddenly, the rapid clicking of Holden's keyboard stopped and he snapped his laptop shut with a definitive click. I jumped slightly at the abruptness of the movement but quickly turned to look at him. "Are you okay?"

My voice got tangled in my throat after so many hours of not using it, the question coming out as a breathless, pathetic little squeak. In my defense, I'd spent most of the day until Nancy's visit obsessing about him penning me against the wall last night.

Eventually, I'd decided to cook the meal and bring some domestic peace to our home, knowing that I was going to drive myself nuts otherwise, but Nancy had ruined that plan. Now here I was, watching him drag his hands over his face before setting the laptop down on the coffee table.

While I thought it was incredibly cute and honorable that a grumpy, rich guy like him was so intent on winning a silly neighborhood contest for me, I suddenly felt bad about how many hours he'd spent in that warehouse when he should've been working on his paper.

Over the past few days, I'd also often seen him doing so many other things around the house that I'd always imagined my future, loving husband would do one day. It was pretty terrifying that everything I'd ever wanted in a real partner was coming to fruition, but in the shape of Holden Thayer.

A guy who was not only grumpy as hell but who should've been working on his paper then, too. I shouldn't have been watching him so closely that I'd even noticed what he was up to. Neither of us should've been kissing the other like we were about to devour each other whole either. Especially when we hadn't even spoken about the elephant in the room, the fact that we had to produce a child.

What a mess. Maybe he's mad at me. Maybe—Wait. Why is he staring at my lips?

Holden hadn't answered my question, but he was openly staring at my mouth, those gray-blue eyes darker than I'd ever seen them. He suddenly reached for me, one large hand wrapping around the back of my neck and drawing me closer. I went willingly, melting into him when his fingers sank into my hair as he slid across the cushions. Then he kissed me and my brain misfired.

A sharp gasp tore out of me right before our lips collided and we pulled apart for a fraction of a heartbeat, but then we crashed back together, and this time, it was a lot. Instead of just being an exploration, it felt more like the sudden breaking of a dam.

Holden's mouth moved against mine, his tongue tracing my lower lip before he stroked it into my mouth, sending another shiver of desire racing down my spine. Reaching down with his free hand, he lifted the laptop from my knees and moved it to the coffee table without looking, leaning into me until he was pressing me down into the couch cushions.

Just about intoxicated by the weight of him on top of me, I pushed my fingers into his dark blond hair, pulling him closer instead of asking any of the questions racing through my mind. *Like what the hell happened to taking it slow?*

"Do you know if Tasha's coming back?" he murmured breathlessly between kisses. "I'd rather not be interrupted for this."

For a second, I couldn't grasp a single thought in my head, but then the answer suddenly popped up like a jack-in-the-box. "She's pulling an all-nighter at the library."

He grinned against my lips. "Great, because I'd also really rather not move right now. I don't think I'd even survive trying to get up the stairs."

My cheeks flushed, but when he crawled fully between my legs, I opened my eyes to find that handsome face hovering a mere inch above

mine. I brought my gaze up to his, seeing the burning heat in it, but instead of acknowledging the heat pooling between my legs, I frowned.

“I’m confused,” I finally whispered. “I thought you didn’t want to mess things up by falling into bed together.”

“We’re on a couch,” he said, deadpan, then pressed a kiss to my forehead and groaned. “Okay, I still don’t want to mess things up, but tell me you’ve actually gotten any work done tonight.”

Since I couldn’t tell him that, I kept my mouth shut and a slight smirk appeared at the very corners of his lips. “Exactly. I did my best and my paper is almost there, but I couldn’t take it anymore. You were *squirming*, Alicia.”

Heat flared across my cheeks, probably turning my face the color of an over-ripe tomato. “I was?”

Strangely, he didn’t smirk again, simply lowering his hips between mine until I could feel the hard length of him pressing into me through the layers of fabric between us. I almost moaned, but I caught my lower lip between my teeth to suppress the sound.

Holden stiffened above me, his eyes sliding shut for a moment as he drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, you were, but I’ve had *this* little problem most of the night myself, so you won’t be getting any judgment from me.”

“It’s really not little.”

Oh, God. Out of everything I could say, why that?

He let out a low chuckle. “Well, I’m glad you approve, but still. I haven’t been able to focus for shit.”

“Same,” I whispered, finally looping my arms around his neck and pulling him to me. “Does this mean we’re actually going to do something about it?”

“I’m not really into denial, Alicia. I still don’t want to move too fast, but whether or not we’re doing something about it is entirely up to you.”

“Are you sure?”

“So sure.”

“Oh,” I murmured, stroking my fingers through his hair and desperately fighting the urge to start rocking underneath him. The hard heat of him was *right there*, nestled tight against me, and I needed friction so badly, but before we got there, he deserved to know. “I want you, Holden. Obviously. I don’t think it’d be moving too fast, not considering…”

I trailed off, drawing in a deep breath before I just blurted it out. “It’s been a very, pathetically long time since I’ve, uh, done anything with anyone. I understand if that’s a problem for you. Especially since we’re going to have to make a baby at some point, but yeah. It’s been a while.”

I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting when I told him that, but he gently cradled my face in his hands and pressed a soft, almost loving kiss to my lips. “It’s not a problem. Nothing you could say would be a problem for me, Alicia. I just want you, okay? We’ll go at a pace you’re comfortable with. If that means not doing anything other than kissing tonight, that’s fine too.”

“No,” I said so fast that it made my cheeks burn again, but I pushed through the embarrassment. If Holden could be honest, then so could I. Even if he was clearly a lot more used to talking about this kind of thing than I was. “I just, uh, are you still sleeping with other—”

“No,” he said immediately. “I haven’t slept with anyone else since Alex first brought up the whole marriage thing. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Oh.”

Wow. I’m just the very definition of eloquence tonight, aren’t I?

He smiled and lowered his lips back to my neck, dropping hot, slow kisses on my skin. “I might be a lot of things, but a cheater will never be one of them. I’m yours now, Alicia. Whether we saw it coming or not.”

“Mine?” My heart gave a soaring leap before it squeezed. “I guess that makes me yours too, huh?”

I felt him smile against my skin. “Yeah, I guess it does. I take care of what’s mine, baby, and I will take care of you either way, but I’m going to need to hear you tell me what you want.”

As he kept dragging his lips across my throat, my eyelids fluttered shut and I arched my neck, barely able to think straight, but I wrapped my legs around his hips and turned my head to catch his lips for another kiss.

“I want everything,” I murmured. “All of it. Just be gentle, okay?”

“I can do that,” he promised, kissing me so deeply that I lost track of where I ended and he began, but he didn’t make a single move to take things further until I was practically burning up underneath him.

When I finally started clawing at his t-shirt like a crazy person, he let out another low chuckle before pulling it over his head in one smooth motion, exposing washboard abs so sexy I wanted nothing more than to lick them, but then he was pulling my pajama shirt off too and the way his

cheeks flushed when he dropped his gaze to my chest made my thoughts scatter to the wind.

“It’s a damn good thing I didn’t know earlier that you’re not wearing a bra,” he murmured, but his voice had a rougher edge to it now, his gaze trailing from my hard nipples to the waistband of my pajama pants. “God, I would’ve had my face buried here all night if I’d known.”

He moved his big hands to my breasts and cupped them, bringing his head down to lick a path around each of my nipples in turn. I shivered underneath him, feeling wet heat pool in my panties as he applied gentle pressure to one nipple and sucked the other into his mouth.

Instinct took over at the sensation of his wet, hot mouth on me, and I suddenly lost the fight against the urge to rock my hips. I started grinding against him with deliberate purpose, a loud moan escaping when pleasure burst through me as soon as I started moving.

“Holden. Oh!”

He groaned around my skin, pressing down firmly with his hips cradled between mine. “This is going to kill me.”

At the increased pressure against that aching, sensitive part of my anatomy, I felt my nails dig into his skin, my lungs forgetting how to function, and my muscles starting to lock up. Holden muttered curses under his breath when he seemed to realize how close I already was, bringing his mouth back to mine to kiss me as he suddenly started moving too.

My grinding had been desperate and erratic, but his hips rolled in slow, rhythmic thrusts that made me see stars, turning my moans into incomprehensible pleas almost immediately. Wisps of pleasure licked at my insides right from the get-go and Holden grabbed my hands, holding them tight as he kept moving, never once breaking stride.

“Shit, Alicia,” he groaned into my mouth. “I won’t last.”

“So don’t.”

I felt him tense above me. His movements became a touch more rigid, and knowing that he was right there with me made me lose my grip on reality for a moment. I fell apart, a mind-numbing orgasm sweeping through me that made my toes curl and my ears ring.

Holden stayed with me all the way through, not stilling until I was completely spent and then pressing a kiss to each of my eyelids when it was over. Our pants hadn’t even come off, but he was breathing hard too, smiling as he tucked me against his side.

“Not too much?” he asked quietly as my lids drifted shut. “Please tell me I didn’t just fuck everything up.”

“Everything is perfect,” I whispered, so sated, happy, and warm that I could barely get the words out before I felt sleep starting to tug at the edges of my consciousness. “It wasn’t too much, Holden. Nothing with you will ever be too much.”

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CHAPTER 31

HOLDEN

Alicia lay tight against my side in the aftermath, both of us still trying to catch our breath. Her head rested on my shoulder, her fingers splayed out across my chest.

She looked exhausted, her eyelids heavy and her body sagging against mine every so often before she'd start and blink her eyes open again. When feeling finally returned to my knees, I pressed a kiss against her temple and carefully slid my arms under her knees and her back.

"Let's get you to bed," I murmured, standing up before lifting her against me.

She let out a soft, sleepy murmur, her head dropping against my collarbone as I carried her out of the living room and up the dark staircase. "I can do it. I can walk."

"Yeah, but you don't have to," I whispered against the top of her head, gently lowering her onto the mattress when we reached her bedroom.

After pulling the covers up to her shoulders, I started straightening up to leave her in peace, but before I could even take a single step back, she reached out from under the blankets, her warm fingers catching my wrist.

"Stay," she whispered. "Please? Stay with me tonight."

In the darkness of her room, I thought for a second I'd imagined the request, but then she tugged gently on my arm and my defenses broke wide open. I rarely did this. In the past, sex had been nothing but a physical release for me. No intimacy required, but since she was my wife, I climbed into bed with her after hesitating for just a second.

As I slid an arm around her side, she burrowed into me, her back sealed against my chest only moments later. She let out a soft, sleepy sigh, kissed my forearm before twining her fingers around mine. Then her body relaxed again and almost instantly her breathing evened out.

Meanwhile, my eyes were wide open and my muscles were rigid. I didn't want to leave her, so I didn't even consider trying to wriggle out of bed now that she was asleep, but shit. I'd only slept beside a handful of women in my life and never intentionally.

It had been more a matter of passing out before I'd managed to convince myself to leave the bed. This, however, was different. She'd asked me to stay and here I was, holding her in my arms as she slept.

I'd had all these grand ideas about going back downstairs to pick up our shirts and plug in our laptops. Hell, I'd even thought I might still get some work done on that paper, but my brain was numb and my body was struggling to catch up to what had just happened to it.

There was sex, there was fucking, and then there was whatever the hell that had been. Maybe it was just because I knew Alicia, and I was actually starting to care about her, but that experience had been something else entirely. It had blown my mind and sucked my body dry. And I was still half-dressed.

I was so out of it that I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep until I woke up the next morning to the pale sunshine streaming in through the windows. Alicia was still fast asleep beside me, one of her arms thrown over my chest and her hair a beautiful mess across the pillow.

Strangely, I *still* didn't feel the urge to get away from her, so I woke up slowly and stayed exactly where I was for a long time, finally only extricating myself when my stomach grumbled. After I managed to get out of bed without waking her, I pressed a kiss to her hair, then padded quietly to the study to get cleaned up and throw some fresh clothes on.

As I walked in, however, my gaze snagged on the framed diplomas against the walls, the fishing caps, and the faded photographs left behind by Alicia's father. Seeing them now, after everything she'd confessed about growing up with her aunt and uncle, put an entirely different spin on these relics of the past.

Before, I'd wondered why she'd kept them up, but I got it now. Her dad had been a high school history teacher, a genuinely good man who'd loved his family deeply. The evidence was carved into the support beams of the

garage and just about everywhere I looked, from the happy family photographs to the souvenirs of trips they'd taken together.

I grabbed a quick shower and I was pulling on a pair of jeans when more of those familiar, uncomfortable questions rolled through my mind. *Did Dad ever feel that way about us? Was there even one day when he looked at his kids and felt anything other than a desire to secure a legacy?*

It should've been easy to answer, but the confusing thing about it was that I actually had more good memories of my father than bad ones. It always messed with my head when I thought about it, but I remembered him teaching me how to tie a necktie before my first school dance. I remembered him sitting in the front row for football games and track meets, his face beaming with a quiet, authoritative sort of pride.

In my memories, he hadn't always been a monster. He'd just been a man consumed by the insatiable, toxic need to grow an empire until the law had finally intervened. I rubbed a hand over my face and shoved the thoughts of him out of my head as fast as I could.

Nothing good would come from obsessing about this shit, and since I didn't have my first lecture until this afternoon, I had to find something else to channel this restless energy into. After shoving a shirt over my head and inhaling a couple of bananas in the kitchen, I pulled on a jacket and some shoes, then headed out to the front yard.

Yesterday, when we'd gotten home, I'd noticed that the grass was covered in a thick blanket of crisp, dead leaves, and it was even worse this morning. Thankfully, there was a rusty old rake resting against the wall on the porch, so I grabbed that before I jogged down the steps and started dragging it through the lawn.

"You're missing a spot near the hydrangeas, young man."

Assuming the voice was talking to me, I looked up toward the street to see the neighbor directly across from us walking toward me with a plastic recycling bin in his hands. *That must be the notorious Mr. Henderson himself.*

He wore a faded navy cardigan with a pair of sensible orthopedic sneakers, his hair shot through with silver but his eyes still intelligent and alert. When he reached our side of the street, he set his recycling bin down on the curb and crossed his arms, looking me up and down in a way that made it feel like he was taking my measure.

"So, you're the new husband I've been hearing about."

“Holden,” I said, stepping forward and extending a hand toward him. “I’ve been hearing a lot about you, too. Apparently, you’re our greatest competition for the Halloween contest next weekend.”

He shook with me, barking out a short laugh as he glanced up at the boxes of decorations littering our porch. “I was wondering what all that was about, but I should warn you that you’re fighting an uphill battle, son. I’ve been planning my display for months.”

“I don’t need months.” I pumped my eyebrows at him before letting go of his hand. “We’ll be ready. This year, it’s our turn to get that gift card.”

“We’ll see about that.” He chuckled. “I might be old, but I won’t relinquish the title that easily.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

As he reached for his recycling bin again, he paused and looked up at the brownstone behind me, his expression softening before he flicked his gaze back to mine. “You know, Alicia’s father used to go all out for the block party too. Before the accident, Arthur would spend three full weekends rigging up custom pulleys just to make a ghost fly between our chimneys. It’ll be good to see some life back on that porch.”

With that, he gave me a friendly wave goodbye, then picked up his recycling bin and walked away. While it had just become perfectly clear that Mr. Henderson and I would be frenemies during every major holiday, the realization didn’t annoy me as much as it might’ve in the past. It felt more like a *welcome to the neighborhood* sort of thing.

From now on, I was picking up where Alicia’s dad had left off, and while I hadn’t planned on losing anyway, taking over Arthur’s porch was a responsibility I would take seriously. It felt like the least I could do, to carry on with the tradition he’d evidently begun. The knowledge also motivated me to clean up the lawn properly, and in no time at all, I’d raked the leaves into neat piles. Then I stuffed them into bags before heading back inside.

As soon as I opened the front door, I caught the bitter, earthy scent of fresh coffee grounds and I smiled, walking directly to the kitchen. Like I’d thought, Alicia was in there, dressed in a pale pink, pleated skirt with a white cardigan and her golden hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail.

She looked so innocent and sweet that at least a dozen dirty ideas hit my mind at once, but instead of lifting her onto the counter or pressing her back against the pantry door, I waited for her to look up and kept a respectful few feet of distance between us.

“Good morning,” I said as soon as her gaze met mine, trying not to groan out loud at the pretty pink flush that spread across her cheeks when she saw me. “I wasn’t sure what time you had to be at work, so I didn’t want to wake you too early.”

“Morning,” she murmured, her voice soft but warm. “Thanks for letting me sleep, but next time, just nudge me. I could’ve helped you in the yard.”

“Nah.” I noticed the way her hand moved up on the strap of her purse and realized she was probably about to leave. “Hey, I don’t have class for another couple hours. How about I drive you to work?”

I half expected her to argue, but instead, she shot me a grateful smile and nodded. “Thank you. That’d be amazing.”

Waving for her to precede me to the door, I did my best not to check out her ass in that skirt, but my gaze drifted down anyway. Now that I’d had a taste of my wife, keeping my hands to myself was going to be a challenge.

That’s for sure.

“What time will you be done?” I asked, clearing my throat when my voice came out a little husky. “I should be finished with class before you end your shift, but it might run over. We—”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” she said quickly. “Tasha wants to talk, so we’re going to catch an early movie and have dinner after that. We might get back pretty late.”

My eyes narrowed, but when she glanced at me as she reached the door, I just smiled and pulled it open for her. *Shit, she isn’t a toy, Holden. You’re going to have to learn how to play nice with her friends.*

Still, I didn’t really want to share her time right now. We were newlyweds, for God’s sake. Tasha already lived with us, but to be fair, she had given us a decent amount of time alone together recently.

I shook my head at myself, still fighting against this strange possessiveness I’d never had before by the time I got back home *after* dropping her off. It was ridiculous, but while I got ready and gathered my stuff, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was actually jealous.

Of her friend. For getting to go out with her when I hadn’t done it yet myself.

Standing in the kitchen with my car keys clutched in my hand, I suddenly got this weird urge to talk to my father, but rather than following through on it, I did what I always did when that urge hit. I scrolled down my contacts to Alex’s name and called him instead.

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CHAPTER 32

ALICIA

"I'm never letting you pick the movie again," I said as I pulled open the restaurant door. "I won't be sleeping for at least a week after that. I'll be too busy checking the crawl spaces to make sure we don't have any demons living in them."

"It wasn't *that* bad." Tasha laughed, following me into the little Italian place on the corner and heading directly for our preferred booth overlooking the street. "Besides, you have a big, strong husband now to protect you. I'm sure Holden will be more than happy to make sure the crawl spaces are demon-free. As long as he gets to kiss you after."

I picked up my menu and hid behind it, not ready to tell her yet that we'd leveled up from kissing. "I can't believe I let you talk in me into going to see that. We both know how much I suck at scary movies."

"It was surprisingly easy to talk you into it this time," she said, picking up her own menu but barely glancing at it before setting it down again. "In fact, it was almost like your head wasn't in the game. So pray tell, dear friend. What was keeping that beautiful mind so busy that I managed to coax you into a theater showing a horror film with barely a squeak of protest?"

"There was a squeak. There were many squeaks, actually. You just couldn't hear them over the sound of your own enthusiasm."

She laughed. "That might've been part of it, but your head has been in the clouds all night. Could it be that our resident Grumpy Bear has been growing on you?"

Thankfully, the waitress arrived at our table, saving me from having to give an immediate answer. We ordered sodas and way too much food, but even after she grinned and left again, I still didn't really know what to say.

"Well?" Tasha prompted. "It is Holden. Isn't it? You're falling for your husband."

My face burst into flame, but I shrugged instead of even trying to deny it. "Let's just say that he's making me happy and leave it at that."

She gave me a triumphant grin, but the expression on her face softened as she reached across the table and took my hand. "Good. I'm glad. You deserve to be happy, Alicia. Seriously. I'm so, so happy for you."

I glanced at her fingers wrapped warmly around my own. "Is that why you're holding on to me?"

"No, I'm doing that because I'm also moving out."

"What?" I yanked my palm out from underneath hers and widened my eyes. "Why? If it's because of Holden, I'll tell him to stop dropping hints and—"

"No, Alicia. It's not that. Well, I mean, it is, but he's right," she said gently. "You just got married a few weeks ago. Both of you are still trying to get your heads wrapped around it and to get to know each other. I doubt either of you really wants a roommate around."

"That's no reason for you to move out."

"Yes, it is." She paused when the waitress came to drop off our drinks, then smiled once we were alone again. "I know your relationship has had everything but a normal progression until now, but you guys should get to be normal newlyweds. When you're ready for that, I mean. You should have the space to get to know each other on your own time and to spend lazy weekends on the couch, just the two of you. Hell, you should get to drink too much wine and dance naked on the kitchen counters if that's what you want."

I scoffed. "That's not happening."

"It should." She sighed as she picked up her drink. "In the meantime, my mom lives ten minutes away and I'm going to live with her until graduation."

"I don't…" I trailed off, my chest constricting as I stared back at her. "Are you sure? At least wait until you've graduated. There's no rush."

"Yes, there is," she said quietly. "I got an internship in Atlanta, and if I don't embarrass myself during the time I'm at the company, I'll probably be

moving there anyway."

"You got an internship in Atlanta," I said slowly. "Really?"

"Really?"

Despite the ache in my chest, I grinned, genuine excitement welling up deep down inside. "Oh my God, you got *the* internship in Atlanta and you didn't tell me?"

"Yes."

I reached across the table and grabbed her hand this time. "I'm so proud of you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was waiting for the right time."

"There is no right time to tell someone you're abandoning them, but if you're going to be abandoning me for anything, it should be this. God, I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," she said quietly, twisting her fingers around mine and giving them a gentle squeeze. "I'm not abandoning you, though. You have a hot, virile, young husband who'll make you forget I was ever even there."

I rolled my eyes at her, blinking back the tears I felt welling in them. "That's not possible. It doesn't matter how hot he is. He'll never make me forget about you."

She let out a soft, emotional laugh. "At least you're admitting that he's hot. That's a step in the right direction."

"But seriously," I said, tightening my grip on her hand. "You have to call me every night."

"Every night," she promised. "Once I get to Atlanta, which isn't happening today, by the way. I just wanted to tell you so you'd have some notice."

"Thank you," I murmured, withdrawing my hand and pretending my heart wasn't breaking a little bit. "I appreciate that, but I wish you'd reconsider staying with us until you have to leave."

"Three is a crowd, babe," she said lightly. "That house deserves another happy couple in it and you and Holden could be that couple."

"Do you really think so?"

She smiled. "I'm as surprised as anyone to be saying this, but he's good for you, Alicia. You guys can make it work. I know you can and I'm pretty sure you're both starting to realize it too."

As much as I wanted to tell her that she was crazy, she wasn't. I genuinely was happy for her, but underneath that happiness was the

heaviness of knowing that this truly was the end of an era. She and I had been roommates a long time and the fact that she was moving out was a stark reminder that I'd signed a contract promising I genuinely would try to make this marriage work.

Part of that was living with Holden as husband and wife, and while we were already doing that, Tasha moving out solidified it for me. Life was moving forward, with her moving to Atlanta for an internship she'd been lusting after for years while I stayed here, trying to build a life with a man I hadn't even known six months ago.

"Yeah," I said after a beat. "I think we might be able to make it work, too."

She stuck a straw into her glass and took a long sip of her soda, her eyes never leaving mine. "If I'm being honest, I didn't think he'd be a good husband. He was so rude and closed-off when I first met him and I sort of assumed he was one of those bad-boy, player types, but it looks like I was wrong."

"No, you weren't. I think he *was* one of those bad-boy, player types," I said slowly. "Until he found out he was getting married, anyway. There's a lot we haven't talked about, but he's already assured me he'd never cheat."

"So no taking his mistress to a casino while we go on his yacht?"

I shook my head. "Sadly, no."

She snorted. "Sadly? I don't think you're sad about it at all."

"I'm not," I admitted. "I don't know. Holden just makes me feel safe, protected, and weirdly, even cared about. I know he doesn't look like the kind of guy who would make someone feel safe, but he does that for me. You should've seen the way he stood up to Nancy. I think he's really trying, even if he isn't exactly sweet or kind about it."

Tasha smirked. "Actually, I think someone who looks like that is exactly the kind of guy who's going to make a girl feel safe. Provided she's married to him, of course. To everyone else, he might be a menace, but he's protective as hell when it comes to you. It's so damn hot."

I chuckled. "I think I might really like him."

"I know you do," she said pointedly, grinning before moving our sodas to the side to make space on the table for all the food we'd ordered. The waitress smiled her thanks before sliding our pizzas, salad, and garlic bread onto the table. Then she left and Tasha smirked again. "That's why I'm

leaving you in his extremely capable hands. Big, strong hands I'm sure will be all over you before the door has even swung shut behind me."

I flushed, busying myself with tearing a piece off one of the pizzas and dishing up some salad in the hopes she wouldn't see my cheeks burning, but unfortunately, she squealed. "Oh my God. He's already had his hands all over you, hasn't he? I knew it!"

As I looked up, I shook my head, then shrugged, then sighed. "A little bit, but not really, and I'm not giving you any more details than that."

She laughed, proceeding to try every angle she could to get me to break, but I stood strong until she finally just pouted. "Fine. You'll tell me when you're ready. I guess it's different when the guy in question is your husband, huh?"

I paused for a beat, but then I realized she was right. "Yeah, it kind of is. We haven't talked about what we're comfortable having each other discuss with friends or family. I guess I just don't want him to feel like I've betrayed him."

She groaned. "Oh hell. You really are too cute when you're in love. Seriously. It's sickening, but fine. Let's talk about me."

I nodded enthusiastically, listening to every detail about the internship in Atlanta and the work she'd be doing. We talked about how happy her mom was to be welcoming her back into the house for a while and about their upcoming midterms.

When we eventually left the restaurant, we decided to walk home, still talking as we wandered around the neighborhood and checked out our competition for the Halloween contest. Pumpkins were starting to appear on porches and fake cobwebs were stretched across hedges.

Little by little, people were getting ready for the big day and I couldn't get enough. I'd always loved this neighborhood, but even more so at this time of year. These were all just ordinary people putting in a lot of extra effort to make some magic for the kids.

When we reached the corner, a gust of wind sent a newspaper blowing across the pavement. Tasha caught it with her shoe and bent over to pick it up. "Assholes. Is it really that much effort to just toss it in the trash?"

As she lifted it, I saw my new last name on the front page and felt the blood drain out of my cheeks. "Tasha, wait. Is that…"

"What?" she asked, glancing at me over her shoulder on the way to the trash. As soon as she saw my face, she stopped walking. "What is it?"

“Is that *Jane*?” I asked, squinting at the tiny shard of the picture accompanying the name. “Can you open that up?”

Her gaze dropped to the paper and she unfolded it, revealing the rest of the photograph as well as the full headline. Across the entire front page was a picture of Jane and Alex with an older man wearing an orange, prison jumpsuit. His sandy blond hair was streaked with gray, his face hard but eerily familiar.

Holden. That’s what Holden will look like twenty years from now, isn’t it?

Tasha came over to stand next to me without having to be asked, both of us scanning the article before the blood drained from her face, too. Finally, when we were finished reading, she looked over at me, her voice hushed with shock.

“Did you know?” she asked.

I shook my head slowly from one side to the other, suddenly feeling like I couldn’t breathe. “No, I didn’t. I feel like I should’ve, but I didn’t know about any of this.”

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CHAPTER 33

HOLDEN

With Alicia out for the night, I should've gone home and waited for her to get back. Or maybe I should've gone to see my mother, but instead, Alex dragged me to an expensive, old-school type of gentlemen's bar with leather booths and brass fixtures.

"This place is ridiculous," I said, shaking my head as I tossed back another generous gulp of my drink. "Next time, I'm taking you out for a whiskey at a normal place."

"You're drinking a whiskey right now."

"Yeah, but this whiskey would charge me fifty bucks a sip if it could."

Alex chuckled. "You still wouldn't be paying."

"It still wouldn't have mattered. It should be illegal to pay this much for alcohol."

"Hey, at least it's good alcohol." He laughed, leaning back against the rich maroon leather with a crystal tumbler in his hand. Right now, he looked every inch a Westwood and Sons CEO, yet there was something easygoing about him tonight.

Alex had always somehow known when to push and when not to, but he let me shoot the breeze about his taste in bars and restaurants for another few minutes, acting like he'd brought me here for nothing more than a catch-up session.

Both of us knew that wasn't true, though. He'd brought me here because he was worried after I'd called earlier. It had been a while since I last had, and clearly, he hadn't forgotten what that meant.

Eventually, once we were on our second round and he'd loosened his tie, he circled back around to what we'd talked about earlier, but his tone didn't change, still light and easy. Like this didn't really matter any more than whether or not bars required actual window treatments.

"So, Court's been on your mind, huh?"

I took a drink. "Unfortunately."

"Have you seen the news today?"

"It was pretty hard to miss, don't you think? His face was plastered on every third corner."

It would be getting worse, too. Today, some publications had led with other stories. One had only photographed the prison gates and speculated about the parole system in general. Another had been more concerned about what it called the *recent spate of early releases.*

Soon, however, it would be constant. As soon as he set foot outside those gates, it would be everywhere, all the time.

"People are already talking, but that was to be expected, Holden. News of his release was never going to be kept under wraps until *after* he got out." He turned his glass between his fingers, glancing down at it for a moment with a thoughtful expression crossing his features. "You need to know that Court won't be coming back into the family like nothing happened, though. That's not how this is going to go."

When he lifted his gaze back to mine and I realized he was completely serious, some of the tension that had been wrapped around my chest eased. "What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what I said. He's your father and I can't tell you how to feel about him, but I can guarantee that the family as we've built it, all of us, will still be here when he gets out. Nothing is going to change that."

"Really?" I arched an eyebrow. "How do you know? You've never been around us when my father is in circulation. Trust me, he won't be easy to ignore."

"No, but that won't matter. We've all done plenty of stuff that's been hard and we're still sticking together. Things have changed while Court's been inside and he's either going to have to fit in or fuck off."

Well, I definitely wasn't expecting that. "I don't want him back. I don't want to see him, or talk to him, or have him involved in my life or my marriage."

Alex's eyes widened just slightly when I said the M-word, but he nodded anyway. "If that's how you feel, then that's how you feel. Again, I can't change it, and frankly, I'm not even going to try. Court doesn't deserve to have me advocating for him, and as it happens, I think I would've felt the exact same way you do."

"What about Jane?" I asked. "Colin told me she's considering letting Dad have some involvement in the company."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean she's considering giving him any sort of control," he said, his voice completely earnest. "I've talked to her, and as always, there are two sides to every story."

"As long as you're not about to give me some bullshit, family-counselor speech, I might hear you out, but I'm leaving if you're trying to lead me toward seeing Dad's side of it."

"I'm not," he said firmly. "I'm trying to tell you how Jane is feeling and why she's considering it at all."

"She shouldn't be."

"I'm inclined to agree, but ironically, she's considering his request to consult for the company in the hopes that it'll keep him busy enough to keep his distance on a personal level."

I blinked a couple times. "I'm sorry, what?"

"This has been a lot for her, Holden," he said patiently, but there was nothing patronizing or condescending about his tone. He was merely laying it out for me. "Ever since Court got arrested, she's the one who's been holding everything together. All of it has been on her shoulders from day one, taking care of the family. Trying to save the company. Rebuilding your reputation."

Alex took a long swig of his drink and sighed. "Now that he's getting out, she's also been responsible for making the arrangements. Dealing with the lawyers. Everything. Again."

"Okay," I said slowly. "So?"

"So the fact that he's coming back has reopened a lot of old wounds for her," he said bluntly. "It's also shone a spotlight on some of her insecurities."

"Jane doesn't have insecurities."

Alex snorted, his eyebrows inching up. "Call her. Right now. Ask her point blank, Holden. She'll tell you herself. She's also still pissed off at the man. She's furious with him, actually. She definitely doesn't want him to

have any power in the business *she* rebuilt after he demolished it, and she wants to protect all of you."

"So why bring him back?" I asked after a few long beats. "Why not tell him to fuck himself instead of finding him some fancy penthouse to serve out the rest of his time?"

"That's part of protecting you," he said. "If the press finds out he's been left out in the cold, it'll turn the spotlight on the whole family. This way, most of that light only shines on Court and Thayer Steelworks."

I groaned. "I hate that you're making it make sense."

He chuckled. "Trust me, so do I, but ultimately, if you set all those things aside, she also still loves him. He's her father and she had a lot more time with him before all of this than any of you guys. This has been rough for her. I know it's been rough for all of you, but think about all the responsibility she's shouldered. What she's done for the company and for all of you."

My lids slid shut and I drained at least a quarter of my drink. *Shit, I need to check in on my sister.*

Jane had dragged me back to school when I'd been perfectly happy destroying my plans for the future in an office. She was *always* the person who kept calling when I wouldn't answer. She'd fed me when I'd lived on ramen and protein powder, and for a long time, she'd been the only reason any of us had gotten anywhere, including graduating from high school.

She'd fought for us when we hadn't wanted to fight for ourselves. "Fuck, I'll call her."

Alex smiled, seeming genuinely relieved. "Thank you. She'd like that, but also, she needs to hear from you. I swear, she's not trying to make anyone forgive him and she's not working with some kind of ulterior motive with this whole consultancy thing. She just wants his mind occupied."

"So he'll leave her the hell alone," I finished for him this time. "Yeah, I guess I see that now. I just didn't want to before."

"No, but that's okay too." His gaze drifted to my empty glass. "Do you want another one?"

"At these prices?" I snorted and shook my head, but I also didn't stand up right away. "No, thanks. I just need a minute. I don't want to go home with all of this."

“Yeah. That makes sense.” He paused for a beat, a slow smile spreading on his lips as he looked back at me. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?”

“Marriage. Alicia. The fact that you actually heard me out tonight when I thought you were going to clock me for bringing Court up at all.”

I let out a dry, choked laugh. “You really thought I was going to do that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Birth control? We can talk about that too. Sex? I mean, you’re married now and there’s the whole *heir* thing to consider, but—”

I stood up, scoffing down another laugh as I shook my head at him. “I’m all good. Thanks, though.”

He smiled up at me. “For what? You didn’t even want any tips about—”

“For not pushing me to accept him back into our lives,” I said, cutting off his teasing remark because I needed to get this off my chest. “Seriously, thank you, and thanks for spelling it out to me from Jane’s side too. I don’t think I would’ve gotten there on my own.”

He inclined his chin. “No problem, man, but hey, if you change your mind and you decide you want to talk about any of that other stuff, I’ll still be here.”

“Do you really think I want to talk to you about sex?” I groaned. “You sleep next to my sister, Alex. I choose to believe your kids were conceived immaculately, and besides, she already had the birds and the bees talk with me. About ten years before I even met you.”

He laughed. “Fair enough, but I am serious about being here if you want to talk about anything else.”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that.”

Oddly, I meant it, too. When I walked out of the stupidly expensive bar, I even felt like I could really trust him again. As always, Alex had shown up. He’d been here to reassure me about my father’s role in my life from here on out. He’d made me see that my sister wasn’t trying to force some kind of family reunion and reminded me that my brothers, Jane, and I needed to have each other’s backs right now.

He’d not only sorted it out so that I could actually have my trust fund, even if it had come with new strings attached, but he’d also somehow found me a wife I actually liked. A wife I really hoped would be home by the time I got there because I genuinely couldn’t wait to see her.

When I walked in, the living areas were dark, but as I hung up my coat, I saw the faint outline of her sitting on the couch, awake, but with her legs curled under a blanket.

“You’re home,” she said quietly, pushing the blanket off her legs and standing, but not to run over and throw her arms around me. In fact, she crossed them instead, and though I couldn’t make out her expression in the dark, there had been something tight in her voice.

Something that made my hackles rise immediately. “You waited up for me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to ask you something.”

My stomach flipped over. “Okay. Shoot. What is it?”

“I read an article in the paper tonight,” she said, and my blood turned to ice. “It was about your father, Holden.”

“I told you he was in prison, didn’t I?”

“Sure, but you neglected to mention what he was there for, how long he’d been there, and more importantly, that he was getting out soon.”

I exhaled a harsh breath and shoved a hand into my hair. “So? There still isn’t an exact date for his release as far as I’m aware, and as for the rest of it, do you honestly expect me to believe you didn’t know?”

“Yes, because I didn’t.”

I scoffed. “Bullshit. You grew up in this city. Everyone around here has heard of Court Thayer.”

“Maybe I’ve heard the name, but I didn’t put two and two together. Honestly, I’m not even really sure that he, or anything he did, was ever on my radar. In case you’ve forgotten, I had other things to worry about around that time. Things that deeply affected my own life.”

“So *that’s* the reason you agreed to marry me,” I said, the truth suddenly staring me right in the face. It felt like I’d stepped on one of those lethal, electric eels as the shock ricocheted around my insides. “You heard the name *Thayer*, but you didn’t know how the mighty had fallen, did you? You just thought I was rich, so you married me without knowing that we lost everything.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you seriously doing this?”

“I thought you were just being practical. Alex probably offered you a bunch of money. I knew that too. I just thought maybe you didn’t care who

you married as long as the money was right."

She stepped closer. "Is that what you thought of me?"

"I didn't know you."

"Clearly, you still don't."

She sounded hurt when she said it, but it sliced right through to the core of my being when she took a big step back, her shoulders caving in a little like she was trying to make herself smaller. That just pissed me off even more. If she'd been angry with me, I would have taken it. Yelling, I knew what to do with, but hurt?

Why the fuck is she hurt? I haven't done anything to her.

"I didn't trust you when we got married because when my father got arrested, I was young enough to really feel the loss of my dad, but old enough to see the ugliness that came with it. That's what I grew up around."

"Holden—"

"No, Alicia. I never wanted any of it. Marriage. Kids. The whole happily-ever-after bullshit. I grew up watching my father destroy his family. The man we were all supposed to be able to trust. That guy who was supposed to love us unconditionally? He was a philanderer *and* a fucking criminal, and I've spent my entire life being told how much like him I am."

Bitter laughter bubbled out of me as I shook my head. "See, I'm smart too. Just like him, and I'm ambitious, and I'm difficult, and if you tell me no, I'll find another way. In business, at least. Oh, and I look exactly like him, which is great, so I know what I am. I don't need you to tell me, too, but if you wanted to know why I didn't tell you he was getting out, that's the reason. I didn't trust you."

"I'm not telling you anything about who or what you are," she said quietly, her chin finally coming up again. "I'm also not going to let you shut down on me, Holden. I see where this is going. I know what you're doing."

I snorted. "Newsflash, honey. I might not know you, but you don't know me either."

Instead of shying away from me again, she released her arms, dropping them back to her sides, her shoulders even squaring as she slowly closed the distance between us while she spoke. "You think that because you're afraid of becoming your father, that means you already are him."

"That's not what I said."

She shrugged. "You didn't have to say it. It's still true."

"It also doesn't mean you're right."

“Oh, but I am. I know I am.” She caught my jaw and turned my face back toward her when I tried turning away. “Maybe you’re worried about becoming him, but you don’t have to be. From what I read tonight, your father was a selfish prick who got himself in trouble because he got greedy, but you’ve done more for me in the last few weeks than anyone else has in years.”

“So?”

“So you’ve done so many things for me you probably don’t even realize I noticed, but I did. Even if you didn’t ask for recognition. You’re the furthest thing from greedy I’ve ever seen and you’re definitely not selfish.”

As she said it, she wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed herself up against me, her lips moving to the crook of my neck. “You can’t hide from me, Holden. I won’t let you.”

She pressed a soft, gentle kiss to my skin, working her way up my throat to my mouth. For a second, I completely forgot why we’d gotten into it in the first place, my eyes sliding shut and my brain going blank.

“Alicia…” I trailed off, swallowing hard as I wrapped my fingers around her hips. “Don’t do this.”

She pushed her fingers into my hair, her eyes intent on mine. “I see you for who you really are, Holden Thayer. Even if you don’t see it yet yourself, and I don’t want you to go, or to hide, or to crawl back into yourself. I want you to stay. Right *here*. With me.”

That old instinct reared up to pull away, to leave, or to make some snide remark that would hurt her enough to make her let go of me, but then she kissed me again and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her closer instead.

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CHAPTER 34

ALICIA

Tasha had headed to her mother's house to give Holden and me some privacy to talk once he got back, but since that hadn't happened yet, I'd had a bit of time to think. As the initial shock of learning what I had wore off, I'd slowly realized that this was the piece of the puzzle I'd been missing.

It had never quite made sense to me why Holden was so jaded and guarded when he was supposed to have grown up like a prince. Part of me had thought maybe he'd just felt used by people so often that he'd shut down. I'd thought perhaps his upbringing had been so gilded and uptight that he'd lost faith in the humanity of humans.

While that had never quite explained the extent of it, I'd figured that eventually, one day, he might tell me the rest, but in the meantime, I'd thought it was more important to get to know him for who he was inside.

As I kissed him now, however, *feeling* the uncertainty, the hesitation, and the genuine fear of this man who was always so confident, my heart ached for him. In a way, Holden and I had this one specific fear in common—we were afraid to let people in because we didn't know if we'd be able to survive losing them.

Maybe we'd developed that fear for very different reasons, but the crux of it was the same. Loving someone meant risking heartbreak if you lost them.

In my parents' case, however, they hadn't chosen to leave. The people in Holden's life had.

When I felt him start to withdraw again, I nipped at his lower lip and tightened my grip on his hair. “Stay with me, Holden. I’m not leaving you. I’m never leaving you. You can’t scare me away.”

He slowed the kiss for a beat, then crashed back into me, groaning when I kissed him back just as hard. “Where’s Tasha?”

“Out.”

“Thank fuck.”

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted me clean off my feet and carried me to the stairs. When I realized we were going all the way up, I squealed and wrapped my arms more securely around him, hooking my ankles together behind his hips.

He grunted whenever my mouth left his, immediately claiming my lips again as soon as he could. He was louder tonight too, moaning into our kisses instead of keeping it all bottled up. A tingle ran down my spine at the thought that maybe he was letting them escape because he couldn’t hold back. Or even better, maybe he didn’t *want* to.

There was this urgency radiating from him as he laid me down on the bed and I quickly realized this was going to be different from last night. Last night, he’d only made a move to take my clothes off after I’d started tearing at his.

Now, the second he laid me down, he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my pajama pants, immediately starting to slide them off. Those eyes flicked up to mine in the dark, almost like he was silently asking permission. Instead of responding verbally, I kicked off my puffin slippers and dutifully lifted my ass for the fabric to pass behind it.

Holden pulled my panties off with the pants, then dropped to his knees and wrapped his fingers around my thighs, tugging me closer to the edge of the mattress. It came as such a surprise that I gasped.

No one had ever manhandled me like this, not even a little bit, but I loved it. Probably because I knew he’d never hurt me even if he was being a bit rougher tonight.

As he pushed my thighs further apart, he leaned forward and moonlight washed across his sharp, gorgeous features, illuminating his heavy eyelids and slightly slack jaw. Need raced through me like a lightning strike at the sight, my teeth sinking into my lower lip.

Holden’s eyes held mine, not lowering despite the fact that I was naked from the waist down. “This is still your show, Alicia. Say yes.”

“Yes,” I murmured, so shocked by the raw desperation in his voice that I could barely even form that single word. Sitting up slightly, I brushed my fingers through his hair, then reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it off. “It’s always going to be yes when you’re the one asking.”

Maybe the moonlight was playing tricks on my eyes, but it looked like he was suddenly staring up at me like he couldn’t quite believe I was real. I stroked my fingers through his hair again and he groaned, leaning fully into my touch. “Holden?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“No, but I will be.” He kept looking into my eyes until I finally saw a hint of that cocky asshole spark to life in his gaze, a slow smirk spreading across his lips. “Stop me anytime.”

Without another word, his eyes finally dropped away from mine, his hands pushing my legs further apart until he had a completely unobstructed view of my undoubtedly slick… *lady bits? Pussy? God, it’s been so long, I don’t even know what to call it anymore.*

Either way, he seemed to like what he saw, groaning as he brought his lips to the inside of my thigh. Slowly kissing his way up, he murmured against my skin. “I need you to keep talking to me, okay? If I do anything you don’t—”

“Will you please just relax?” I asked breathlessly, seeing the tension in his shoulders when I finally looked away from his face. “If I don’t like something, I’ll tell you, but so far, the only thing I don’t like is that you still don’t trust you’re not going to scare me away.”

“I’m trying, Alicia.” He ran a hand along the thigh he wasn’t kissing and I moaned when he stopped just before he reached my entrance. “Before I can trust that, I have to be able to trust that you’ll keep talking to me.”

“Fine.” I huffed out a breath, already embarrassed about what I was going to ask, but lying back on the bed and asking anyway. “Touch me, Holden. I want to feel all of you everywhere and I don’t want you holding back or being afraid of showing me exactly what you like.”

A noise caught somewhere between a growl and a groan escaped him. Then his mouth was on me, hot, wet, and wonderful. It’d been so many years since I’d felt anything like it that my hips went flying off the bed, but Holden grabbed one hip in a big hand and anchored me to the mattress, leaving the other free to rock and writhe like it was nobody’s business.

“Oh, God,” I moaned, my eyes squeezing shut as my back arched and his free hand shot up the length of my torso to tweak my nipple between his fingers. “Holden!”

He groaned and swirled his tongue around my clit, catapulting me into a whole new world of pleasure. I didn’t want to know how he’d gotten so skilled at this particular activity, but the guy had a mouth made of pure magic.

On a complete sensory overload, I bucked underneath him, my fingers tight in his hair and my entire being tensing in preparation for the onslaught of my orgasm. For the briefest of seconds, I wasn’t sure how to let go.

Every nerve ending I had was thrumming with the need for release. My toes curled as he licked me like a popsicle. When he swirled his tongue around my clit again and didn’t stop this time, I started trembling, wisps of pleasure starting to lick through my veins.

It was never like this when I was by myself. I’d never felt anything this intense actually, and the thought of surrendering was almost too intimidating to face, but then he lifted his hand from my breast and slid a thick, strong finger into me, essentially eradicating any choice I had in the matter.

My body clenched around that finger like it needed his touch to survive and all those knots that had been tightening at the core of my being released all at once. One more flick of his tongue at exactly the right moment, and the next thing I knew, I was coming.

“Holden!” I screamed, not even caring if the neighbors heard me as I rode out the cascading waves of pleasure. They stole the air from my lungs and the thoughts from my brain, leaving me panting and speechless in the aftermath.

I expected him to stop, to look up at me, and maybe crawl up to my side, but instead, he stayed exactly where he was. The speed and pressure of his mouth changed though, and it took me a second to realize he was actually cleaning me up.

With his tongue.

Oh, God. I moaned again, shivering as I lay there in the dark, wondering if this was what it felt like to have one’s mind blown with an orgasm.

“You okay?” he murmured when he finally lifted his head up, wiping his mouth with the back of his forearm as his gaze caught on mine. “We’re still good, right?”

“We’re still good,” I whispered, beckoning him closer. “I think you might’ve just ruined me, though.”

“For other men?”

“That too.”

He smirked as he crawled up, planting his knees between mine and bending over to press a gentle kiss to my lips. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” I asked, still panting and struggling to catch my breath.

“Yes, I did, and I’m okay with it.”

I chuckled, sliding my numb arms around his neck and pulling him closer. “Now, you.”

“Now me what?”

“Your turn,” I whispered, lifting my head and locking my ankles together behind his firm butt.

Unfortunately, that was the moment I remembered he was still dressed. *Well, that won’t do*.

Without wasting any time, I reached for the hem of his t-shirt, liberating him from that first before starting on his pants. Holden didn’t even try to stop me. He also finally cut the noble crap, obviously accepting that I was very much a consenting party to this encounter.

Finally helping undress himself, he kicked his pants and underwear away once I’d pushed them to his knees. Then he sealed his mouth over mine and kissed me so deeply I could taste myself on his lips. In the past, I might’ve found it vaguely repulsive, but with him, a strange sense of satisfaction washed over me.

I’ve marked him. He’s mine. So there.

As soon as all the fabric was out of the way, I locked my ankles around his hips again and pulled him down, frowning when he froze instead of going any further. “What’s wrong?”

“We need a condom,” he ground out, those sharply handsome features tight with restraint as he looked into my eyes. “I’m serious, Alicia. I’m way too close to the edge to fuck around without one right now.”

“We don’t need a condom,” I whispered, tightening my muscles to pull him further down. “What we need is to start working on producing an heir, right?”

He stiffened. “Are you serious?”

“Well, yeah? We both agreed to it and—”

“That doesn’t mean we have to start trying right away.” He pressed another chaste, gentle kiss to my lips, still refusing to move even though I was practically vibrating with need underneath him again. I could feel the heat of his skin radiating into me and it was driving me crazy knowing he was so close. “We have time, Alicia.”

“Are you clean?” I asked instead of arguing the point. “Because I am.”

“So am I,” he murmured, those eyes locking on mine in the silvery moonlight filtering in through the windows. “You really are serious about this?”

I nodded, intently holding his gaze as a myriad of emotions tumbled through my chest. While I knew how unlikely it was that we’d get pregnant tonight, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about that clause in the contract.

Okay, maybe that’s not quite accurate. What I haven’t been able to stop thinking about is the fact that we agreed to make a baby together.

At some point, anyway.

He smirked as he finally started lowering his hips. “Okay, then. Let’s roll the dice.”

As soon as the heat of his skin came into contact with mine, my brain shut down entirely, not a single thought about anything remaining. Holden sucked in a sharp breath, following it up with a long, low groan that sent my body humming all over again.

“Fuck, Alicia. Shit. No. This feels too good.”

“Let it,” I whispered, lifting my head to claim his lips for another kiss as he set my very blood on fire just sinking into me. “This is a first for me, so I probably won’t last either.”

“Yeah. Same.”

Moving slowly and gently, he slid inside, muttering curses as his muscles locked and he even started trembling slightly. Every single part of this was so much better than I’d ever imagined it could be, from the way he was gliding against places that’d never been touched before to how he kissed me like he’d been waiting his whole life to do it.

We moved together in a slow, intoxicating rhythm, and while I couldn’t be sure how he felt, I let myself get lost in him. With Holden’s delicious weight pressing me into the mattress and the feel of him inside me with nothing between us, it was easy to forget ours had been an arranged marriage.

Our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces, every move he made bringing me closer to the edge, and if the noises he was making were anything to go by, the same was true for him. All the while, he never stopped kissing me, finally groaning my name when I felt him swell deep inside me.

In the aftermath of another orgasm that'd nearly made me wake the neighborhood, he pulled the blankets over me without saying a word, then gathered me in his arms and promptly fell asleep, holding me like he'd never let go.

While I knew that didn't necessarily mean it was true, I let the exhaustion of the day drag me under, my heart feeling so ridiculously full that I knew without a doubt that I was in trouble. But I didn't care. Because I suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that my dear husband might just be right there with me.

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CHAPTER 35

HOLDEN

Apparently, I'd made an impression on our neighbor across the street. That was what Alicia thought, anyway. I preferred to believe I'd simply intimidated old Rex Henderson into wanting to play nice with me.

Maybe he'd seen all those boxes on our porch and wanted me to take it easy on him at Halloween. That wasn't going to happen, but I couldn't deny I was quite enjoying this unexpected, early morning coffee with him and another neighbor he'd dragged over to our porch.

Tony was an old man who lived down the street, wore a permanent scowl, and looked like the kind of person who peered through his window at all hours of the day, just waiting for someone to do something he disapproved of. When I'd first stepped out onto the porch, he'd looked me up and down like he'd been trying to decide whether to call the police on me, but then I'd offered them coffee from the fancy machine, and suddenly, we'd bonded.

Rex and Tony sat on either side of me at the rickety little table on our porch. If this was going to become a regular thing, I'd have to buy new outdoor furniture, but it'd probably be worth it if I kept getting the neighborhood gossip like this.

"Are those kids really out here every morning?" I asked, squinting at a group of boys doing all sorts of hops on their bicycles at the corner.

"Every morning." Rex nodded, his mouth set into a grim line. "From six thirty. Sharp."

As I watched, one of the boys tried to do some kind of twist-hop thing over the curb, and unsurprisingly, he wiped out, smacking into the cement with a thud I could hear from all the way over here. I winced, already bracing to go help, but his friends howled with laughter, and the next thing I knew, the kid was back on his feet.

"They're reckless," Tony grumbled, his head shaking as he turned away from them. "I keep waiting for ambulance sirens, but so far, they've gotten lucky."

"It won't last forever," Rex muttered before lifting his mug to his lips and taking another sip of his coffee. "Stupid always catches up to people. *Always*."

"Agreed." I sighed, as tight-lipped and disapproving as the other two grumpy old men. "Where are their parents?"

Tony shrugged. "All I know is they're not here."

"Work, probably," Rex suggested, then lifted the mug in my direction. "This is good. You really made it right here at home?"

I nodded. "The wife and I bought a fancy espresso machine as a wedding gift to ourselves."

Rex gave me an approving look, confirming that this was how one made friends as a married man living on a new block. Hobbies and shared interests didn't play a role. It was all about good coffee and complaints about teenagers.

I fucking love it.

I was even beginning to suspect I'd found my people. Although I hadn't been happy about being pulled away from my naked wife at some absurd hour, I felt right at home with these guys. Deep down, I supposed I already was a grumpy old man.

At that moment, another group of boys came tearing around the corner on their bicycles. Rex tensed when one of them drew ahead of the others. "He's going too fast. Where the hell are his brakes?"

"He's always going too fast." Tony leaned forward, eyes widening as he glanced at the intersection. "There's a car coming!"

I leaped to my feet. "Watch out!"

The boys swerved around a parked SUV, another jumping the curb to avoid colliding with the mercifully slow-moving car pulling away. I pressed a hand to my chest and shook my head. "Idiot."

Rex cupped a hand around his mouth and lifted his ass halfway out of the chair. “Slow down!”

For half a heartbeat, I thought they might actually do it now that they knew they had an audience, but nope. They ignored him completely, simply racing past at breakneck speeds toward the group of boys still waiting at the other corner.

“Get off the sidewalk!” I shouted at one trailing a bit behind the others. He looked younger, his gaze actually flicking toward us as he passed. “You’re going to hit the mailbox!”

The boy glanced ahead and he must’ve realized I was right because he suddenly banked hard, his tires sliding back onto the street, allowing him to narrowly avoid the neighbor’s mailbox. I didn’t even get a thank you for the warning.

The little asshole just faced stubbornly ahead, speeding to catch up to his friends, brothers, or maybe just all-round bad influences. I shook my head and glared after him. “Someone should talk to that one’s parents. He’s still young enough to stand a chance.”

Rex opened his mouth to answer, but a black SUV pulling up at the curb drew his attention. “Who’s that? It’s a darn nice car.”

“It’s Alex,” I said, blowing out a hard breath before I stood up and offered them each a tight, apologetic smile. “My brother-in-law. If he’s here this early, it means I’m going to have to make him coffee now, too. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“A damn nice car,” Tony muttered his agreement with Rex as he stood too. “Let’s take this to my porch.”

Alex parked and climbed out, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses, but I could see the confused pucker of his brow as he looked between the three of us. I raised my espresso toward him. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” he said, but he sounded almost wary. “What are you guys doing?”

“Networking,” I said, jerking my head toward the house. “Come on in. I have coffee you might actually like.”

Rex grunted at Alex. “He’s a good kid. Don’t be too hard on him.”

I smirked. “You hear that? I’m a good kid.”

Alex inclined his chin at Rex when he passed but waited for both him and Tony to shuffle off the porch with their coffee still in their hands before he spoke again. “I see you’ve made some new friends.”

“They’re connections.”

“Eighty-year-old men are your new connections?” Alex frowned. “Why?”

“They have all the information about this block I could ever need, and Rex is in his early seventies, I’ll have you know. I’m not sure about Tony, though. He could be anywhere between sixty and a hundred and fifty. He just has one of those faces, but he’s a cool guy. Grumpy as hell. I love it.”

“Why not, I suppose.” Alex sighed and pulled his sunglasses off those intensely assessing blue eyes, watching the older men go before he turned back to me. “Can we talk inside?”

“Sure. Come on in.” I pushed the door open and motioned for him to precede me, then gave my new friends a wave before following him inside.

Alicia was in the kitchen, already dressed for work and screwing the top onto her new travel mug. She blinked a few times when she saw him, slightly apprehensive. “Alex? Hi. This is a surprise.”

“Hey, Alicia.” He slid his hands into his pockets, not moving any further than the foyer. “I’m sorry to show up unannounced so early. I needed to have a quick chat with Holden and I thought I’d have a better shot if I came here than if I tried calling. I don’t think I was expecting to find him making friends with geriatrics.”

She chuckled. “He’s keeping his enemies close, is all.”

“Enemies?” Alex frowned deeply, glancing back at me. “It didn’t look like they’re your enemies.”

“She means for the Halloween porch decorating contest,” I explained, walking around him to the kitchen to start fixing us each a cup of coffee. “Mr. Henderson, Rex, is the defending champion.”

“A porch decorating contest?” Alex glanced between Alicia and me. “And you two are… participating?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said immediately. “We’re not only participating. We’re winning.”

Alicia cocked a hip against the counter and sighed, her fingers wrapped around her mug. “Holden is taking it super seriously. I keep telling him to cool it, but he’s got his heart set on receiving the prize.”

“It’s not about the prize,” I argued, winking when I caught her gaze. “It’s about the bragging rights.”

“Has it occurred to you that those bragging rights currently belong to your new best friends?”

I shrugged, pressing a few buttons on the touch screen before sliding two fresh mugs into the slots on the machine. “Sure, but now that we’ve bonded over our mutual love of yelling at errant children, our friendship will survive a shift in the title.”

“They’re not errant.” She rolled her eyes. “They’re just kids from the neighborhood who ride their bikes to school together.”

“Did you *see* them this morning? They’re totally errant. Reckless as shit. Last I checked, getting to school didn’t require tricks or almost getting hit by a car. You would have yelled at them too.”

“I don’t yell at children,” she said. “I work with them, remember?”

“Yeah, but you still yell at *these* children when they leave their bikes in the driveway all afternoon.”

“Only when they’re in our way.”

I grinned. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. You do yell at children when it’s warranted, and if you join us for coffee on the porch tomorrow morning, you’ll realize that this is absolutely warranted. Hell, it’s a public safety service.”

“Oh, you’re doing that again tomorrow?”

I shrugged. “Probably. Both Rex and Tony really liked the coffee.”

Alex’s gaze bounced between us, a smug expression on his face as he listened to us banter like we’d been married fifty years already. Before I could call him out on it, Alicia checked the time and pushed away from the counter.

“Crap, I have to go.”

“I’ll drive you,” I said immediately, glancing at Alex. “He can either come with us and talk in the car, or wait here and enjoy the best coffee in the city until I can get back.”

“No. That’s okay,” she said, sliding her bag over her shoulder. “I’ll just take the train.”

“I hate it when you take the train.”

“And yet, I take it almost every day,” she argued lightly. “It’s my routine and I happen to like it.”

Ignoring my continued protests, she strode over, pushed up on her toes, and kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you later, Holden.”

As she spun away from me, she waved at Alex and made a beeline for the door. “Bye! It was good to see you. Send my love to Jane and the kids.”

“Will do,” he called after her. Then she walked out and disappeared, and he finally strode to the kitchen counter, accepting the coffee I pushed toward him. “Are you really letting her take the train?”

“She wants to.” I dropped into the stool across from him. “Trust me, I’ve tried stopping her, but she doesn’t want me driving her every day.”

“So buy her a car,” he suggested with amusement suddenly dancing in his eyes. “You can do that now, or have you forgotten?”

“I, uh, I might’ve forgotten, but I’ll talk to her about it.”

Alex nodded, settling in before the amusement faded and his expression changed into that hard, business-like mask that told me I wasn’t going to like what he was about to say. “I need to talk to you about Court.”

My jaw clenched. “We just talked about him last night. Has something changed?”

Alex held my gaze, a weirdly unreadable expression in his eyes. “Jane and I paid him a visit. We had to review the release plan with him and lawyers.”

“What? When? I just saw you, like, twelve hours ago.”

“Yeah, well, things are going to move fast from here,” he said, his voice flat. “The lawyers want to submit the plan this morning. Apparently, that means Jane and I need to be ready to jump at a moment’s notice.”

Ah, so that’s what’s going on with him. “I’m sorry, but you could’ve just said no. You didn’t have to drag your asses out of bed at some godforsaken hour just because Dad is in a rush to get out.”

Alex’s jaw ground, but he didn’t explain or defend their actions. “You need to be prepared, Holden.”

“For what? The cameras?” I let out a humorless snort. “I’ve been prepared for those for years.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what I’m talking about. We’re all prepared for the media storm we’re bound to face. What you need to be prepared for is him.

My eyes narrowed. “Why? Just last night, you assured me that he’s not just going to be walking back into the family like nothing ever happened.”

“He still won’t, but he wants to see you.”

“No.”

Alex sighed. “He asked about you specifically, Holden. All he wants is a conversation.”

“Still no,” I said firmly. “I thought we covered this. You told me I don’t have to forgive him and that you won’t try to force me to talk to him

either.”

“That’s not what this is,” Alex insisted. “I’m not trying to force you to do anything and I stand by what I said last night, but he’s still your father and I think you should bury the hatchet before he gets out.”

I stared at him, blinking hard. “Nope. Why are you even asking?”

“Because I have to,” he said, exasperation creeping into his tone. “If I didn’t come here, Jane would have had to and she’s got enough on her plate.”

“I agree, which is why neither of you should’ve jumped when the lawyers called.”

Alex stood firm. “Look, you still don’t have to let him back into your life. He’s asking for one conversation, not a relationship, and you carrying this much anger—”

“Is what he deserves after everything he’s done,” I snapped, finishing the sentence for him. “My anger is *my* problem, Alex. Not yours.”

“You might think that, but just hear me out.”

I scoffed and swiped my bag up from the counter, heading straight for the door. “I have class. Don’t come back here if it’s about my father. There’s a key under the mat. Lock up when you’re done with your coffee.”

As soon as I reached the door, I yanked it open and took off. Alex was trying to protect Jane. I got that, but they were letting Court in and look where that was leading. For me, protecting Alicia—and myself—meant staying as far away from that man as the press would let us.

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CHAPTER 36

ALICIA

When I heard the first whispers erupt, I figured it was just people who thought I'd admonish them for speaking in the library. The women cut off when I looked at them, turning back to whatever they were reading and bending their heads even closer together, but the second group was different.

Three men stood near the water fountain, outright scowling at me and not looking away or shutting up when I glanced in their direction. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. *What the heck?*

By the time I reached the circulation desk, I'd noticed at least a few more stares and one more group whispering, so I stopped, pretending to straighten a stack of returned picture books while I tried to figure out what was going on. One of the junior librarians glanced at me as I shuffled the books, then immediately looked away when I caught her staring.

I frowned. People here didn't look away from me like I'd busted them cheating on their homework, least of all my coworkers. Children sometimes hid behind their mothers if they were shy, but that was about it. This, however, was not that.

The junior librarian wasn't even discreet about it when she sneaked another peak at me. Then she shot up from her chair and pulled out her phone, typing furiously as she practically ran in the opposite direction. I put the books down, relieved when I saw one of my friends from work walking toward me.

"Good morning," I said, smiling.

“Morning,” Sarah replied too quickly, then hurried away like she might catch a contagious disease if she stayed within five feet of me for more than thirty seconds.

I sighed, my head shaking as I finally walked to the children’s section and dropped my purse in the drawer. Two moms were standing beside the dinosaur display, speaking quietly until they saw me approach. The first woman’s mouth snapped shut mid-sentence while the other gave me an apologetic smile.

“Can I help you find something?” I asked. “If your son is interested in dinosaurs, we’ve got—”

“No, thank you,” she cut me off, sliding forward to put herself between me and her little boy. “We’re fine.”

I nodded, but I definitely sensed hostility from her for some reason. Why she’d felt the need to physically protect her child from me, I didn’t know, but I needed coffee if this was what the day was going to keep throwing in my direction.

When I walked into the employee lounge, I was almost at the ancient coffeemaker when I noticed a newspaper spread across the table. Normally, I wouldn’t even have given it a second glance, but today, the sight made my stomach drop and my heart stammer.

I drifted closer on numb knees, convinced I was hallucinating until I was right next to the table, but this was very, very real. Someone had even circled the photograph splashed across the center page in black ink.

It was a picture of Holden and me arriving for the Halloween Gala at this very library. My hand was tucked into the crook of his arm and his body was turned slightly into mine, like he’d been trying to shield me. Underneath it was a headline printed in such a large, bold font that it felt like it was screaming accusations at me. **Thayer Heir Marries as Patriarch’s Release Looms.**

Bile pushed up the back of my throat as I stared down at it, realizing it’d been published hot on the heels of another article detailing Mr. Thayer’s early release. He stared up at me from the page, the picture another of him wearing orange prison scrubs and a cold, hard expression.

It was just him this time. No Alex or Jane. I looked down at that face, properly able to see what he looked like for the very first time. Last night, I’d been so focused on how much he looked like Holden that I hadn’t been able to see past it, but right now, I found myself searching for differences

rather than similarities. Unfortunately, outside of the obvious age difference, there weren't nearly as many as I would have liked.

This man's name had become synonymous with everything Holden hated and yet, a quick skim of the article about us revealed that the public didn't see it that way. One paragraph described Holden as *notoriously private and difficult, known for his icy temperament.*

According to the next paragraph, a source had called him, "brilliant but volatile. Holden definitely has that same ruthless streak that defined his father."

Oh, my God. That was Holden, but it also wasn't him at all. *Heaven knows, he can be rude and difficult, arrogant and dismissive, but he's not ruthless. He's certainly not cruel. Who the hell would say that about him?*

As I read the rest of the article, tears started burning at the backs of my eyes. I thought about last night, about how torn up he'd been and how hesitant. I thought about his gentle kisses and the way he'd pulled the blanket over me as I'd been falling asleep. I remembered the Holden from this morning, shooting the breeze over six a.m. coffee with two old men who just so happened to live on our block. My mind drifted back to that morning when he'd been trying to fix the lawnmower and how he'd spent all night trying to install the espresso machine himself.

That wasn't the man in the article, but at the same time, I knew Holden could be icy. I'd seen the way he could reduce someone to silence with just one sentence. Hell, I'd used him as a weapon against Nancy just a couple days ago.

I'd also seen the darkness writhing in those eyes last night, the hurt, the anger, and the fear of becoming Court. *That* was what made this article so dangerous to the man I was falling for. It took the worst pieces of him and framed it like they were the whole, and if he saw enough of this kind of thing, he'd start believing it again too.

I suddenly felt like someone had sent four ice cubes in a row slithering down my spine. Just as I was about to grab the newspaper and crumple it up, the lounge door opened and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Mrs. Donnelly strode in, the senior children's librarian who'd worked here for longer than I'd been alive. She had the uncanny ability to read people's minds at this point and she didn't even glance at the newspaper before her lips pressed into a thin line. "You shouldn't read that filth."

“I…” I trailed off, swallowing past the sudden lump in my throat. “I didn’t know. I’ve never been famous before. Or maybe I’m infamous now. I’m not really sure.”

“Sarah told me she saw you come in here.” Mrs. Donnelly strode to the couch in the corner, sitting down and patting the empty space beside her. “I’m glad I found you. Come sit with me.”

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out as I went to join her, practically collapsing into the space instead of lowering myself into it as gracefully as she had. “I’m so sorry. Am I getting fired?”

“No.” She frowned, peering at me over the frames of her tortoise shell glasses. “Why would you be getting fired? I’m also not sure what you’re apologizing for.”

“Neither am I,” I admitted, but the tears were welling in my eyes now and the whispers were suddenly making complete sense. “I’d understand if you don’t want me here anymore, though.”

She waved one hand dismissively while reaching for mine with the other and giving it a warm, gentle squeeze. “These things always blow over, Alicia. I’ve never been in your shoes, but when you’ve been around the block as many times as I have, you know that *everything* blows over eventually.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“It will,” she said, her voice soft but firm. “People get bored, my dear. News cycles move on. No matter what, eventually, the headlines will forget your name and find someone else to drag through the mud.”

I let out a soft, choked laugh. “Are you sure?”

“Completely,” she said without hesitation. “In the meantime, I want you to go home and stay there for a few days. Experience has taught me that the best thing you can do in this sort of situation is to lie low. It’s difficult to take shots at someone you can’t find.”

“What? No. I only just got back from a few days off. There’s the Halloween order, and story time, and—”

“We’ll cover it.” She gave my hand another squeeze, an understanding smile on her face. “This isn’t a punishment, Alicia. I’m merely giving you permission to leave so you don’t have to be here while people are trying to decide who you are based on nothing but sensationalism and buzzwords.”

She fell silent for a beat, then withdrew her hand and stood before glancing back down at me. “A long time ago, Nora Thayer did as much for

this library as Jane Westwood is doing now. Both women are very dear to my heart because of how they've supported us and they're your family now. Go be with them. They need you as much as you need them."

With that, she gave me a brief nod, then headed over to the table and crumpled up the newspaper without another word, dropping it in the trash on her way out. I rose slowly once she was gone, keeping my head down as I left the lounge and went to collect my purse from the children's department.

I could feel eyes following me with every step I took, understanding for the first real time in my life what it felt like to be watched. And the scariest thing about it was that I honestly didn't know if I could handle this.

Despite everything else, I was mature enough to know that there was a heck of a lot more to Holden than that article had made him out as, but I genuinely didn't know if I could take this kind of scrutiny. The infamy. Strangers hating me simply because of whose hand I'd been holding in a photograph.

I let out a shaky breath as I hurried toward the train station, tucking my chin into my collar, grateful to the icy wind for an excuse to pull up the hood of my coat. As soon I was shielded from view, I felt better, but then my phone started buzzing just before I reached the station and I nearly had a coronary. Pulling it out of my pocket, I slowed my mad dash for the doors when I saw Deja's name on my screen.

As Colin's wife, she was my sister-in-law and probably one of the only people on the planet right now who understood how this felt, but she'd also never called me before.

"Hi Deja," I said after picking up. "Is everything okay?"

"Hey," she replied solemnly. "No, not really. Where are you?"

"I'm just about to walk into the train station."

"The train?" She groaned. "Alicia, no. That's not safe. Not today. Which station? I'll send a car. Can you come over?"

"Come over?" I asked after giving her the name of my station. "Why? Has something happened?"

She sighed. "Nothing new, but I think it's time we had a family meeting. Things are really hitting the fan now and I know this isn't how we should be getting to know each other. I wish I had a better reason to invite you over. You know, something normal, like dinner or drinks, but unfortunately, we don't have time for that right now."

I breathed out a long, slow breath and turned toward the street. “Don’t bother with a car. I’ll just grab a cab. What’s your address?”

Before she’d even finished rattling it off, I stuck my hand in the air and a taxi squealed to a stop in front of me. I practically launched myself into the back seat, told him where I was going, and then eased back into my seat.

“I’m on my way,” I said quietly, keeping my voice down in the hopes that my driver wouldn’t cotton on to who he had in his car right now. “I’ll be right there, okay?”

“Be safe, Alicia,” she replied. “I really wish we could’ve had a better *welcome to the family* conversation than this, but Hurricane Court is bearing down on us and I really think it’d help if we could all get on the same page before he gets out.”

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CHAPTER 37

HOLDEN

Midterms were coming up quickly and Halloween was only two weeks away, but naturally, now would be the time when the media shit storm we'd been bracing for would hit. I left my last lecture of the day with a headache and three pages of notes I'd never be able to read because of how fast I'd had to write.

My phone buzzed as I crossed the quad, but I ignored it. It buzzed again as I pulled my keys out of my pocket and headed for the parking garage. The damn thing had been at it all day, not shutting up for two consecutive minutes at a time since I'd left home this morning.

When I climbed into my car, I had twenty-something new, unread emails, more texts than I was ever going to open, and a message from Alicia asking if I was coming to Colin's house when I was done. That one, I replied to, letting her know that I was on my way before I turned over the engine.

All the way to Colin's neighborhood, traffic was a nightmare. Since it was cloudy, people seemed to have forgotten how to drive, a man in a low-slung sedan cutting across two lanes without signaling forcing me to slam on my brakes. I muttered curses under my breath, smacking the brakes *again* when he veered back across the same lanes like he'd simply needed to get closer to check a road sign.

In the process, my phone connected to Bluetooth and the screen flashed with an incoming call. *Illinois Department of Corrections.*

I glanced at it and snorted, but then that stupid fucking sedan swerved around a delivery truck, red light exploding across the back of it when he pumped the brakes once more. As I braced against the steering wheel to hit my own again, my thumb hit the control by accident and the call connected.

“Hello,” a much too familiar voice on the other end of the line echoed through the car. “Holden, are you there, son?”

Every muscle in my body locked and I tightened my grip on the wheel, punching the button to hang up without saying a single word. The call disappeared from the screen and I refocused on the traffic, but my mind wasn’t there anymore. Instead, it was stuck in some alternate dimension where nothing existed but anger at the audacity he had.

The rest of the way to Colin’s house, it felt like I’d disconnected myself right along with that fucking call. I’d expected Dad to pick up the phone eventually. I’d known it was coming, but actually hearing his voice again after all these years had abruptly and unexpectedly made him real again.

It’d brought him back from the proverbial dead, reminding me that he was more than just a name I hated and a picture I didn’t want to see.

He was still here, on the same planet as me, living, breathing, and looking forward to rejoining society soon. The very same man who’d been in our house one day and gone the next wasn’t just some shadow we lived under. He was very much flesh and blood, and soon enough, he’d be close enough to touch again.

As I pulled up in front of Colin’s house, I parked right at the end of the driveway. I wasn’t sure why Alicia was here or who else was coming, but I wasn’t about to do something stupid, like let them park me in if this was some kind of intervention.

I knocked on Colin’s door still feeling like my brain had been detached from my body, and evidently, it was pretty obvious. As soon as he pulled it open, he frowned, his gaze sweeping across my face like he was searching for signs of injury.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“No, and thanks.”

“Don’t be an asshole.” He took a step aside and waved me in. “You look terrible. What happened? You’re not sick, are you?”

I shook my head, brushing past him into the house. “I’m fine. Where’s Alicia?”

“She and Deja have gone out to pick up a baby-shower gift.”

For a second, I just stared at the empty rooms surrounding me, both the living room and the kitchen visible but deserted from where I was standing. I tried to process what he was saying. “They went to pick up a *baby-shower* gift? Whose shower?”

“Maggie’s,” he said, squinting at me. “Are you sure you don’t have a fever?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

Colin let the door swing shut behind us, motioning for me to follow him to the kitchen. “Ryan and Maggie have invited everyone to New York next weekend for their shower. Naturally, because it’s Maggie, it’s Halloween themed.”

“Naturally,” I muttered, rubbing both my hands across my face and trying to force my brain into *this* dimension. The one I should be in. “So, next weekend, huh? She’s actually organizing her own baby shower for *Halloween*?”

“Yep.” He strode directly to the fridge, pulled out a pitcher of water, poured two tall glasses, and handed one to me. “Drink. We can talk about the shower in a minute. Tell me what’s going on with you first. You’re really pale, man. I’m worried.”

I wrapped my fingers around the glass, the cold against my skin and the slight moisture of condensation finally helping to clear my head a bit. I took a long drink, focusing on the sting of the iciness as it made my throat ache. Ultimately, however, there was no point trying to lie about this.

Court had probably already called Jane or someone else—maybe even Colin—to tattle about me hanging up on him. The truth would come out. There was no reason my brother shouldn’t hear it from me.

“Court called while I was on my way over here,” I explained, keeping it fast and factual. “The fucking car in front of me was being an idiot and I accidentally connected the call when I was trying to avoid dying in a fiery crash.”

Colin slowly lowered his glass back to the counter before he’d even taken a sip, drawing his lips into his mouth as he visibly processed what I’d said. “Did you talk to him?”

“No.”

“Okay,” he said finally, his tongue popping out to wet his lips like he was nervous. “He’ll probably try again. You do know that, right?”

I scoffed. “Yeah, I do, but it doesn’t matter how many times he tries. I don’t want to talk to him.”

Colin slowly sat down on the nearest stool, dragging a hand through his hair before finally reaching for his glass again. “He probably just wants to make amends, Holden. It’s your decision whether to allow him to do it or not.”

“That’s going to be a no from me. I’m not interested.”

“You’re his son.”

“Oh, I know. No one ever lets me forget it.”

“Isn’t it a good thing he’s trying to make amends with you?”

I snorted. “No. Why now, huh? Why didn’t he want to make amends when I was sixteen and watching the authorities empty our house? Why not when I was seventeen, trying to figure out why every person I knew was suddenly looking at me like I was carrying a deadly plague?”

“Because now he’s getting out.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “This is about him, Colin. Everything is *always* about him. That’s not amends. It’s cowardice. He just wants us to look like a big, happy family when he walks free. He doesn’t want me embarrassing him now that he knows he’s going to have to look me in the face eventually.” I drained the rest of my water and stood. “When the girls get back, please tell Alicia I’ll be at home.”

“Holden—”

“I have midterms starting soon and a ton of studying to do,” I grunted. “As it is, I have the press bullshit to deal with. The Department of Corrections might’ve decided that it’s time to let him out, but I don’t have time to deal with his ego or his needs right now.”

“Okay,” Colin said, rising and following me to the door. “I’ll let Deja know to drop Alicia off at your place.”

“Thank you.”

He was opening his mouth to say something else, but I didn’t stick around to hear it. When I’d told him I had to study, I’d meant it, so I went home, hunkered down, and tried to put my dad out of my head.

With my laptop open in front of me, I read the same paragraph four times before getting up for another glass of water. I tried to decode my notes from class today and went to make a cup of coffee instead. A couple hours later, by the time the front door swung open and Alicia walked in

carrying a shopping bag, I'd done a lot of puttering around and absolutely no studying.

My father refused to get the hell out of my head, the course content made no sense, and at this rate, I might as well have been a potato. Barely looking away from the screen when I heard the door swing shut behind her, I refocused on the damn paragraph that'd been refusing to cooperate all afternoon.

"Hi," I muttered.

"Hey." She kicked off her shoes when she reached the living room and laid her shopping down gently on the couch. "How's was your day?"

"Fine. Yours?"

"Yeah. It was fine. Long." Her eyes drilled holes in the back of my head, but I didn't look away from the laptop. "How's the studying going?"

I shrugged. "Fine."

"Wow, you're incredibly eloquent today." She took a few steps closer, not sounding much more chipper than I felt. "Are you okay?"

"Yep," I lied. "All good. There's nothing better than getting an unexpected call from a prison to brighten up one's mood."

She sucked in a soft breath. "You heard from your dad?"

"No. He called, but I didn't speak to him."

"Why not?" she asked.

I finally spun on the chair to arch an eyebrow at her. "Why not? Gee. I don't know. Maybe because I don't have anything to say to him."

Her gaze seemed strangely flat now that I was looking at her, some of her blonde hair that must've slipped out of her ponytail just framing her face instead of being pushed behind her ears. I frowned, cocking my head when I realized she was a little pale too.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She shrugged one of her shoulders. "Nothing. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, but clearly, something *is* wrong with you. Just tell me what it is. I can fix it, Alicia."

"No, you can't."

I huffed out a frustrated breath. "Yeah. You're right, actually. I can't do anything if I don't know what's going on."

She lifted her chin slightly, those hazel eyes still weirdly dull as they held mine. Almost like some kind of light had sparked out deep inside. "Why didn't you talk to your dad, Holden?"

“I’m not getting into this with you right now.”

Her eyes flashed. “We’re already in it. I’m not asking you to break down molecular science into three easy to understand sentences for me. All I’m asking is why you didn’t want to speak to your father. Some of us would give anything to receive a call like that.”

“Some of us also had fathers worth speaking to,” I snapped. “I didn’t, okay? I don’t. Can you please just drop it? If you really want to talk about something, why don’t you just tell me what’s wrong with you?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine. I’ll drop it.” I turned back to my laptop. “See, this is how people act when they’re letting go of something you asked them to let go of.”

“Will you please just look at me?” she asked a beat later and I turned, another sharp comment sitting right at the tip of my tongue, but as soon as I was looking at her again, I realized that she seemed exhausted. “I had a bad day, Holden. Okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? I had a really, *really* shitty day and I realize you’re in a mood, but can you please not take it out on me?”

I felt my shoulders drop as I stared back at her, those protective urges rising up from deep within. “What happened, Alicia?”

She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, averting her gaze as she shook her head. “I’m not allowed to go back to work for now. That’s what happened. I’ve essentially been put on leave until these issues your family is dealing with in the media subside.”

My heart kicked against my ribs. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, so am I.” She held my gaze for another beat before she shook her head and turned away. “I just need some space tonight, okay? Good luck with the studying.”

As I watched her storm upstairs without even looking back at me once, pain radiated through my chest. Her bedroom door snapped shut and it felt like the sound cracked something deep inside me. I’d managed to piss off the one person in my life who made me feel like I wasn’t completely broken, and in the process, I might just have broken *her*.

Pushing up to my feet, I suddenly realized I needed to get out of here. I needed to walk, and think, and possibly punch something that wouldn’t call

the cops, so I grabbed my jacket and headed for the door, but as soon as I pulled it open, I saw Rex across the street.

The old bastard had started decorating. Orange lights had been wrapped around the porch railing, a giant, inflatable skeleton was leaning against the front door, just waiting for its turn to be placed, and a massive, grinning jack-o'-lantern hung from a tree in the center of his yard.

The man himself was on a ladder in front of the porch, attaching an array of lights, and a hot, irrational spike of anger crawled up my spine. Logically, I knew there were only so many days left before the contest would be judged, but with everything else going on, I'd figured I had time.

Just like I'd thought I'd have time before Court got out. Before I'd make Alicia hate me. Before the rest of my family started pressuring me to forgive a father who'd never done anything other than donate his sperm to earn that fucking title.

I knew it made absolutely zero sense whatsoever, but as I looked across that street and saw Rex essentially bringing the spirit of Halloween to life, I lost it, red pulses flashing across my field as vision as I spun around and marched back into the house.

It was time to get to work and I knew exactly where I had to start.

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CHAPTER 38

ALICIA

A loud, mechanical whine coming from somewhere outside yanked me out of a deep, dreamless sleep. I sat bolt upright, blinking hard as I tried to work out what the heck was going on. I'd barely even managed to take a breath when there was a sharp burst of grinding followed by absolute, sudden silence.

I rubbed my eyes, wondering if I'd dreamed the noise, but then the mechanical buzz started up again and I pushed off my blankets to race over to the window. It sounded like someone was trying to saw down a house. Peering into the yard below, I tried to find a source, but from this vantage point, it seemed the noise was coming from the front. Still half asleep, I pulled on a sweatshirt Holden had left in my room at some point and stumbled to my door, shoving my feet into my puffins as I went.

On and off, the mechanical whine rang out, then the grinding, then the silence. It was so disorienting that I was torn between being convinced the house was under attack and simply wondering if an overly enthusiastic neighbor was getting an early start on renovations.

"Holden?" I called out as I jogged downstairs, my eyes wide but my brain still foggy.

The noise died down again as I hit the foyer, immediately realizing that something seemed off about the space, but it took me a solid few seconds to pinpoint what it was. The entire door was off its hinges. My footsteps slammed to a stop, awareness suddenly dawning that this wasn't an attack or an overly enthusiastic neighbor.

It was Holden.

Immediately wide awake, I drew in a deep breath and folded my arms over my chest, apprehension taking over from confusion. We hadn't left things between us in a great place last night, so I walked slowly toward the opening where the door used to be, entirely unsure what I'd be getting from him this morning.

Before he even came into view, I realized half the porch railing was missing and the old steps were gone. New timber lay stacked on the lawn and Holden himself was on the far side of the deck with a circular saw in his hands, covered from head to toe in sawdust.

That dark blond hair was sticking up in all directions, protective glasses over his eyes, and his feet bare despite the chill in the air. The old t-shirt and jeans he had on looked like they'd just been through a war, covered in grime and dirt in some places and small rips in others.

For a long moment, I just watched him, completely shocked that a guy like him even knew how to use a circular saw, but then I finally took another step forward and cleared my throat. "What, uh, what are you doing?"

"My best, Alicia," he said over his shoulder, not even looking at me as he uncapped a marker with his teeth and started drawing a line on a fresh piece of timber. "I'm doing my best."

My eyes slid shut, my heart suddenly aching for him with such agony that I nearly doubled over with the pain of it. It was such a simple answer and yet, it carried so, *so* much. If he'd been awake that early and he'd simply wanted something to do, he could've just put up the decorations, but instead, he was starting with the porch itself.

Maybe it was because he couldn't fix what was happening with Court, or his family, or what'd happened to me at the library, but he could fix the steps and replace the railing. He was doing his best at the only thing he could do something about and that spoke volumes about who he was.

Fuck that article. They don't know a thing about this man.

"Do you want some coffee?" I asked around the lump in my throat when I looked at him again. "I'll go make it."

"Yes, please." He finally glanced up at me, wiping sawdust off his forehead with his arm. "All the coffee would be great."

I managed a tiny smile. "That doesn't sound very healthy."

"I didn't say I wanted to survive. I just need to wake up."

Inclining my chin in a nod, I held his gaze for a moment, those blues grayer than I'd ever seen them. Almost as if the storm inside was raging right behind them, but he offered me a tiny smile of his own and I finally turned, heading back inside.

Once I got to the kitchen, I programmed the machine to produce the only coffee I'd learned to have it make so far. I leaned a hip against the counter and waited. Last night had been awful. Both of us had been hurting, and instead of supporting each other, we'd wielded our own pain like accusations.

I didn't want to do that again, so when the coffee was ready, I picked up our mugs, determined to do better this time. Walking back outside, I handed his over, then sat down on the edge of the porch, wrapping my fingers around the warmth of my mug as I watched him work.

"You don't have to stay out here," he said after a few beats, looking up at me from where he was crouched on the lawn, checking the size of the timber he'd cut. "I wouldn't be offended if you decided against freezing your ass off."

"I'm okay for now," I said, my eyes tracking his movements when he measured a second piece of timber against the first. Everything he'd done so far seemed to have gone pretty seamlessly, which was a bit of a surprise. "You're rather handy for the son of a billionaire. Has anyone ever told you that?"

He barked out a laugh. "No. I can't say they have."

I turned a little bit until I was facing him fully, watching the muscles in his arms bulge as he lifted the heavy saw and made another slice. "Did your dad teach you?"

"No." He scoffed, wiping his brow again before slotting in the next piece and tightening a screw. "My father probably didn't even know how to make his own coffee. He had people to do things for him his whole life, but things changed pretty drastically after he went away."

"Is that when you learned to work with your hands?" I asked after taking a moment to think about it. I honestly never had, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what they'd gone through. "It must've been quite the learning curve."

Those eyes lifted up to mine, but there was no anger or defensiveness in them now. "It was, but as soon as I started having to take things apart to learn how to fix them, I realized I actually liked it. Isaac helped a lot. He's

always loved taking things apart to see how they worked, so he was pretty excited when I started doing it too."

I smiled and took a small sip of my coffee. "You're lucky to have so many siblings. It must be nice to know there's a whole group of people out there who will always have your back."

"Sure," he agreed easily, then let out another dry laugh. "On the flip side of that, there's also a whole group of people out there who always think they know what's good for you."

"Fair enough." I leaned back on one palm and brought my mug closer to my chest with the other. "On that note, I'm sorry about last night. I was angry and I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"You didn't."

"Yes, I did. I was upset, but so were you," I said quietly. "Both of us had reason to be and both of us could've handled it better."

He tightened another screw before sitting back on the porch and finally picking up his coffee. Staring out at the street as he wrapped his strong fingers around the mug, he lifted it to his lips, seeming thoughtful as he took a sip and slowly swallowed it before bringing his gaze back to mine.

"You didn't walk in here looking for a fight, Alicia," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "I didn't want one either, but I was stressed and pent-up, and I felt fucking terrible about you not being able to go back to work because of me."

"It's not because of you." I drew in a deep breath through my nostrils and let my gaze drift toward the street. "You know, I've never seen my picture in the paper before. I've also never had to read mean things about someone I genuinely care about. I didn't know what to do with that or how to handle it, and then, just after I'd seen the article about us, I was asked to leave until things died down."

He hung his head, his shoulders rising as tension wound through him. "I'm so sorry, Alicia."

"Don't be," I said. "That's what I'm trying to say. It's not your fault that the media hounds your family or that they write the things they do. It's not your fault that your father gave them a reason to, but I think it's safe to assume that even if he hadn't, they would have hounded you anyway. Look at the Westwoods. None of them have ever been in prison, but whenever there's a slow news day, they're on the front page for one thing or another."

He scoffed down a laugh. "True."

“Exactly.” I smiled, tears pricking at the backs of my eyes when he glanced back up at me. “Yesterday, when I first saw that article, I was mad at you, and at myself, and hell, even at Alex, but what I was most upset about was that I couldn’t just call my dad to come and get me.”

“Yeah, I hear that.”

“The thing is, when they died, I was still in that phase where my dad was my hero, you know? If something was broken, Daddy could fix it. If I was sad, Daddy would make me happy again. I realize you might never have felt that way about your father, but when I got home and found out he’d called you, that was where my head was at.”

“On how unfair it was that your awesome dad died and my shitty one didn’t?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, that too, but mostly on how lucky you are that you still have the chance to talk to him. I’m sorry if I overstepped, Holden. I didn’t mean to imply that you had to speak to him or even that he deserved a conversation with you, but I meant it when I said I’d give anything to receive a call from mine.”

When he finally looked at me again, he reached out and wrapped his fingers around mine, giving them a squeeze. “You didn’t overstep. I knew what you were saying. I knew where it was coming from. If it helps, I’d give pretty much anything to get a call from *your* dad too.”

Tears welled on my eyelids as I smiled, wrapping my hand more securely around his. Slowly but surely, it felt like we were breaking down the wall that’d gone up between us last night and it felt really good.

“I’m proud of us,” I said quietly. “We’ve just successfully talked through our first fight.”

He blinked a couple times, like the notion surprised him, but then he grinned and stood up. “Yeah, I think we did. Look at us, being all mature and shit.” Chuckling as he bent over, he dropped a tender kiss on top of my head and then straightened up again. “Speaking of things that are mature, I smell like an extra matured steak. I need a shower.”

“Definitely.” I wrinkled my nose, making a show of waving my hand in front of my face, but if I was being honest, he was pretty hot, all sweaty, dusty, and smeared with dirt. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“In the shower?” He pretended to gape at me, widening his eyes and bringing a hand up to his mouth like he’d been scandalized. “Well, I never.”

I laughed. “I meant in the house, dear husband, but now that you’ve mentioned it, maybe I will join you in the shower. Even if only to prove a point.”

He turned from the open doorway to wink at me. “Whatever point it is, you’re very welcome to come prove it. I’ll be naked. And waiting.”

With that, he turned and disappeared inside, and I chuckled, but as I finished the last dregs of my coffee, I wasn’t blind to the fact that Holden was really going through it right now. He had exams coming up and assignments to finish, he had a new wife to consider and a house in desperate need of maintenance and attention, and in the midst of all that, the person who’d done a tremendous amount of damage to him and his family would be walking back into his life soon.

And the press wouldn’t let him forget it.

There wasn’t much I could do about any of that, but I could be there to support him, to let him know that I would stand by him, and to try to ease the guilt he felt about me being in this now too. With that thought in mind, I headed upstairs and stripped off as I walked into the bathroom.

The shower was already steamed up, water drumming in a steady beat against the sides. I’d never done anything remotely like this before, but I pulled last night’s elastic out of my hair and let it tumble to my shoulders. Then I reached for the shower door and climbed in with him.

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CHAPTER 39

HOLDEN

I stood under the hot spray and dragged my hands over my face, trying to find some solace in the fact that at least I'd made things right with Alicia. Well, sort of, anyway.

She'd essentially been put on a leave of absence from a job she loved because of me, and instead of pulling her into my arms and letting her cry on my shoulder, I'd snapped at her. I'd driven her up to her bedroom alone instead of comforting her. Oh, and then I'd probably woken her up from a long night alone to the glorious whine of power tools.

Husband of the year right here, folks. If you were looking for him, it is me.

As a groan started working its way out of my chest, the shower door suddenly swung open and Alicia appeared through the steam like a siren. Stark naked, her golden hair hung in messy waves to the tops of her nipples, those hazel eyes immediately finding mine.

"Is this okay?" she asked quietly, hesitating in the door for a beat.

I scoffed and reached for her hand, careful not to yank her right off her feet as I pulled her into the cubicle with me. "I thought you were joking, but I'm definitely not mad that you weren't."

A shy, sweet kind of smile played at the corners of her lips, but she wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her body right up against my chest. "Are you sure? It kind of looked like you were brooding in here. I can leave you to do it in peace."

My hands slid to her hips and I flexed my fingers on them, holding her in place as I stared down into those blue-green-gold eyes and tried to figure out what to do here. I'd never even been in a serious relationship before, much less married, so while my body had a metric fuck-ton of ideas of what we could do with the naked, gorgeous girl in the shower, my mind was slightly more hesitant.

"Don't leave," I finally murmured. That seemed like a good place to start no matter where this led. "I'm sorry about the library, Alicia. I'm sorry that my family's troubles have become yours."

She scraped her fingernails lightly against the back of my neck as she pushed her hands into my hair. "That's generally what happens when you marry someone, so I knew what I was signing up for. Your family is mine now too. We have the same troubles, but we also share the same joys. Despite everything else, I liked spending time with Deja yesterday."

I groaned and lowered my forehead to hers. "If we're going to keep talking about Deja or anyone else, I'm going to need you to stop doing that with your nails."

A slight smirk appeared on her lips as she scraped them with a little more intention across my scalp this time. "What, that?"

I tightened my grip on her hips. "Yeah. That."

"Oh." She did it again, watching closely when I felt my lips part without any sort of conscious thought going into it. "You like that, do you?"

"When it's you doing it, and you're naked, and wet, then yes. I'd like pretty much anything you do."

While I'd been trying very hard to keep it at bay, I was suddenly extremely aware of how soft she was against me, her front pressed so tight to mine that little dams of water were forming between us. Inhaling a deep breath, I slid my hands from her hips to her ass, tempted to smack it, but I wouldn't take it quite that far yet.

Meanwhile, her eyes were still on my face, searching or perhaps only observing what she was doing to me. I wasn't sure, but when I saw her pupils dilate as I squeezed her butt, it was game over.

I brought one hand to her chin and gently lifted it until her head was tilted. I claimed her mouth for a kiss that burned straight through the bullshit. No matter what else might be true at this point, I cared about this woman. I had genuine, deep feelings for her. I hadn't told her yet, but that hardly mattered. Right now, she was the balm I needed. While I didn't

know if that was why she'd gotten into this shower with me, I was desperately grateful she was here.

Even more grateful when she kissed me back, evidently not caring about the bullshit, the noise, or everything we still had to talk about. It was only the two of us in this shower right now, and for as long as that was true, we got to just be *us*.

Suddenly, I pushed her up against the wall and kissed her deeper, leaning into her soft, tiny frame and groaning when she gasped into my mouth. *Fuck, I love the sounds she makes. I love how surprised she always seems that she turns me on the way she does. I love…*

Shit. I cut off the train of thought when it started going in a whole other direction, focusing instead on running my palm up her side until I was cupping one of her breasts. She moaned into my mouth, arching into me like she honestly thought she had to *encourage* me to touch her. I almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of that notion. We'd barely even touched each other and my cock was already painfully hard, eagerly awaiting further instruction. Every time she even looked at me a certain type of way, it sat up like a damn puppy, willing to beg for her attention.

As I stroked my tongue into her mouth again, I kept a tight hold on her hip, the thumb of my other hand flicking her nipple. I felt her knees buckle, almost losing it when I heard her sharp intake of breath as I did it again.

"Let's wash up," I murmured between kisses. "Then I'm taking you to bed."

"Now?" she asked hoarsely, her eyes flying open to look into mine. "You want to wash up *now*?"

"How am I supposed to make love to you when I still smell like a donkey?"

My heart smacked into my ribs when I realized what I'd just said, Alicia's widening eyes telling me she hadn't missed it either, but neither of us mentioned it. Instead, I eased away from her and squeezed a generous dollop of shower gel into my palm. I lathered up every inch of her and quickly washed myself when I was done.

She watched every move I made, her breathing shallow and her cheeks flushed as I made sure we were both rinsed off. As soon as we stepped out of the shower, she threw her arms around my neck and I picked her up, still dripping wet, and carried her to bed, my mouth sealing over hers once more.

She held on tight, her ankles hooking together at the base of my spine, and she didn't even squeal or laugh this time. *It actually feels like she's getting used to this.*

I smiled against her mouth, murmuring between kisses. "You like that I'm so much bigger than you, don't you? I think you're learning to like that I can do this."

"What, pick me up and carry me to bed whenever you get horny?" she teased breathlessly, but then shrugged. "Yeah, I think I can get used to it."

I laughed, laying her down gently on her mattress and bringing my body down on top of hers. Those eyes were burning with lust and laughter as they held mine, but there something deeper in them too. *Maybe even another L-word.*

As I held myself up on my elbows and my knees, I kissed the tip of her nose and each of her eyelids, then dragged my mouth lower, planting kisses on her jaw, her throat, and right over her heart before sucking one hard nipple into my mouth.

Alicia let out a soft moan, her fingers tangling in my hair and tugging so sharply that my cock twitched. I made a sound too close to a growl, but I didn't really give a shit. She needed to know what she did to me.

While I loved that she always seemed so surprised about it, I didn't love that it meant she didn't know yet that as far as I was concerned she was the sexiest woman on the planet. As I moved to her other breast, I ran my hand up her thigh to her pussy, groaning at the wet heat that met my fingertips.

"You're always so wet for me," I murmured against her skin, giving her a little nip before I started kissing a path down her stomach. "I can't get enough of you, Alicia. I never will."

She squirmed underneath me, breathing hard as she gripped my shoulders. "Holden, I…"

When she trailed off, I glanced up at her face, wondering if she was finally about to tell me to stop. Honestly, I kept wondering when that was going to happen.

A guy like me should *not* be allowed to touch a girl like her, but instead, when she finally wrenched her eyes open again, she trailed her fingertips gently across my cheek and *smiled.* At *me*.

This fucking girl.

"Can I try?" she asked quietly.

I frowned. "Try what?"

“You know…” Her gaze traveled down the length of my body, settling on the glistening tip of my dick. “That. What you were about to do.”

I blinked fast. Too many times. “You’re asking if you can go down on me?”

“Yes.” That gorgeous pink I was so obsessed with bloomed across her cheeks again as she shifted her weight up on her elbows. “So, can I?”

I blinked again, feeling completely and utterly stupid. Like her question had sucked my brain right out of my body. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

Shit, that was too enthusiastic, wasn’t it?

She smiled as she watched me lie down on my back beside her. “You’re that willing to let me try something I haven’t done for a very long time and am probably really bad at?”

“I’m that willing to try anything you want. You don’t even have to ask, but that? Yes. Just… yes.”

She sat up beside me, tucking her hair behind her ears as her eyes roamed across my body, her cheeks flushing an even deeper shade of pink. As she bent her head, I closed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath, but I still cursed and crushed the blanket in my fists when her hot mouth hit my skin.

“Fuck, Alicia.” Every single part of me wanted to thrust, fuck, or at the very least move, but I held still as she sank down, her tongue curving around my shaft making me see flashes of light behind my eyes when I screwed them shut. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. That feels too good.”

I felt her smile around me, her movements still slow and hesitant, but only for a few minutes before she found her rhythm and nearly slayed me with it. Before I knew what was happening, she was bouncing up and down enthusiastically, her fingers coming up between my legs to cup my balls.

Every other time we’d been together, she’d been the one writhing and squirming, but that sure as hell wasn’t true today. I was halfway out of my mind by the time I tapped out, vaguely wondering when I’d started trusting her enough to drive me to the brink of losing control. And I didn’t mean by making me come. I meant actual control.

As soon as she lifted her head, I didn’t flip her over or slam into her. I looked up into those eyes and offered her my hand, then watched as she climbed into my lap with both of her small hands in mine.

I stayed still as she positioned her entrance above me, moaning out loud when she sank down slowly, completely at her own pace. Still holding her hands when she started moving, I matched the rhythm she set with thrusts of my own, so close that I could barely see straight but refusing to do anything to rush her.

“Holden,” she whispered as her brow furrowed, her grip on my hands tightening. “Oh, God. That feels… I need…”

Without waiting for her to try to form the words, I covered both of her hands in one of mine and reached between us, circling her clit with a fingertip until she stiffened above me. Her head dropped back, her lips parting as she started moving faster.

At this rate, my teeth were going to crack from how hard I was clenching my jaw, but I stayed with her every step of the way. When she finally screamed my name and her muscles started rippling around me, I arched my head into the mattress and let go, coming so hard that my vision blacked out.

For a second in the aftermath, it occurred to me that there was nothing arranged or fake about us anymore. Somewhere along the line, our marriage had become real. The hard stuff, the fun stuff, and the sexy stuff, it was all there, just waiting for us both to admit that maybe, somehow, we wanted to keep doing it.

Together.

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CHAPTER 40

ALICIA

Tasha's bedroom looked like a cardboard-box store had exploded and the debris was packaging on every conceivable surface. There were boxes on the floor, on the bed, and stacked against the wall. Rolls of tape littered her dresser and nightstand, and there were little bits of bubble wrap everywhere.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" I asked, genuinely surprised at the amount of crap she'd accumulated over the last few years. "Where did you even keep it all?"

She pumped her eyebrows at me as she shoved another sweater into a box. "I was the queen of Tetris as a child. If you have that kind of skill, you'll never run out of space."

"Yeah, I can see that." I shook my head and taped up another box. "It's a miracle you didn't get four concussions a week from stuff falling on your head."

She laughed. "If I did, would you even have noticed? You and Holden have been pretty lovey-dovey lately."

I felt my cheeks turn bright red, but I scoffed anyway. "The man is in class for six hours a day and he spends his evenings repairing our deck or assembling decorations. How lovey-dovey can we really be?"

"Yeah, but the deck repair thing is because he's secretly eighty," she joked. "He's certainly grumpy enough."

My eyes rolled, but I also couldn't help smiling as I thought about his morning ritual of having coffee with our elderly neighbors. "Don't let him

hear you say that. He'll call you an ageist. Rex and Tony are both in their early *seventies*."

She chuckled. "Well, excuse me."

As she taped up the next box, I went back to folding a stack of t-shirts, but I felt her watching me and I could practically feel the curiosity pouring out of her. Eventually, once my stack was neatly folded, I turned to face her again, planting my hands firmly on my lips as I arched an eyebrow.

"What?" I asked. "Just tell me what you're thinking, Tasha."

"I'm thinking you're in love with him," she said softly as she reached into her closet for another handful of hangers. "I also think you two are really good together, but I've told you that before, so I won't say it again."

"You just did."

She grinned. "Okay, yes. I had to say again, but it's only because I'm right. You should see your face when he walks into a room, babe. Hell, you should see *his* face when *you* walk in. Have you told him yet?"

"Told him what?"

She huffed out a frustrated breath. "Have you told him that you love him, dummy? What else would I be talking about?"

I put my hands up in front of me and shook them around a little. "Uh-uh. No. Keep your romance away from me. I'm not the heroine in one of your books."

"Oh, of course not. You just married a billionaire to save your house," she said. "Then you fell in love with him."

"I did *not* fall in love with him," I protested, but even as I said the words, they tasted so wrong on my tongue that I knew they couldn't be true. "Okay. Fine. Maybe I did, but I doubt he'd want to hear it."

She frowned, her head tilting slowly as she looked back at me. "What? How can you even say that? The guy is crazy about you."

"I don't know, Tash," I said, the events of the last few days flashing through my mind like a movie reel. "There's so much going on with him right now that I don't know if he's capable of being crazy about anything, let alone a wife he was contractually obliged to marry."

She groaned and collapsed on her bed, spreading out between the boxes and propping her chin in her palm. "Are you serious right now? It doesn't matter what *else* is going on with him. Trust me, he's got feelings for you and he's *feeling* them."

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Maybe when we’re here, at home, and it’s just us, but Holden never even wanted to get married. He doesn’t believe in happily ever afters and he definitely isn’t going to want to hear that some girl is in love with him when there are so many other issues in his life right now.”

“Sure, except that you’re not just *some girl*. You’re his *wife*,” she said pointedly. “You’re the woman he married, even if he never wanted to. He did it anyway and he’s been happy about it. You’ve been happy about it. Why not just both be happy? You both deserve it.”

“We do.” I turned toward the next box I had to pack and carefully laid her jackets into it just to give myself something to do so I wouldn’t burst out crying. “Unfortunately, I think Holden needs to deal with his dad before he’ll be able to be happy, and until he’s happy, I won’t be completely happy. Does that make sense?”

“Wait.” She frowned. “Are you saying you’re *not* happy?”

“No.” I shoved at a puffy jacket that refused to stay flat. “I *am* happy. I’m happier than I’ve been in years, but I’m scared to let myself feel it because Court fucking Thayer is hanging over our heads like an ax murderer who can swing that ax at our happiness at any given moment.”

Tasha stared up at me for a long beat, then sighed and sat up on the bed, somehow managing to cross her legs without kicking off any of the boxes. “Okay, but if that’s how you feel, tell him to talk to his dad.”

“I have, but he doesn’t want to. He won’t even consider it.”

“Can you blame him?” she asked calmly, and my eyebrows shot up in surprise, but she carried on before I could answer. “I don’t know how much you remember about the time all that stuff went down with Court Thayer, but it got pretty ugly.”

“I don’t remember much at all, actually. I didn’t even remember the name until you and I picked up that paper.”

Her expression softened with sympathy. “Well, I don’t blame you for that either. You had your own stuff to deal with around that time, but it was bad, Alicia. It was real bad. Maybe Holden just needs some more time.”

“Maybe, and I wish I could make that happen for him, but he doesn’t have much more time. Court is getting out, no matter how Holden feels about it, and I’m worried about what it’s going to do to him if that happens before they’ve cleared the air.”

“Holden knows his dad’s getting out, right? I mean, obviously, it’s been all over the news, but surely, the family knew before.”

I shrugged. “I think so, but it’s almost like he’s pretending it isn’t happening. Sometimes, it feels like he thinks if he just doesn’t talk about it or listen to anyone who tries to talk about it that they’ll keep his father in prison until he’s ready.”

She snorted. “That’s not happening. Have you tried talking to him like you’re talking to me now?”

I shook my head slowly. “Nope, but Court Thayer isn’t a broken step. Holden can’t fix this with a trip to the hardware store and the problem isn’t just going to disappear.”

“You’re worried,” she said gently, reaching out to squeeze my hand. “It’s normal to worry about the people you love, Alicia. There’s nothing wrong with it, but you also can’t put off your life or your happiness just because you’re so worried about what’s going to happen in the future. So just be happy now. Be in love. Hell, tell the boy you’re in love with him. At least give it a try.”

As I absorbed what she’d said, it finally dawned on me that she wasn’t wrong. Holden had years’ worth of issues with his father to work out. It wasn’t realistic of me to expect he’d figure it all out overnight simply because the state had decided to release the man.

“I hate it when you’re right,” I muttered.

She laughed. “I’ll try to do it less often, but I’m serious. You deserve to be happy and so does Holden. Don’t put it off. Be. Happy.”

I shoved at the puffy jacket again, but then I laughed too, closing my eyes and actually allowing myself to feel it. These last few days with him had been bliss. We’d been sharing my bedroom, falling asleep and waking up together every day. We made breakfast together in the mornings and dinner together at night.

Awake or asleep, he was always touching me. Reaching for me. He didn’t even seem to realize he was doing it. It was like he just wanted me close, a hand on my back at the store or his fingers finding mine under the blanket when we were watching TV.

There were so many small things that had become part of our routine that made me genuinely happy, like how he always kissed my forehead right before I fell asleep and always had coffee waiting for me when I came out of the shower.

Tasha let out a dreamy sigh. “If I ever meet a dude who puts that kind of smile on my face, make me marry him.”

I laughed, but before I could respond, my phone started ringing. Pulling it out of my back pocket, I glanced down at the screen and hope flared to life in my chest. “It’s my boss. God, I hope she’s letting me come back.”

Tasha crossed her fingers and lifted them to show me, getting up off the bed to head back to the closet.

I took the call and lifted the phone to my ear. “Hi, Marge. This is such a surprise, but I’m glad you called.”

“Alicia,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically crisp. “Hi. Are you able to speak?”

“Uh, yes. Just give me a minute.” I motioned toward my bedroom and backed out of Tasha’s room as she nodded her understanding. As I stepped out into the hall, I drew in a deep breath and tried to brace myself for whatever was coming. “Okay. I can talk now. What’s going on?”

“Well, I wanted to speak to you personally,” she said, sounding so apologetic that my stomach flipped. “I’m afraid I have bad news, Alicia.”

I dropped down on the edge of my bed. “You want me to stay away for longer, don’t you? A few days wasn’t enough for the fervor to die down.”

“No, it wasn’t.” I heard a soft sigh from her end of the line. “It’s worse than that. With all the renewed interest in the Thayer case, there have been some concerns raised from parents.”

“Excuse me, what kind of concerns?”

“Concerns about the children’s department librarian being a Thayer,” she said quietly. “I’m so sorry, Alicia, but I’m afraid there have been several complaints about this.”

“About *me*, you mean.” I stared blankly at my bedroom door, my heart twisting in my chest. “They don’t trust me to work with their children any longer.”

“No, they don’t. In fact, there’s a petition doing the rounds, and unfortunately, we cannot ignore it. I’m so, so sorry, but we’re going to have to let you go.”

My fingers went ice cold, my lungs seizing in my chest. “What? Mrs. Donnelly said it would only be a few days. She said the news cycle would move on and—”

“At the time, that was our official position,” she explained gently. “We still believe that all this ruckus surrounding your husband’s family will

eventually calm down, but I'm afraid the parents who frequent our library are still not comfortable with having a Thayer around their children. There's significant support on our board for this decision."

As she carried on explaining the legal consequences of keeping me on against the parents' and the board's wishes and the concerns that had been raised, I tuned her out. I caught every fifth or sixth word, but that was it.

It felt like I could physically see my world coming down all around me. All I'd ever wanted was to be a librarian. It had never been just a job to me. It was a dream come true. I'd put together that story corner with my bare hands and I'd lovingly curated the displays according to age, interests, and potential issues.

"I really am sorry," she said at the end of her spiel. "This is not a reflection of your work or our personal feelings."

"I understand," I whispered, swiping angrily at the tears streaming down my cheeks. "It's okay, Marge. I do understand."

"We'll pay out your remaining leave and provide a reference," she said. "Good luck, Alicia. I truly wish we could've kept you on."

I hummed a noncommittal sound, but when the call ended, I kept the phone pressed my ear for a long time, unable *not* to wonder if marrying Holden had been the biggest mistake of my life. Alex had found me when I was desperate. He'd known about the house and the taxes, and he'd offered me the money I needed to solve my problems. All of that was fair.

I'd known what I was signing up for, or at least, I'd thought I did, but I hadn't known about the Thayers' impending media circus or that their patriarch was about to hit the news again. Maybe Alex hadn't known how bad it was going to get, but he hadn't even given me a heads-up.

Now, because of something I hadn't known—couldn't have known since it wasn't public knowledge at the time—I'd lost my job. I'd lost my normal life. My aunt had sought me out after *ten years* to demand money and my boss had told me that getting fired wasn't a reflection of my work.

What that implied was that it was a reflection of my new family. As was the fact that my aunt suddenly wanted money from me.

Is this really what my life has become?

"Alicia?" Tasha called down the hall. "Are you okay? I'm going to start loading up the boxes or I won't get to my last class on time."

I cleared my throat and wiped at my cheeks again, but they were dry now. Shoving all my feelings and questions down, I stood up and slid my

phone back into my pocket, determined to act like nothing was wrong.

Determined to act like Holden, actually. God, I suddenly understand the man a lot better. It's easier to just pretend, isn't it?

When I walked back into Tasha's bedroom, she looked up, smiling as she tossed another roll of her tape onto her bed. "What did Marge want?"

"Nothing," I said, striding over to the nearest box and picking it up. "She was just checking in. Can I take this down to the car?"

She nodded, scooping up a box of her own and following me out. I could feel her watching me as we loaded up the first round of boxes, then the next, and then the next. Eventually, she sighed and leaned with her elbow on the roof of her car.

"Okay, what's really going on?"

"Nothing," I repeated, holding her gaze dead-on, but refusing to give her anything. I wasn't ready to admit it out loud. "I'm fine. Really. I guess maybe I'm just tired."

If Holden could shove it down and go about his life like it wasn't falling apart, then so could I. I loved him. I knew that now. I just didn't know if I could survive being part of his family and I had absolutely no clue what to do about it.

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CHAPTER 41

HOLDEN

Alicia sat farther away from me on the plane than I'd been expecting, choosing a seat in a cluster with Mom and Jane instead being anywhere near me. It was only a few feet, but the distance was driving me insane. I'd already spent the better part of the week pretending I hadn't noticed that something was up with her, but she'd definitely been weird these last few days.

Quiet and withdrawn, she'd spent most of her time curled up on the couch with a book, barely even looking at me unless I spoke directly to her. At first, I'd thought maybe it was just a real good book, but her silence felt different somehow, like it came with an agenda.

I just had no fucking idea what that agenda was or where it had come from.

"Are you going to stare at her for the entire flight?" Wyatt asked from across the aisle.

"I'm not staring."

He snorted. "We've been in the air for eleven minutes and you've done nothing but stare."

"I'm not staring. I'm…" I trailed off, because I was staring. Staring and trying to figure out if I was in a fight to save my marriage and just didn't know it yet. "I'm contemplating."

Wyatt chuckled. "From where I'm sitting, contemplating and staring look very much like the same thing."

"Yeah, well, you should've chosen a better place to sit."

“Maybe I’m not the one who should’ve chosen a different seat, buddy.” He inclined his chin pointedly toward the empty space beside my wife. “Go. Talk to her. Whatever it is, I’ve been told communication is key.”

I scoffed. “Whoever told you that is an idiot. Communication requires both parties to participate. The real key is to figure out what I did wrong and to fix it.”

He laughed. “You know, I think you’re becoming fluent in *husband*. Good luck, man. That sounds tough.”

As I nodded, he went back to his laptop and I raked my fingers through my hair, lifting my gaze back to Alicia. Jane had stood up at some point during our exchange and went to join Alex, Colin, Deja, and the kids near the front. Mom was chatting to Alex’s flight attendant near the bar, their quiet conversation about tea drifting to my ears.

Suddenly realizing that this was my shot, I got up and moved to the oversized leather seat next to hers. She had a book open in her lap, but she hadn’t turned a page since we’d taken off. When I dropped down beside her, she glanced up, giving me a soft smile before looking back down at the book.

My insides rebelled against the loss of eye contact, everything in me needing those pretty hazel eyes to look into mine when she told me what the actual fuck was going on. While I’d been busy with class all week, I’d tried to talk to her more times than I could count, but she just kept telling me she was fine.

Obviously, however, she was *not* fine. In fact, she was about as far away from fine as fine could be, but I didn’t know how to bridge the gap between us right now. It just felt so fucking wide, especially because I strongly suspected that she was putting this distance between us because of how I’d been acting about my dad.

Finally, when she just kept staring at that page like it held the answers to the mysteries of the universe, I broke. Alex’s private jet with the entire Thayer family aboard—those who still lived in Chicago, anyway—was *not* the ideal place for a private conversation, but I kept my voice down and reached for her hand.

“You’re not reading,” I murmured as I wound my fingers around hers. “Why?”

“I’m trying to,” she said lightly, finally glancing up at me again with a soft smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Neither did her teasing tone. “My

husband just keeps insisting on talking to me while I'm doing it."

"You've been on the same page since we took off."

She shrugged. "I like this page."

"It must be one hell of a page." I peered over her shoulder, my heart pulsing when I realized it wasn't even a whole page. It was the start of a new chapter, only one short paragraph sitting below a drawing of an elaborate map, a number, and the location where this part of the story would be set. "That's, like, four lines, baby."

"Yeah, but the map is interesting."

I sighed and leaned back against the plush leather chair, my fingers still wound around hers, but I noticed she hadn't adjusted her grip to wrap hers around mine in turn. "How do I make it up to you?"

A slight frown puckered her brow, but she lowered her gaze back down to the map. "I'm fine, Holden. There's nothing to make up for."

Obviously, there was, but maybe she'd tell me once we were alone. While I was keeping it as a surprise for her, I'd booked us into a hotel away from everyone else, a little boutique establishment in Tribeca where we could have some time to ourselves without twelve people appearing at our door every other minute.

We would have to have dinner with the family tonight, but I had plans for breakfast in bed tomorrow and a walk through the city in the evening after the baby shower if she wanted one. There would be no distractions. No studying or class, no Court, no Tasha, and hopefully, no press.

I'd been planning our weekend together for days, hoping that some time away from it all would help both of us to just breathe again. God knew, I needed it. Maybe she did too.

"You're thinking so loudly, I can hear you," she murmured. "What's going on in that gigantic brain of yours?"

I brought our joined hands to my mouth and brushed a kiss against her knuckles. "You'll see when we land. In the meantime, you could tell me what's been going on in yours."

"Holden." She groaned, withdrawing her hand and dropping it in her lap instead. Dressed in soft, comfortable jeans and a pale pink sweater, her golden hair was loose. She looked so pure, so innocent, that it fucking killed me to know that *I'd* brought this heartache into her life. Whatever she was struggling with right now, it was because of *me*. "I told you, I'm fine."

"You're not, Alicia. You've barely spoken to me all week."

“That’s not true.”

“It is. You said maybe six words to me this morning before we left the house.”

She sighed. “I said good morning.”

“Exactly, that was two of the six.” I turned in the seat to look at her, burning to reach for her again, but I didn’t. “Why are you being weird?”

“You’re being weird too.”

“Yeah, but weird is my normal,” I said, exhaling a heavy breath through my nostrils. “Can we please just talk?”

When she looked at me again, I thought she might actually tell me, but instead, she reached across the space she’d put between us and took my hand again. “I’m okay. Really.”

I laced our fingers together, grateful she was at least touching me again but still not believing what she’d said. Ultimately though, I couldn’t exactly force it out of her at thirty thousand feet with my family on the same quiet, private jet, so I squeezed her hand and leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes and willing New York to appear faster.

It felt like it took several years to get there, but when we finally arrived at our hotel, we checked into a room overlooking the water. Floor-to-ceiling windows provided the kind of views that belonged on a postcard. Alicia immediately gravitated toward them, folding her arms as she drifted closer to the glass and stared out at the city.

I dropped our bags beside the bed and went to join her, hesitating for a second before I stepped up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her close to my chest. “What do you think?” I asked quietly. “Do you like it?”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “It’s beautiful, but it must’ve cost a fortune. I thought we were all just going to stay with Ryan and Maggie.”

“We could’ve, but I thought it might be nice to make it into a quiet weekend for just the two of us. We’ll have to go to the shower tomorrow and dinner tonight, but outside of that, we can do our own thing. Sleep in. Go exploring. Whatever we want.”

She hummed a sound but didn’t say anything—or bring her hands up to mine where they were wrapped around her. For a long minute, I didn’t know what to do next, so I just watched the sailboats and the yachts gliding

past the shoreline on the Hudson. I pressed a kiss to her hair and reluctantly let go.

Alicia glanced at me over her shoulder when I took a step back, her head cocking before she finally turned to face me. “What is it?”

“Are we okay?” I asked. “Because it really doesn’t feel like we are.”

“We’re fine,” she said, but it came a beat too late, her eyes just a touch too focused on something behind me. Her arms even came up to cross over her chest again. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“I don’t know, but that wasn’t a very convincing yes.”

She finally looked right at me, but her arms remained tightly crossed and her cheeks were a little ashen now. “We’re okay.”

“Are you feeling sick?” I asked. “You’re looking pale and there’s a pharmacy right down the block. If you need anything, I can—”

“I’m not sick.” She gave me a tired smile and backed toward the bed. “Maybe I just need to lie down a bit.”

As she spun and headed toward it, I thought about going to lie down next to her and pulling her into my arms, but instead, I stayed exactly where I was, terrified touching my own wife might make everything worse.

But maybe I was imagining things. Maybe everything that had happened with the media and the library had rattled her more than I’d realized. There was a possibility that she could really just be exhausted. We could rest this weekend and maybe even come out the other side actually being okay.

For a few hours, I wanted that to be true so badly that I almost believed it, but it all came tumbling down at dinner. At first, everything was fine. She even started looking relaxed as she laughed with Maggie and Deja, holding Cam on her lap until the food came.

I put my hand on her thigh under the table and she covered it with her own. While we ate, Alex and Colin regaled us with tales of what all the Westwood brothers and their families had been getting up to, regularly reducing the entire table into stitches of laughter. After the plates had been cleared, however, Mom turned her attention fully to Alicia, both women seemingly enjoying catching up until Mom finally mentioned the library.

“How are things going at work, sweetheart? I hope all this nonsense with Court hasn’t been causing you any trouble.”

Alicia froze, turning into a pillar of salt beside me. Her hand tightened in mine and the color drained from her cheeks so fast, my mother frowned.

“Oh, darling. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“No. It’s okay.” Alicia reached for her glass and took a sip of water. “I, uh. I don’t work there anymore.”

My heart dropped straight out of my ass. “What?”

She glanced at me, shrugging despite the tears I saw welling in her eyes. “I lost my job a few days ago.”

I blinked hard, my heart suddenly trying to claw its way out of my throat as disbelief ricocheted through me. All week long, I’d been with her. I’d asked her countless times if she was okay. I’d complained about midterms and told her what was going on in my classes. We’d sat down together every night for dinner and she’d been carrying *this* around while I’d been obsessing over whether she was angry with me because I wouldn’t talk to Court?

Holy fucking shit. Why didn’t she tell me?

Mom reached across the table and squeezed Alicia’s arm. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. I know it’s hard, but you’ll find something better.”

Alicia gave her a strained smile and nodded, but as Mom launched into a full-blown maternal pep talk, I barely heard a word. Alicia had loved *that* job. *That* library. Maybe she would find something better eventually, but she shouldn’t have to.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This is my fault, isn’t it? My wife had lost her job because of my last name. *Because of me.*

While she hadn’t said it in so many words, the timing was too coincidental for that not to be what this had been about. Those articles had come out about our marriage, naming her as a Thayer and plastering her face all over the paper, and suddenly, she’d gotten fired.

I felt a cold sweat break out across my entire body when it dawned on me that I’d handed her this disaster. When I’d put that ring on her finger, I’d essentially branded her with a scarlet letter that would follow her around for the rest of her life. Which was *exactly* what my father had done. He’d branded us with that same letter and *I’d* printed it all over Alicia’s life. While I’d sworn I would never become him, here I was, the reason my wife had lost her job and frankly would probably lose her entire career.

Being married to me had made it all implode. *Because let’s get serious. No one is going to hire her anytime soon. Not while she shares my last name.*

Just like my father, I wasn’t a savior or a protector. Everything I touched turned to shit. I’d ruined this woman’s life because I’d wanted access to a trust fund, and sure, she’d gotten to keep her house, but at what cost?

Because right now, to me, the price seemed to have been not only her career, but her hopes and dreams too. Maybe even her future. And that? That price was just way too high to be acceptable.

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CHAPTER 42

ALICIA

As soon as the hotel room door clicked shut behind us, I knew we weren't going to be pretending everything was fine. Holden didn't even take off his jacket before he spun to face me. His dark blond hair was mussed after the amount of times he'd shoved his hands through it, and a storm raged behind those blue eyes.

The sharp angles of his face seemed to have been molded in stone as he narrowed his eyes at me, his chin high, and a muscle feathering in his jaw. "Why didn't you tell me?"

My stomach rolled at the hurt in his voice, the pain, and the definite underscoring of betrayal. I strode over to the bed and kicked off my shoes, then lifted both hands to unfasten an earring, sliding it out before I started on the next.

"I didn't know how," I admitted quietly, continuing with my nightly routine. If I didn't give myself something else to focus on, I was going to fall apart. Dropping the earrings on the nightstand with a soft clatter, I moved on to the clasp of my necklace. "It was a lot and it came out of nowhere. I needed time to process and I didn't know what to say to you when I couldn't even fully comprehend it myself."

He scoffed. "Here's a thought. You could have started with, *Holden, I got fired today.* God, Alicia, I asked you so many times if something was wrong."

"I know."

"Then why the *hell* didn't you tell me?"

After pulling the necklace free, I slid a few bangles off my arm and set them down on the nightstand too, but since the next step was taking off my dress to change into pajamas, I strode over to the windows and looked out at the city lights. There was no way I was getting undressed right now, and since I couldn't bring myself to look at him, I just focused on the dancing light reflecting off the water and tried to keep myself from bursting into tears.

"I was embarrassed," I said quietly, hugging my arms around my chest in an attempt to physically keep myself together. "You don't know what it's like to get that call and I hope you never have to find out, but it's not exactly fun."

"Which is why I could've been there for you. Hell, I *should've* been there for you, but that's pretty fucking hard when the person you share a home with is hiding shit."

"I wasn't trying to hide it." I spun to face him. "I was just trying to figure out what I was going to do."

"Right, and you thought it'd be best do that without me. Like I don't factor into the decision at all."

"That's not true," I snapped as his words sliced deep into my chest. "That's not it at all, actually. Shit, Holden. I wanted to come to you with a plan so that I didn't feel so pathetic."

"So you decided to lie to me for a week?" His eyebrows pinched together, hurt glittering in his eyes. "Did it ever occur to you that we could've figured it out *together*? We're married, Alicia. Last I checked, that means that when you make plans for the future, you do it with the other person. You don't lie to them."

"I didn't *lie*."

"You lost your job and proceeded to tell me you were okay. For a fucking *week*. How is that not lying? Clearly, you're not okay and I don't even know what happened. I don't know why they fired you or if there's a way to help you get your job back. I don't—"

"There isn't," I cut in, hugging myself tighter as I held his stormy gaze. "It turns out you were right about how the public views a Thayer. That's what happened. The story broke in the press, people found we were married, and then some of them decided I was a problem."

His face fell, the fight draining out of him, but his shoulders remained rigid, a different kind of hurt suddenly brewing behind those eyes. "So that

is what happened? You got fired because you're married to me."

My heart pulled toward him, but I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around his neck and whisper all sorts of promises and reassurances about how everything was going to be okay. "I don't blame *you*, Holden. Parents just didn't want me working with their children anymore. There were complaints and my boss said it wasn't about my performance or that I'd done anything specifically for them to complain about. It just…"

"It is what it is," he finished for me, suddenly looking so defeated and so devastated that I almost wished he'd just get angry again. "You should've told me."

"I'm sorry I didn't," I said quietly. "There was nothing you could do, though. I knew you'd want to try and I didn't want to put that on you on top of everything else. You have enough on your plate."

"If I'd known, I would've scraped everything else off the plate." He held my gaze intently but didn't take a step closer like he usually would.

It was like I could see those gears in his head turning, pointing all the guilt inward, so I shook my head and let out a soft scoff, needing to draw him back out. "That's why I didn't tell you. I didn't want you scraping everything else off your plate because there genuinely is nothing you can do. You would've skipped out on your midterms and become even angrier with your father, and neither of those things would've gotten me my job back."

As painful as it was to say that to him, that was our reality. This wasn't temporary. It was my life now. Every job application would have my name on it and every employer would Google me. Every time our picture appeared in a paper, people would remember exactly who I was married to.

I was a part of his world now, and clearly, that world had teeth. Holden had tried to warn me and I hadn't gotten it. And now it was too late.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he finally murmured as that light in his eyes went out. The gears had stopped turning, and while it was subtle, I knew him well enough by now to recognize when he was retreating behind that cold, logical part of himself. "If you want out, you can get out."

I wouldn't have been more surprised if an Egyptian cobra had reared up right in front me. Stumbling back a step, I blinked hard and tried to remember that he didn't mean it. He didn't want me to, but…

"The prenup protects you," he said, his voice so painfully calm that it was hard not to wonder if maybe he did want me to take the exit ramp after

all. “You’d still have the house and the money. Everything Alex promised you would stay. You’d be set for life, Alicia.”

“You think I want out?” I whispered. “Do you really think that little of me?”

He shrugged—fucking *shrugged*—those eyes more gray than blue now that the storm that’d been raging behind them was gone. Instead, they’d turned completely flat. Like none of this affected him at all. “I think maybe this isn’t what you signed up for and that’s okay.”

“No, it’s really not.”

“You lost your job.”

“Because I’m married to *you* and I didn’t even tell you right away because I didn’t want you to think exactly what you’re thinking right now, and now, you’re offering me money to leave.”

“No, I’m telling you that you don’t have to stay because of money.”

A part of me deep down inside cracked straight down the middle. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what? If there’s something I’m missing, then explain it, Alicia, but from where I’m standing, you have nothing to gain by staying married to me, but everything to lose.”

But if I leave, then I lose you. And I love you. I know that wasn’t part of the agreement, but I love you and losing you would be worse than losing anything else.

As those thoughts tumbled through my head, I realized what an idiot I’d been for falling for him. Holden had married me for reasons I still wasn’t clear on, but I was clear about the fact that he’d never wanted to be married or to have kids.

Which makes this even worse.

“You know what?” I finally said, forcing myself to speak past the agony tearing me up inside. “You’re right. This wasn’t what I signed up for.”

My heart was pounding so hard that it hurt, but there was one more thing I had to say before I cut off my own emotions too. One more thing I’d been silently struggling to come to terms with for days, too scared to say anything because if I did it might become real. But if we were at a place where the contract was back to being front and center, then it was time he knew. “My period is ten days late, so I guess congratulations are in order. You’re getting that heir we agreed to.”

His entire face went blank, those eyes sliding shut and staying that way for much longer than a regular blink. “What?”

“That’s what the contract says, isn’t it?” My voice was shaking so badly that I could barely get the words out, each syllable feeling like it was tearing another hole in the fabric of my soul. “Marriage and a promise of an heir. Whatever was in it for you, you can tell Alex it’s time he gives it up. You’ve fulfilled your promises.”

“That isn’t—”

“It’s fine,” I snapped. “I’ll be happy for you, but after this weekend, we’ll go back to the way things were. We’ll stay in separate bedrooms and we’ll be together in name only.”

He looked like I’d slapped him. “Alicia, stop.”

“No. It’ll be easier this way, Holden. We’ll just have to get used to it.”

Blinking hard, he took a step toward me, but I turned my back. I couldn’t let him touch me. If he did, I’d fall apart completely and I couldn’t afford that right now.

I desperately wanted him to tell me I was wrong. I wanted him to tell me that he *knew* I’d never choose money over him, and more than anything, I wanted to know that I wasn’t alone in this. That I wasn’t the only one who’d fallen in love despite the foundation of our relationship being signatures on some pieces of paper.

Instead of any of that, I heard a harsh exhale, then footsteps, and by the time I turned, the door was falling shut behind him. Holden was gone.

Part of me expected the floodgates to open as the realization sank in, but it didn’t happen. Despite feeling like my insides were being torn apart by a rabid tiger, I didn’t shed a single tear. There was just nothing inside except a void. My body felt heavier than ever as I finally changed into pajamas and climbed into bed.

I curled onto my side, pulling the blankets over myself and going so completely numb that it felt like I was in shock. When I’d taken that deal Alex had offered, I’d accepted the money and married a man I hadn’t known because he could give me everything I couldn’t afford to keep otherwise.

Holden had known that. Hell, he’d accused me that first week of being just another gold digger who was in his life for money, and I had been. At the end of the day, he hadn’t been wrong. I’d had all these noble excuses and justifications, but I’d done everything he’d accused me of.

I’d simply made the unforgivable mistake of falling in love with him. That was entirely my own fault.

My hands lowered to my stomach of their own accord. I didn’t know yet if the heir was somewhere in there, but it was a very real possibility. A tiny life could’ve already started growing inside me. It should’ve felt terrifying, wonderful, and impossible to stop thinking about all at once, but instead, I felt nothing.

Nothing but the cold certainty that maybe Holden was gone for good and worse, maybe he’d never even really been mine to lose in the first place.

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CHAPTER 43

HOLDEN

If I hadn't known where I was going, I might've gone somewhere stupid, but Alex had texted after dinner to say that he, Ryan, and Wyatt were meeting up at a bar to blow off some steam before the shower. I'd had zero intentions of joining them, but as I blew out of our hotel, I hailed a cab and went to involve my brothers in my bad decisions.

Naturally, because Alex had chosen the bar, it wasn't the hole in the wall kind of place I would have ended up drowning my sorrows in. This was an exclusive, high-end whiskey-tasting room. With dark and moody lighting, cigar lounges, and thickly carpeted floors, it felt like I should've been storming into a meeting with the mob when I marched in.

Unfortunately, the patrons looked more like investment bankers than a kingpins, and that included my brothers. Part of me registered disappointment over that fact.

Getting into a fight with a member of the mob would've helped me blow off steam much better than sipping expensive whiskey while discussing the ambiance provided by the dimly lit crystal chandeliers.

The other part of me, however, the larger part, was too messed up about where I was at with Alicia to register much of anything. I stalked across the carpeted floors like a predator determined to rip apart anything in its path, finally finding Ryan sitting at the corner of the wooden bar with a drink in front of him and Wyatt on one side. Alex stood on the other, but he took one look at me and didn't even ask if I was okay, which was how I knew I seriously wasn't.

Instead, he just pointed at a stool and perched his hands on his hips. “Sit. Talk. Wyatt, get the man a drink so he can do that too.”

Seconds after I’d sat down, a tumbler of whiskey appeared in front of me, but I shook my head. “I’m not drinking tonight.”

Ryan’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you dying?”

“Fuck you.”

Wyatt chuckled. “Nah, he sounds fine.”

I blew out a heavy breath and propped my elbows on the bar, burying my face in my hands without really meaning to. It just happened, but it felt right, so I pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes and groaned.

“I fucked up,” I muttered, my voice muffled, but Alex must’ve heard me anyway.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Everything.”

I felt him move in beside me at the bar. “Okay, everything. I got that, but maybe you should start at the beginning. What happened, Holden?”

I finally lifted my head, seeing Ryan and Wyatt with identical expressions of worry on their faces, but Alex was calm, so I focused on him. “I fucked it up.”

“Yeah, I heard that part too,” he said quietly. “What exactly is it that you think you fucked up, though?”

“Alicia, and I don’t think I fucked it up. I *know* it.” All three of them were watching me closely, but no one said anything. No one asked anything, which sucked. I could handle questions. They gave me something to fight against. Silence, on the other hand, gave me nowhere to hide. “You heard what she told Mom at dinner, right?”

“She lost her job.” Alex said, his jaw tightening. “How does that relate to you fucking things up?”

“Parents complained. That’s why she got fired. No one wants the librarian dealing with their kids to be a Thayer.”

Alex’s eyes turned ice cold. “I’ll handle it.”

“No.”

“I can talk to the board. We can—”

“I said *no*, Alex. The damage is already done.” I looked right at him. “The board can’t change the minds of the community members. Trust me, if I thought it would help, I’d go balls to the wall on this, but I can’t because it would probably only make things worse.”

Ryan groaned. “He might not be wrong. If you do try to strong-arm the board and the community finds out, there’ll be hell to pay. The headlines will be raving about the entitlement of the Westwoods and the Thayers and how we think the rules don’t apply to us.”

Alex scoffed. “They don’t always.”

“Wow. You really are a snob.” Wyatt smirked, but his expression sobered when he turned back to me. “We’re sure that’s what happened? I didn’t hear her tell Mom that.”

“No, but that’s only because she didn’t. She only told *me* after dinner. It gets worse, though. I didn’t even know she got fired until she told Mom. She didn’t say anything when it happened.”

Alex sighed, squeezing the side of his neck for a beat before he glanced at me again. “Okay, that’s not ideal, but we can find her another position. There are dozens of libraries in Chicago.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?” he asked. “We can fix this, Holden.”

“We can’t, because the point is that she didn’t lose her job because she wasn’t good enough. She lost it because she married *me*.” As I said it, it was like the emotional dam I’d built over the last decade just burst open, spewing feelings I’d been keeping bottled up for years all over Alex’s fancy whiskey bar. “I fucking knew something like this could happen. That’s why I stayed away from people for so long. This family is poison and all of you know it. As soon as we get involved in something, it dies. Like Alicia’s career. Except this time, it wasn’t Dad who did it. It was me. So yeah, I fucked up. I fucked up just by existing in her proximity.”

“You’re not Court,” Alex said. “Also, not for nothing, you didn’t fuck it up or poison her career, Holden. This is a rough patch. That’s all.”

I scoffed, but the thing about anger was that it was so super useful until it wasn’t, and as soon as it wasn’t useful anymore, it had a tendency to turn into something even uglier. “It’s not a rough patch. It’s what being a selfish dick looks like in real life.”

“What are you talking about?” Wyatt asked quietly, glancing at the drink I still hadn’t touched. “Maybe you should take a sip and—”

“No,” I snapped. “I haven’t told any of you this, but I met Alicia before we got married. She was on that stupid bicycle one night when I was walking home and she nearly got hit by a car. She didn’t, thank God, but from the very first second I saw her, I wanted her.”

Although I hadn’t even admitted it to myself until now, it was true. In that split second when I’d first looked into her eyes, my entire world had narrowed down to one person I hadn’t even known. “I wanted her so fucking badly, but she disappeared. Then I saw her again when I found out she was the roommate of a girl in one of my classes, and I wanted her even more.”

“Then you walked into that conference room and found out she was the girl I was setting you up with,” Alex concluded. Sighing, he gave me the softest smile I’d ever seen on him. “Well, that clears up a few things I’ve been wondering about.”

“Good for you,” I grunted, then sighed and sank my face into my hands again. “I love her, man. I didn’t mean for it to happen, but it did, and look at where that got her. As soon as I saw her in that conference room, I should’ve turned around and walked away. I shouldn’t have done this to her.”

Alex brought a hand to my shoulder. “You didn’t do this to her. Don’t take responsibility for something other people did. Her getting fired isn’t on you. If anyone is at fault here other than the fucking press, it’s me. I brought her into this, didn’t I?”

“What, so you want me to just pass the buck?” I scoffed. “That’s practically a trademarked Court Thayer move, Alex. He always had some excuse. Someone else to blame. I am responsible for this. It’s on me.”

“No, it’s not,” he said firmly. “First, I’m happy you’re finally starting to realize that you’re not like him, but more than that, this honestly isn’t your fault. The press branded you as something you’re not and they sensationalized your marriage for clickbait. That’s not on you.”

“But I *am* like him,” I muttered. “I just ruined her life—”

“I hate to break it you, man, but I doubt Dad ever sat in a bar trying to figure out how to protect his wife,” Ryan said dryly. “Court doesn’t get all twisted up about his actions hurting other people.”

I blew out a slow breath. “I still should’ve done a better job of protecting her.”

“None of us can protect the people we love from every asshole in the world,” Alex said. “Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“What does Alicia want?” Ryan asked. “Let’s break up this pity party and think logically. What does she want?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Have you asked her?”

I gave him a look. “She won’t talk to me. We got into it back at the hotel and now…”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “Have you given her a reason not to talk to you?”

I almost told him to fuck off again, but instead, I drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, I did, and now, I think she’s wondering if marrying me was a mistake. The worst part is that she’s right. She never should’ve done it.”

Alex sighed. “We’ll figure it out, okay?”

I nodded, but I didn’t tell him I wasn’t sure there was anything left to figure out anymore. I also didn’t tell him that I’d basically told her to leave me despite the fact that she might be pregnant with my child. *Fuck, that still seems so surreal.*

“I have to go.” I suddenly pushed to my feet, leaving before any of them could ask why, but Ryan had been right.

I should’ve found out what she wanted, and now that I knew that, I just hoped it wasn’t too late. When I pushed out into the crisp night, sirens blared in the distance and music spilled out of bars and clubs all around me, but I hardly even noticed any of it.

All I could think about was Alicia. How pale she’d been. How quiet. Her period being late didn’t necessarily mean anything. Even *I* knew that.

God, I’d put her under enough stress lately that I might’ve scared it away forever, but also, it could mean something, and if it did? *Holy shit. A baby. Our baby. She might be pregnant with my child.*

Instead of terror or fear whipping through me at the realization, it was like a chest of hope had cracked open, flooding me with the emotion so intensely that I almost couldn’t breathe. My feet slammed to a stop completely by themselves, part of me wanting to burst out into hysterical laughter while another thought we should opt for tears.

A devil on my shoulder whispered that we should just run all the way back to the hotel and celebrate until the sun came up. Preferably while naked, and sweaty, and—

I groaned. *Fuck, this moment really should’ve been so different.*

Instead of happiness and celebration, my wife was lying alone in a hotel bed in a city she didn’t know, angry and hurting. It almost knocked the wind right back out of my sails, but then I thought back to the conversation I’d

just had with my brothers and I pulled my phone out of my pocket, making a call I never thought I'd make as I kept walking down the street.

Two minutes later, it was done. I was getting my act together. I had to. Whether or not there was a baby on the way or if somewhere in my very DNA, Dad's fucked-upness was going to eventually take me over, I had to grow the hell up.

Alex's first reaction had been to try and fix it for me, like he had been doing for years. Wyatt had been convinced I needed a drink to calm down and Ryan had made me realize that my first question should've been about her. What *she* wanted. How she was feeling.

God, I hate that all that's true. Alex should've been able to trust that I would have fixed it if it was possible. Wyatt should've known I could deal with intense emotions sober, even if past outbursts hadn't quite proven that. I should've had answers for Ryan.

It was time to get it together, and though I had no fucking clue how to go about doing that, I passed a pharmacy and headed inside on a whim. Just absently wandering through the aisles, I finally ended up in the toiletry section and picked up a few things I knew Alicia liked.

Her shampoo. The stupidly expensive lip balm she insisted was better than every other lip balm on earth but never wanted to buy because it cost too much. The tea she drank before bed. Chocolate.

Finally, I found myself standing in front of the pregnancy tests for what felt like an hour, but there were so many that I didn't even know where to start. I considered calling one of my brothers. Alex, Colin, and Ryan had been through this, but in the end, I didn't even reach for my phone. I was doing this myself.

Do we need digital, or early detection, or rapid result? Should I get a two-pack. No, a three-pack.

By the time I made it to the cashier, I'd decided to stick with the simplest looking one. My hands shook as I emptied my basket onto the counter. The dude who rang me up didn't ask questions or give me any of the weird or knowing looks like I'd sort of been expecting. He barely even glanced at me, sending me on my way a minute later with a bag hanging from my hand containing a little box that could change everything.

And it could change it for the better, I suddenly realized.

While I'd never wanted marriage or kids, it occurred to me as I held that bag that I desperately wanted it all with her. I wanted the stupid, simple test

to be positive so she and I could have a baby we'd raise together. I wanted to go home and finish fixing our deck so I could finally put up the Halloween decorations and then I'd go even bigger for Christmas.

I wanted to renovate Tasha's room into a nursery and move my stuff into Alicia's bedroom for good. To turn it into *ours*. As it sank in how badly I wanted all that, it hit me so hard that I could've wept with the hope spilling through my veins.

Now, all I had to do was prove to her that I was serious. And that I could become the kind of man she could depend on rather than one who walked away.

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CHAPTER 44

ALICIA

Sometime in the early morning hours, I woke up when the mattress shifted behind me. It took me a second to remember where I was, but when I cracked open an eye and saw the faint glow of New York City beyond the windows, it all came tumbling back in.

Holden came back to me.

For a few hours there, I honestly hadn't known if he would. I heard the quiet rustle of a paper bag and he reached over me, setting a few candy bars down on my nightstand. All my favorites.

My heart tried warming, but I refused to let it. For all I knew, this was his version of a goodbye. Although judging by the fact that his forearm was bare, he'd taken off his jacket and pushed his sleeves up to his elbows, but I didn't turn to look whether he'd done it while packing his bags.

On the other hand, the mattress had shifted because he'd climbed into bed with me, which seemed an odd thing to do if he was leaving, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he settled in under the covers, sliding one arm carefully around my waist and fitting his chest to my back. Tucking himself around me like a shield, it felt he was trying to make sure I was there and couldn't leave.

The Ice King of Chicago, curling himself around his wife like he couldn't bear not to touch her. Honestly, after the way he'd left and how numb I'd been, the gesture was too comforting not to relax into. I leaned into it, letting my body mold to his. In response, his arm tightened around me, drawing me even closer, but we still didn't talk.

Okay, so he's not leaving. That's a start, right? He came back to me. He's here. Maybe that means something.

While I doubted chocolate and cuddles could be a true solution to marital discord, just for tonight, for now, it felt like a step in the right direction. My eyes drifted shut again, and before I even knew it, exhaustion had dragged me under once more.

The next morning, the first thing I became aware of was the scent of coffee in the air. I cracked my eyes open to see Holden sitting on the chair beside the window with two takeout cups in his hands.

A tight, but genuine smile touched his lips when he noticed me looking at him. "Good morning, gorgeous."

"Morning," I murmured, my voice still thick with sleep, but when he held one cup out toward me, I pushed myself up and took it. "What's with the room service?"

The compliment too, but I won't bring that up right now. Hearing him call me gorgeous *isn't the worst way to start a day. Especially since I went to bed thinking he doesn't care about me at all.*

Holden shrugged one broad shoulder under a fitted t-shirt, those eyes never leaving mine. "I guess I wanted you to wake up to a peace offering."

I wrapped my fingers a little tighter around the warmth of the cup and finally managed to return his tight, small smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We lapsed into silence for a long, awkward minute before I cleared my throat and glanced at him again. "Where did you, uh. I mean. You don't have to tell me, obviously, but where did you, uh…"

It was ridiculous, but I couldn't actually bring myself to finish the question. I wanted to know, but I also wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answer. A guy who looked like Holden, alone in Manhattan after a fight with his arranged wife?

The possibilities were endless and I hated every last one of them more than the next.

His smile grew a little more amused, at least some of the tension draining out of his features as laughter sparked to life in his eyes. "Where did I go? It's okay, Alicia. You can ask, and for the record, I do have to tell you. You're my wife. I'm pretty sure it's in the fine print of marriage as an institution."

As I kept holding his gaze, it didn’t escape my notice that he’d been very careful not to reference our situation or the contract at all. He’d added those last words fast enough that it made me think he specifically wanted to avoid making it sound like he was talking about our contract.

Interesting, but not definitive. Unfortunately.

I lifted my chin a little higher. “Okay, so where did you go?”

“Out with the boys,” he said without skipping a beat. “Alex took Ryan and Wyatt to this horribly uptight whiskey bar and I met up with them there.”

I frowned. I hadn’t smelled alcohol on him when he’d climbed into bed, and I would’ve since I hadn’t had any myself and he’d pressed himself so tight against me, but I knew better than to read anything into it. Despite the amusement that’d appeared in his eyes, the air between us was still much too tense, nothing we’d argued about at all resolved.

As I nodded, the brief moment of levity ended anyway when he reached into the pocket of the jacket hanging over the chair. It was the one he’d had on last night. As soon as I saw the box he pulled out, my stomach went ice cold.

“I also popped into a pharmacy and bought this.” He showed it to me but didn’t move to hand it over. Instead, he just tapped it on the side of his hand twice before sliding it back into his pocket. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m putting any pressure on you. I’m not. I just wanted to have one nearby in case.”

Strangely, he didn’t sound panicked or scared. He also didn’t sound excited, so there was that, but at the end of the day, he also wasn’t cold anymore. He wasn’t a shut-down drone with the emotional range of a teaspoon either.

Despite the tension, there was warmth in his eyes and something careful about his tone. He took a sip of his coffee and leaned back in the chair, completely ignoring that little box for now. “Did you know there are about forty different options for those things? I had no idea which one to get, but if I chose wrong, just tell me and I’ll go grab a different kind.”

The very thought of him standing in front of that shelf, mulling over which test to buy, brought a smile to my lips. “Which one did you go for?”

He looked vaguely guilty for a second before he gave me the first ever sheepish smile I’d seen from him. “The one that looked least likely to require an engineering degree to use.”

A short, quiet laugh shot out of me before I could stop it, but then I drew in a breath and gave my head a small shake as I glanced at the corner of the box sticking out of his pocket. “Thank you, Holden. I appreciate the thought and the effort, but I’m not ready to take it.”

I waited for the disappointment or another flare of anger, but instead, relief flickered across those handsome features and he let out a breath that sounded like he might’ve been holding it. “Okay. I’d like to know at some point, but it doesn’t have to be today.”

My head tilted. “Are you ready for me to take it?”

“No.”

The answer came so fast that I knew it had to be honest, and although I was surprised, it also felt like a weight had lifted from my shoulders. “We’re about to spend the entire day with your family at a baby shower. Should we just shelve it until after?”

He nodded. “Yeah, for sure. Let’s do that. I want to know, but I don’t want to find out when we’re angry at each other or because it feels like an obligation to be fulfilled.”

My throat tightened, but I agreed. “I don’t either.”

After holding my gaze for another beat, he stood, leaving the jacket with that ridiculous little box that carried the weight of our future exactly where it was. “We should get going soon. I’ll give you some privacy to get ready. Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Pastries, it is.” He grinned, but it was still strained. He grabbed a different jacket and took off, leaving me with my stomach in knots and a strange but deep sense of disappointment.

Holden was my husband, but he was clearing out of an entire hotel suite to give me privacy when he’d already seen everything I had to offer. That could mean only one of two things, either it was a sign of respect or he’d lost interest in me.

Trying not to overthink it, I took a quick shower and dried my hair, then changed. By the time he got back with breakfast to go, I was ready. In the car on our way to Staten Island, I picked at the delicious selection of pastries he’d bought, wondering if I should just ask where his head was at with all this.

Maybe I should just tell him that I love him and see what he does with it. Or maybe that will send him off the deep end.

By the time we pulled up to Maggie and Ryan's massive house, I still hadn't decided what to do, so I decided to put a pin in that too. Holden helped me out of the car. His hand rested on my back as he guided me inside.

I leaned into even that tiny touch, allowing myself just a moment of comfort before my jaw dropped the second we walked inside. Maggie had decorated the entire house in orange and black, somehow managing to make pregnancy look like the ultimate Halloween event.

There were pumpkins everywhere. A variety of tiny and huge, orange, white, and everything in between. One had even been carved into the shape of a skull with a pacifier in its mouth.

"That's disturbing," Holden murmured behind me. "What was she thinking?"

"I heard that!" Maggie called happily, appearing from the doorway of a lounge off the hall we were in and grinning as she came over to hug me. "It's not disturbing. It's art."

"It's a cry for help."

"Your entire being is a cry for help," she retorted, smacking his arm. "Come say hi to everybody."

He smiled, so different now that we were here than he had been in that hotel room this morning. It was nice, though, seeing him relaxed and a little more carefree with the people he loved.

After leading us toward their enormous back garden, Maggie disappeared and I paused on the deck, utterly astounded by the amount of people who were here. They were everywhere, family members I recognized, but so many I didn't know.

"Holden!" a voice called from the shaded side of the deck and I turned with him, seeing a dark-haired man grinning like a loon and an extraordinarily beautiful, exotic-looking woman beside him.

Immediately, my brain connected the dots. *Isaac and Jasmine.*

Before we'd even moved, they were right in front of us, Isaac throwing his arms around his younger brother in a hug that looked like it might suffocate him. "Surprise!"

Holden groaned, but I could see the smile he was trying to fight and the joy lighting up his eyes as he returned his brother's enthusiastic, back-thumping hug. "What the hell are you two doing here? No one told us Egypt was invited."

Isaac laughed. “That’s because you’re the last one anyone tells anything to.”

To my utmost surprise, Holden joined in the laughter, smacking his brother’s back before letting him go. As they separated, Isaac turned to me with that massive, truly joyful grin still on his lips. “You must be Alicia. Welcome to the family.”

He tossed his arms around me next, drawing me in for an equally enthusiastic hug. So shocked that I couldn’t remember how to move my arms for a second, I caught Jasmine’s eye over Isaac’s shoulder and she chuckled. “Just make your peace with it now. He’s always been affectionate, but it’s even worse now that he’s been exposed to my culture. Our men wear their hearts of their sleeves. None of this broody, moody, bottling up business.”

As she said it, she waved directly at Holden. I laughed but he groaned. “Seriously? God, sometimes I forget how glad I am you live on the other side of the fucking world.”

Jasmine winked at me. “You see.”

Isaac finally released me and clapped Holden on the shoulder. “You know, when Colin told me you got married, I assumed it was a prank.”

“I’ve spoken to you on the phone, like, every other day since.” Holden glanced at me, his eyes softening when I laughed right along with them.

Isaac shrugged, those eyes shining with humor. “Yeah, but I didn’t know if I believed she was real.”

I watched the two of them together with genuine warmth flooding my chest. While I’d known Holden had called Isaac a few times about the coffee machine and the Halloween decorations, I hadn’t known they’d spoken quite as often as every other day. It was clear that these two were close, though.

Then again, Holden was like this with all of his brothers. Despite everything their family had gone through, or maybe because of it, they seemed to truly love each other. It was a dynamic I completely adored.

And I’m part of it now too. Sort of, anyway. Maybe one day, I really will be.

It occurred to me then that there were definite benefits to reap as a Thayer that had nothing to do with money. Family had always been important to me. I simply didn’t really have any to be close to.

If he and I manage to work this out, even if he doesn't love me, maybe I can still have this and maybe that could even be enough. My heart gave a pang of disagreement, but I leaned into Holden again when he led me off the deck after Isaac and Jasmine finally left us.

The rest of the afternoon passed in much the same vein, with too much happening to fully immerse myself in the misery of unrequited love. I was introduced to so many people that it made my head spin.

Nash Pembroke, Maggie's brother, approached us just as Isaac left. He was with several other Pembroke brothers, but I honestly couldn't remember their names. There were far too many people. We played ridiculous games, ate our body weight in snacks, and I sat with Maggie while she opened so many gifts, she'd be able to stock a small department store.

Every time I felt myself getting lost in the crowd, however, I found Holden, his eyes always already on me. All those hard edges between us seemed to soften as the afternoon wore on. We hadn't really made up at all, but I still loved the way he looked at me and I still wanted to reach for his hand whenever he was near.

So maybe there's hope for us yet. Maybe.

When he slipped his fingers through mine every so often during the day, I squeezed them just to let him know I still wanted him there. It almost felt like somewhere along the line, we'd both decided to just give each other a little more grace.

Perhaps showing each other that, despite the accusations, the guilt, and the uncertainty, neither of us had given up. It meant a lot, knowing that maybe my spiraling thoughts last night hadn't been quite accurate after all.

When we were finally on our way back to the hotel, we held hands in the back seat of the car, but neither of us said much. Holden opened my door for me when we arrived, his palm warm in the small of my back as we headed inside.

After we walked into the room, he shut the door behind us, then strode over to the minibar. "Can I get you anything? We've got some sodas and sparkling water."

I drifted over to the little sitting area by the window, my gaze catching on that little box still sitting in his jacket pocket where we'd left it this morning. Without even really thinking about it, I pulled it out and turned it over in my hands.

Holden turned to glance at me from the minibar, probably wanting an answer, but as soon as he saw the test in my hand, his eyebrows shot up. “Are you taking it?”

I shook my head, slowly lowering myself into an armchair before looking back into his eyes. “I don’t think I can do it yet.”

“Okay,” he said immediately. Zero hesitation. “Then we keep it until you’re ready.”

I searched his gaze. “Is that really okay with you?”

“Of course. What else would I say?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that you’d like to know if you really do have an heir on the way.”

Still without a second of hesitation, he abandoned the minibar without taking anything out of it and strode across the room, sinking to his haunches in front of me. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for. Fuck the heir. I want to know if I’m having a baby with you, but I can wait. I want to be in a better place too, Alicia.”

My eyes burned with the tears gathering behind them, my heart fluttering in my chest. “So do I. I guess it’s just that right now I don’t know what happens if it’s positive and that’s scary. I just… yeah.”

“Yeah.” He gave me a soft smile. “I don’t know what happens either, but we’ll cross whatever bridge we need to cross when we get to it, okay?”

Without breaking eye contact, he took the box out of my hand and set it down on the table, then leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “Whenever you’re ready is fine with me, Alicia. I promise. There’s no pressure.”

I nodded, bringing my head closer to his to rest my temple against it. “Okay. Can we go to bed now or did you have your heart set on a walk?”

He chuckled and slid an arm around my waist. “Bed sounds good to me, baby. Let’s do it. Tomorrow is another day and the city isn’t going anywhere. It’ll be right here when we have the energy to explore it.”

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CHAPTER 45

HOLDEN

For a long time, I'd done everything I could to avoid Thayer Steelworks. Then Jane and Colin had needed help covering for Ryan and I'd come back, really hitting my stride at the company for a while there. After the last time I'd been summoned here though, I'd honestly thought I would go back to avoiding this place like the plague.

If Court was going to be consulting, I figured I would once again start making a habit of driving at least three miles around the very building just in case, but here I was. Willingly.

The fact of the matter was that it was time to get serious. That was the decision I'd made back in New York and I was sticking to it. And for me, getting serious started right here.

Colin looked up when I walked into his office, his gaze flickering back down to the clock on the computer screen before he frowned at me. "You're early."

I smirked and shut the door. "I've been told it's a desirable professional trait."

"By whom?"

"Everyone who knows me."

He laughed and closed the folder in front of him, leaning back in his chair and pressing the intercom to order two coffees before he fixed his gaze on mine. "Alright, you've got me curious. I'm not sure I was expecting a call from you for at least the rest of the year, let alone straight after spending an entire weekend together. What's this about?"

“A job.”

He blinked rapidly. “A job?”

“Yes,” I said. “That work-study position, to be exact.”

His eyebrows inched up. “Last time we talked about this, you told me to shred the paperwork because you jumped the gun.”

“I lied.”

“I know.” As I crossed his office and dropped into the chair opposite his desk, he watched me closely, looking a little confused as his gaze tracked my movements. “Here’s the thing, Holden. You lied because I told you Dad might be getting involved again. Do you realize that might still be happening?”

“Yes.”

“And you still want to work here, despite the fact that he might be coming onboard as a consultant?”

“Yes.” I shrugged. “Look, I need the hours for my degree and I’m not interested in a favor. I don’t want you to invent a title for me or to assign me an executive assistant whose primary goal will be to prevent me from saying inappropriate things to the board.”

He scoffed down a laugh. “Okay, so no babysitter. No office on this floor. Anything else?”

“Yeah. I want to something I can actually learn from and where I can gain the practical experience I need, but I also can’t be in a position that will require seventy-hour work weeks.”

“That sounds reasonable,” he said after studying me for a moment. “What do you want to do, then? It sounds like you’ve given this a decent amount of thought, so hit me with it.”

“Logistics.”

His eyebrows shot all the way up this time. “You want me to put you in the manufacturing division?”

I nodded. “Supply chain. Distribution. Shipping. Inventory. Whatever you have on that side of the business. I’m not fussy.”

“Why?” he asked, standing up and striding toward the window. “You’ve never been in that division before.”

“That’s exactly why I want to go there now. When else am I going to have the opportunity to learn about that part of it?”

“They’ve been struggling with shipping schedules,” he said thoughtfully. “The logistics have become a low-key nightmare ever since

the GlobalStar expansion. It's never been particularly glamorous over there, but that's even more true right now. Trent's family is keeping us busy too. Between them and the Saads, it's been crazy."

"Fabulous. Sorting that out for you sounds like a dream come true."

He snorted. "I just want to make sure you know what you're asking. If I put you there, you'll be dealing with warehouse managers, carriers, suppliers, inventory software, customs documentation—"

"You're still not scaring me."

"You'll also be dealing with my wife and her family." He glanced at me over his shoulder. "Are you prepared for Basel, Khaled, and Jasmine freaking out about bringing a baby range into the States every other minute?"

"I love the Saads."

He laughed. "Are you really this eager to get your hands dirty?"

"Bring it on, baby."

Chuckling as he returned to his desk, he blew out a heavy breath, glanced at the ceiling like he was sending up a prayer, then nodded. "Okay, then. I'll put you with manufacturing and shipping, but don't come crying to me when the customs guys are mean or Khaled threatens to rip off your—"

"Got it," I said. "Khaled loves me. The Saads and I are tight, and if the boys are mean to me, I'll tell your wife."

"Deja is even meaner," he joked, then turned back to his computer and clicked something. "Since it's going to be a work-study position, you won't get an executive salary."

"Yep."

"You'll report to the operations manager and if you screw up—"

"Let me guess, you'll fire me?"

The corners of his lips curved ever so slightly. "Sure, if you want me to, but I was going to say I'll make you fix it."

"That's also acceptable."

Colin tapped rapidly at his keyboard for a few seconds, turned back to me, grinned like a smug hare, and leaned back in his chair again. "Welcome back to the fold, little brother. I knew you wouldn't be able to resist us forever."

I groaned, but deep down, those words affected me more than I'd thought they might. For so long, I'd distanced myself from everything

Thayer. They'd been trying to bring me back for years, but until my recent foray into the corporate structure, I'd never even considered it.

Now it sort of feels like coming home.

"How did you get that done so fast?" I asked finally. "What happened to the paperwork?"

He pumped his eyebrows at me. "I told you I knew you were lying before. I filled it out and submitted it. Your application for a work-study has already been accepted. We were just waiting for you to tell us about the placement."

I exhaled a long breath, nodded, and stood up, pretending that I didn't feel anything at all, but the truth was that this felt better than it probably should have. It felt right, even. "There's someplace I need to be tomorrow and maybe the day after, but I'll see you on Thursday?"

"Make it Monday," he said, winking when he looked up at me. "I'm going to make your life difficult, so you might as well enjoy this last week of freedom."

"You've been doing that since I was twelve," I said. "Trust me, I know how to handle you."

The door opened and his assistant brought in the coffee, so I stayed until it was done, taking the time to drill him on details of my new post. After, I'd barely even turned over the engine in my car when my phone rang, Alex's name appearing on the screen in my console.

I hit the button on the steering wheel to answer. "What's up, Alex? I'm just leaving the office, so if I lose you, it's because I died of shock about the fact that I went there voluntarily."

A brief pause followed and he laughed. "I think *I* almost just died of shock. What happened? Did Colin summon you for another ambush?"

"You heard about that, huh?"

"Yeah, but I still don't think it was an ambush." He sighed. "Anyway, is everything okay over there?"

"Apart from the fact that Colin is going to be having way too much fun with me as of next week, it's all good."

Alex paused again, clearly surprised by all of this. "You're doing the work-study there after all?"

"I am."

"Pity, I was hoping you'd ask to do it with me at W&S, but I guess we can't have it all."

I chuckled. “I wasn’t aware W&S was even on the table. Maybe next time?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Hey, I actually called because I need a favor. Don’t hang up on me, but I need you to come to the bank with me at some point this week.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“There’s some final paperwork for the trust before they’ll be able to formally transfer it all into your name. It’s just a few signatures, man.”

“I thought that was already done.”

“Most of it is, but there are a couple of documents that require your signature in person.” He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry. I know it’s a hassle, but—”

“Okay,” I said. “Yeah. It’s no problem. Of course, I’ll be there. Can we make it Thursday?”

There was yet another pause. “You’re agreeing?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?” he asked. “It was almost too easy.”

“What can I say? I’m maturing.”

“You have my sincere condolences,” he joked. “The descent into maturity is never easy, but I’m proud of you.”

“You would be.”

He laughed. “I’ll see you on Thursday, Holden. Don’t forget, okay?”

“I won’t,” I promised, then hung up and clicked into my message thread with Alicia.

Inhaling a deep breath, I decided to keep the message short and simple. I wanted to tell her what I was doing and where I was going, but since it might not end well, I didn’t want to get her hopes up.

Maybe I really am maturing.

Me: I have to go out of town for a couple days, so I’m not going to be home tonight or tomorrow night. Stay safe. I’ll miss you.

I hit send without overthinking it, tempted to add those three little words that had been burning my tongue for the last few days, but since I wanted to say those in person, I left it out. After tossing the phone down on the seat beside me, I backed out of my parking spot and drove.

This was a trip I never imagined I’d be making, but being with Alicia had changed something in me. I cared about her and about our future too much to keep putting it in jeopardy just because I was stubborn. Right now,

there was even a possibility that there was a baby in that future. A baby I desperately wanted with her.

While I didn't know yet what I was going to say when I finally got where I was going, I was done running from that moment. Instead, I was running toward it, refusing to let my stubborn streak get in the way of the future I so badly wanted to be able to start planning without the past holding me back any more than it already had.

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CHAPTER 46

ALICIA

Holden had been gone since this morning and I had no idea where he was. Logically, I knew that shouldn't be bothering me at all, let alone bugging me as much as it was.

We weren't teenagers. He didn't owe me a detailed itinerary every time he left the house.

Just a couple months ago, he'd had a whole life of his own and I had no clue what it had entailed. It was entirely possible that there were friends he hadn't seen since he'd been thrown into this marriage with me or sports he hadn't played since our *I-dos*. There might've been a trip planned or concert tickets bought.

Honestly, it could be anything. Plus, I should've been happy to have the house to myself and some space to think. The tension between us since last week, and New York in particular, had been exhausting.

Ever since we'd gotten back, we'd both been trying to move past it, but it all just felt so insurmountable right now. This time apart gave us both the opportunity to reflect and figure some things out for ourselves, but I still wasn't nearly as cool, calm, or collected about it as I wanted to be.

It should've been enough that I had my own stuff to worry about, like what I was going to wear to the neighborhood Halloween block party in a few days. *See, very important stuff of my own going on.*

Yet, all I could think about was Holden. Where he'd gone. What he was doing. When exactly he'd be back.

Tasha snapped me out of my thoughts when she held a costume up against herself and pumped her eyebrows at me. “What do you think? Is *Sexy Fox* the look you’re after?”

“No.”

She pretended to gag and returned the costume to the rail. “You’re no fun anymore. Now that you’re married, you’re like an old married woman.”

“I *am* an old married woman,” I teased, at least trying to muster up some humor. “I’m almost thirty and I’m married, so do the math.”

She snorted. “You’re years away from thirty and it’s not like you’ve been married for decades. Sexy foxes are hot. You should think about it.”

I shook my head, my gaze wandering around the costume store we were in. It’d been turned into a Halloween lover’s paradise, plastic skeletons dangling above our heads, kids screaming as they went to battle with foam axes, and so many costumes to choose from that I should’ve been ecstatic over the range of choices.

When I looked back at her, Tasha motioned at the fox costume again. “Will you at least try it on?”

“No.”

She groaned. “Okay, fine. Give me some hints, then. What’s the vibe we’re looking for?”

I shrugged. “Halloween block party.”

“That’s not a vibe.” She planted her hands on her hips, opening her mouth before suddenly snapping it shut again as she cocked her head. For a long second, she just stared at me, then sighed and her expression softened. “You’re still worried about Holden?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It’s pretty hard to get excited for a party when I don’t even know if my husband will be there.”

“He’ll be there,” she said firmly. “Wherever he’s gone, he said he’d be home in a couple of days, right?”

“Yes.”

“So that means he’ll be back.” She turned toward the variety of sexy animal costumes on the rail again. “All we need to do is pick one that’ll make him want to tear it off with his teeth as soon as he sees you.”

I laughed, but the sound came out quiet and sad. “Our problems aren’t really related to that kind of thing, Tash. Some days, I could wear a trash bag and he’ll still want to rip it off with his teeth.”

Grinning, she shot me a look over her shoulder. Her eyes held mine. The grin slowly started fading. “There’s something else, isn’t there? This isn’t just about you being worried about his relationship with his father anymore.”

I shook my head slowly from one side to the other, chewing on my lower lip as I tried to decide how much to tell her. “There’s more.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really, but the long and short of it is that I got fired because of all this stuff going on with the Thayers in the press right now and I didn’t tell him.”

Tasha’s mouth dropped open and she blinked slowly. She swiped her tongue across her lips and gawked for another second. “The library let you go? I thought they just told you to lie low for a while.”

“They did, but then they received all sorts of complains about a Thayer working with their kids and it went downhill from there.”

She scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. Court committed white-collar crimes. Unless they’re worried about you swindling their kids out of their allowances, I don’t really see the problem.”

“I know, but it is what it is.” I dragged both hands over my face, considering telling her about the possibility that I might be pregnant, but I wasn’t ready to admit that to anyone yet.

Hell, it had been hard enough acknowledging to *myself* that my period was *late*. Telling Holden had been a heat of the moment thing. If I told Tasha in the cold light of day and without being in the middle of an argument, that would make it real. I wasn’t ready for real. As a precautionary measure, I’d cut way down on caffeine and I hadn’t had so much as a sip of alcohol, but outside of that, I just needed some more time to get my head wrapped around the possibility.

Tasha wrapped me up in a hug and squeezed me tight. “Do you think they’re going to let you come back when this blows over?”

“No,” I admitted against her hair. “I don’t know for sure, but I doubt it. My boss didn’t mention anything like that on the phone, so…”

I trailed off, surprised when Tasha suddenly laughed as she let me go. By the time she’d pulled away and was standing in front of me again, she was beaming, her eyes brimming with genuine excitement.

“Okay, I know it sucks that they fired you, especially because you didn’t do anything wrong and Court’s crimes had nothing to do with harming

children, but look on the bright side. Now, you can really lean into being a rich wife."

Confusion snaked through me. "What are you talking about?"

She hooked her arm through mine and dragged me away from the sexy animal outfits. "I'm talking about you not having to work. Don't get me wrong, I know you loved your job, but let's face the facts. Your husband is loaded and so are you. If you miss the work itself, you can always find a community organization with some books to volunteer at and help them expand their offerings, or you can join one of those groups that teach children to read, but at the end of the day, you don't *have* to do that."

I blinked a couple times, but she wasn't wrong. "I haven't thought of volunteering."

She gave a mock little bow as we stopped in front of the slutty princess dresses. "That's why you have me. I'm a genius. Think about it, Alicia. People have jobs to make money. You don't need that anymore. You can do some actual good for the kids of this city, and when you're not doing that, you can just be a lady who lunches."

I shoved her playfully. "You want me to start having garden parties?"

She laughed. "Hey, if the shoe fits."

I groaned. "I hate that you're making some sense."

"I always make sense." She winked at me, then motioned toward a Cinderella style dress that wouldn't even fully cover my butt cheeks. "With that thought in mind, your royal gowns await, milady. You're a Thayer now, get it?"

"Why do you insist on calling them the Royal Thayers?" I asked. "They're really not."

"No, but they used to be. They used to rule our fair city's social scene with an iron fist. Nora was practically a queen, which makes you a real princess."

"I don't think princesses come in *slutty*."

"Sure, but like you just said, they're not that royal anymore. Well, not right now, anyway, but while you're waiting for them to rebuild their reputation, you could go back to school or you could sleep until noon and start entire libraries in community centers all over when you finally wake up. The possibilities are endless."

The more she spoke, the more I realized that I hadn't thought about any of this. Honestly, I hadn't even considered looking at it from the point of

view that this might be a blessing in disguise at all, but maybe it was.

Maybe it would even be okay if I am *pregnant.*

The shift in perspective suddenly opened up a whole new world of what my future might look like. It felt like someone had shattered a piece of glass I'd been trying to walk through without even realizing it was there.

It happened so fast that it was almost dizzying, but God. During the pregnancy, I could stay home, rest, and take my time deciding what my next move should be. After the baby was born, I wouldn't have to worry about maternity leave, or childcare, or whether I could afford to take six months off.

I could spend my time with the baby and reading to my own child. Warmth bloomed in my chest at the thought. I truly had loved my job and being a librarian had been my dream for so long that I'd never even considered an alternative, but motherhood was another dream I'd always had.

Sure, I hadn't been expecting it *right now*, but I'd heard no one ever felt ready. Maybe that was why human beings had been designed to take so many months to grow. While the miracle formed inside us, we had the time to prepare.

As I thought about it in this new, different light, it was like I could feel a giant weight lifting from my chest. Being married to Holden didn't have to mean everything I loved disappeared. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

I could have it all but at full volume. I could throw myself into absolutely anything I chose wholeheartedly with nothing holding me back.

I smiled as I looked past Tasha toward the rail behind her. "You know what? You might be right. The possibilities really are endless."

She smirked. "I'm always right, honey. That still doesn't answer my original question, though. What kind of vibe are we after?"

"This." I walked around her and pulled a costume off that rail. "This is what I want."

A simple black witch's dress with a pointed hat and a pair of ridiculous, striped tights. Tasha took it from me, casting a critical eye over it before she grinned. "I like it. You're going to look adorable *and* Holden is going to want to tear it off with his teeth."

I laughed, and this time, it came out sounding right. Soft but genuine. And most importantly, much less sad. "Let's get it. What are you going to be?"

“Oh, I’ve had my costume for weeks.” She looked toward the men’s section. “Should we pick something up for Holden while we’re here?”

I frowned. “I don’t know. Do you think he’ll dress up?”

She chuckled. “Oh, God. Can you imagine if he does? He’d probably have a Batman suit custom designed and then spend the whole night grumbling about it.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed, smiling as I tried to picture him in something like that. “Let me ask him. If he wants to dress up, I’ll come back and get him a costume.”

“Okay, then.”

We strode to the register, paying before we went our separate ways. As always, Tasha had a study group to get to, so she raced off as soon as we were finished at the costume store, leaving me to return home alone. To an empty house and an uncertain future with the man I was sharing it with.

Sighing as I unlocked the front door, I walked in and set my shopping bag down. I just kind of drifted around for a while, taking in all the little signs that he lived here now. His boots sat next to mine by the door, a few of his jackets hanging on the coat rack.

The espresso machine took up an unreasonable amount of space on the kitchen counter and those candy bars he’d bought me back in New York were on top of the microwave, where he’d been building me a little stash for when I felt like one.

On the one hand, drinking it all in like this was comforting. Physical proof that he and I were building a life together. On the other, I still had no idea how much of what he’d done for me had been out of obligation and what he’d done because he actually cared. Despite my new outlook on the future, that was still eating away at my insides, the fact that I didn’t know if any of it was real.

Practically speaking, I supposed it didn’t matter. We were still married and we might still be having a baby together. He lived here with me and he’d absolutely sworn that there was no one else. From the outside, it all probably looked perfect and yet that wasn’t enough for me.

As much as I knew catching feelings hadn’t been part of the arrangement, I desperately wanted it to be real. I wanted him to be here because he didn’t want to be anywhere else, but right now, I simply didn’t know if that was true.

Frankly, I didn’t know much of anything right now. Except that I missed him something awful and that nothing would feel right again until he got back.

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CHAPTER 47

HOLDEN

The first gate slammed shut behind me before I'd even made it five feet inside the prison. The sound was so jarring that it went straight through my chest. I couldn't imagine hearing that heavy, metal against metal clank umpteen times a day, followed by the ominous scrape of a lock sliding into a place.

An honest-to-God shiver raced down my spine, but I kept walking, acting like I hadn't just flinched so hard that I'd nearly pulled a muscle. Inhaling a deep breath trying to convince my heart to act normal too, I caught the scent of industrial cleaner, old concrete, and something vaguely metallic wafting through the air.

My first instinct was that it was blood. *It has to be blood, right? I mean, fuck, it's a prison.*

My blood pressure skyrocketed at the thought, but on my next breath, I realized it wasn't that. It was more just a stale, institutional smell that seemed to have permeated the walls at this point.

I swallowed hard, keeping my eyes on the corrections officer walking a few paces ahead of me. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, so bright that it drained the corridor of all color. Somewhere in the distance, another gate swung shut with a heavy clang, a mechanical buzzing sound ringing out a moment later.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and kept moving, my shoulders so rigid that my entire skeleton was starting to hurt and my teeth ached from

how hard they were clenched. My stomach was in knots, and honestly, I could feel my pulse in my throat.

It had been ten years, give or take, since I'd last seen my father and I'd spent the vast majority of that time convinced that I didn't ever want to see him again. I'd even tried convincing myself that I didn't care, but the truth was that I'd imagined this moment more times than I would ever admit.

Sometimes, late at night, I'd wondered what he looked like now. If he'd look much older or more or less the same. If he'd somehow *look* guilty. If he'd be happy to see me or if I'd even care.

As I followed the guard down the corridor, I realized I definitely did care. Although I didn't give a shit if he was happy to see me. What I cared about was how I would feel because right now I sure as hell didn't feel good.

More gates clanged, that mechanical buzz making me flinch every time it blared. Some of the lights flickered, that industrial scent so pungent in some areas that I almost couldn't breathe, and then the officer stopped in front of a door, and suddenly, I realized this was it.

"Are you ready?" the man asked, eyes on his clipboard instead of on me. "Remember, physical contact is limited to the very beginning and very end of your visit. You are to remain on the opposite side of the table at all times and if you need us, just say so. We'll be there. Court's never given us any trouble, though."

"Sure. Of course."

He barely even glanced up before he reached for the door, pushing it open and striding in ahead of me. As soon as I followed, the officer behind us the shut the door, sealing me into a room with my father for the first time in my adult life.

Court was the only guy sitting alone at a table when I walked in, but he rose when he saw me, and for one incredibly fucking weird second, looking at him felt like looking into the mirror thirty years from now. In person, the resemblance between us was brutal, much more striking than I remembered or would've been able to imagine despite how often people told me how much I looked like him.

Our hair was the exact same shade of dark sandy blond, though his had gone gray at the temples and was shot through with silver in places. We had the same eyes. The same mouth. Even the slight crease that appeared

between his eyebrows as I approached was so familiar that it felt like an electric shock.

“Holden,” he said quietly when I reached the metal table he was occupying, a small, relieved, but disbelieving smile ghosting across his lips. “You came.”

My heart was clawing at my ribs. I’d spent the last decade trying to forget the sound of that voice. I’d thought I’d succeeded, but nope. *Definite fail.*

“Hi, Dad.”

For a second, we just stood there, staring at each other and I shifted on my feet, hoping like hell he didn’t think we were going to hug. Thankfully, he finally nodded and gestured to the chair opposite him, lowering himself down once more.

Since I kind of had to sit, I sat but I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure what *to* say. *What does one talk about with your estranged father when visiting him in prison if you were a teenager the last time you saw him?*

Court didn’t speak up immediately either, but he did look oddly serene and weirdly smug as he stared at me from across the table. “So, how’s school?”

My eyebrows shot up. “How’s *school*?”

He shrugged, somehow managing to make even his prison jumpsuit look like it was couture as he leaned forward, sliding his elbows onto the table. To be fair, he was careful about how far he stretched, but he still had that same air about him, that confident authority I remembered from when I was a kid.

His posture was still impeccable, his shoulders wide and his head held high even though he was in orange. Another slight smile flickered across his lips. “I figured I’d start somewhere safe. You’re at the University of Chicago now, right? Jane said you’re getting an MBA.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I am.”

“How is it?”

“Expensive.”

He chuckled. “At least some things haven’t changed. Tuition bills are still the same as an average mortgage, then?”

I shrugged. “I guess that depends on what you’re studying and where, but yeah. Pretty much.”

His gaze moved from one of my eyes to the other as he sat up straighter, nodding slowly. “Well, education is always worth it. Regardless of what you plan on doing after you get the degree. Knowledge is power and all that.”

“I think that’s debatable in my case,” I said bluntly. “We’re spending a fortune on advanced education I don’t technically need. I don’t regret enrolling, but whether it will be worth it remains to be seen.”

“Well, any employer will look kindly upon an MBA on your resume,” he said without skipping a beat. “You got any leads on what you want to do with it?”

“I’m starting a work-study at Thayer on Monday, so I’ll take it from there.”

His eyebrows inched up. “Thayer, huh? That’s a surprise. I thought Alex would try to shove you into W&S or send you to Texas to work with the Shepherds.”

“He wouldn’t have had to shove me into it,” I said. “If he’d spoken to me before I’d made the arrangements with Colin, I’d have taken it in a heartbeat. Maybe not Texas, unless my wife was willing to move there for a while, but W&S itself could’ve been a great place to learn.”

Court blinked slowly, doing a double take he was trying not to be obvious about, but even after all that time, I could see he was rattled. “Your *wife*?”

“Yeah, my wife.” I felt my eyebrows drawing together. “What, Jane and Colin didn’t tell you?”

He dragged a hand through his silvery hair, glancing toward the sliver of window high up on the wall as he shook his head. “No. They didn’t.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” He drew in a deep breath, a muscle in his jaw ticking with annoyance before he shook it off and turned back to me, folding his arms on the table and giving me another small smile. “What’s her name?”

“Alicia.”

“Alicia who?” he asked. “I think I remember one of the Baines girls—”

“No,” I said, cutting him off with a soft scoff. “Her maiden name is Nettles. You wouldn’t have known her parents. They didn’t travel in your circles.”

“Ah.” Surprisingly, he chuckled. “How did you meet her?”

“Alex,” I said slowly, a little confused why he’d even asked. “He set us up.”

“Colin told me Alex likes playing matchmaker,” he said, chuckling again. “I wasn’t expecting him to set you up with someone who isn’t part of our world, though.”

My eyes narrowed. “Why? You were hoping for a match that would’ve been advantageous for the family?”

“No, Holden,” he said quietly, sliding one hand over the other on the sterile metal table. “I’m just surprised Alex knows anyone who doesn’t travel in our circles, is all.”

“Alex knows a lot of people.”

He shrugged. “Sure, but he also works very hard to build connections and strengthen alliances. That boy is a Westwood through and through. Nothing wrong with that. It’s just out of character for him to arrange a marriage that does nothing for any of the companies involved.”

He said it so casually that my hackles slowly came down, the assumptions I’d made about what he might’ve wanted out of a match for me clearly wrong. I drew in a deep breath, willing my blood pressure and my heart rate to just stabilize already, but this environment wasn’t exactly conducive to relaxing.

In that moment, however, I realized two things. One was that being in prison must really fucking suck if even I was on edge here as a visitor who was returning home, to his own bed, and could leave whenever I chose.

The second was that Alex had done more for me than I’d ever realized when he’d approached Alicia rather than some high-society princess about marrying me. I dragged my fingers through my hair at the realization, but Court spoke again before I could fully process what it meant.

“Are you happy?” he asked. “Your wife, I mean. Does she make you happy?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t even have to think about it. Potentially the only times I truly had been happy ever since he’d gotten thrown in here had been with her. “Alex might’ve set us up, but I love her.”

I had no idea why I’d told him that. I hadn’t meant to, but it’d come out before I could stop it and Court grinned like I’d just told him he was having premium steak for dinner tonight after a decade of prison chow. “That’s great, Holden. Honestly, it’s wonderful news.”

“Is it?” I asked, crossing my arms when I realized he seemed genuinely pleased about all this. Like it meant everything was fucking sunshine and roses for us out there despite what he’d done. “No offense, or actually, take offense if you have to, but you haven’t exactly cared about what made us happy in the past, Court. What’s changed?”

For the first time since I’d walked in, some of that smug confidence disappeared, his gaze turning down to his hands. “I don’t expect you to make this easy for me, Holden. I know I’ve missed a lot and I realize that even before all this, I wasn’t the best parent a kid could want.”

“I didn’t need you to be the best. I’d have settled for you just being there.” I blew out a harsh breath and glanced at the guard, who’d tensed at my outburst but eased back on the heels of his boots when I shook my head at him. I turned back to my father. “Look, I didn’t come here to argue or to participate in father-son therapy. There’s no point trying to turn this into a bonding session.”

“Why did you come, then?” he asked after a beat. “Whatever it is you want from me, I’ll give it to you if I can.”

I swiped my tongue across my lips and squeezed the nape of my neck, my head shaking when I realized I didn’t have an answer to that. “Honestly, I don’t know why I’m here. I guess I just needed to look you in the eye at least once before you get out. It’s been fucking with my head, knowing you’re going to be out there again soon, so I ripped off the band-aid.”

He held my gaze steadily. “That’s good, Holden. It’s a good thing. A brave thing to do.”

“What, you’re going to tell me how proud you are?”

“No.” He sighed. “I am, for what it’s worth, but I don’t think that matters much. Would you like to talk about what I did? The money? The affair? Obviously, you’re angry and you have every right to be. They’ll let you yell at me as long as I don’t yell back or get up. You also shouldn’t come around to my side of the table while you’re yelling.”

“I don’t want to yell at you,” I ground out. “You wouldn’t know this about me, but I’m not much one for raising my voice.”

“You got in a lot of fights for a while there,” he said. “When you were younger. Jane used to tell me.”

“Fighting doesn’t mean yelling, Court.”

“That’s fair,” he said after a beat. “Alright, don’t yell at me, then. You always have been different.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “*I* would’ve yelled at me. I’d have ranted and raved until the guards dragged me out of here, but it’s like I said. You always have been different.”

As he said the words, I realized he was right. I was different and I always had been. He and I might look alike, but on the inside, we had very little in common.

“Do you want to tell me about your classes?” he asked. “I’d like to know what you’re learning about. What you’re going to be doing for your work-study at the company. Anything you want to tell me, Holden. I’ll listen.”

I looked back at him, my head buzzing with too many realizations at once, but then I started talking, telling him about all kinds of ridiculously normal things. My classes, my upcoming mid-terms, and hell, even the Halloween block party.

Eventually, when we were all caught up on the absurdly mundane minutiae of my life, I stood up. “I should get going. It’s a long drive back to the city.”

“I’m glad you came.” He stood up, extending a hand toward me. “Thank you for visiting, Holden.”

“Yeah.” I shook with him, squeezing his hand for a beat longer than necessary before letting go. “I’ll see you on the outside, Dad.”

The door opened and I gave him one last nod before I left, striding back to the world through that series of constantly clanging gates until I was finally back in my car in the parking lot. Blinking against the sunlight, I sat there for a few minutes just trying to regain my bearings.

Now that I was breathing fresh air again, it was suddenly crystal clear that my father, Alicia, and hell, even Alex had been right. I might look like Dad. I had his face and his mannerisms, but I really wasn’t like him.

My father had spent his entire life chasing the ever-elusive *more*. More money. More connections. More status. Fuck, as disgusting as it was to think about, more sex. More people being jealous of him and wanting the pretty young thing on his arm.

That was *not* me. And Alex had somehow managed to help me find someone who, like me, was deeply caring and somewhat feisty. Someone who had goals, ambitions, and dreams that had nothing to do with high society.

Shit, even if my father had never been sent to prison, I probably still would've grown up to shun that world. I'd never fucking liked it, whereas my father had thrived in it. Me? I'd always longed for a life away from galas and fake smiles.

Mostly because I'd always known they were fake when all I wanted was for people to be real. Another reason why I hated Halloween so much. *Fucking masks.*

On my way home, I felt lighter than I had in years. It was a day earlier than I'd planned on going back and Alicia wasn't even at the brownstone when I got there, but my mind was made up, so I got to work.

From here on out, I was going to be real. I'd face whatever consequences I had to for it, but I was finished hiding. Even from myself.

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CHAPTER 48

ALICIA

As soon as I walked around the corner, I saw the skeleton. It was impossible to miss, the LED lights blazing where it stood in the center of our yard, directly facing Rex's house.

That wasn't the only thing. The closer I got to home, the more details I noticed. Our entire front yard had been transformed for Halloween, one of the werewolves standing like a sentinel at the top of the new steps while the other stood guard at the bottom.

Orange lights wound through the trees, their branches glowing against the darkening sky. Purple and white lights framed every street-facing window. Masses of enormous cobwebs stretched between the columns, complete with fake spiders the size of dinner plates and several other plastic creepy-crawlies we'd picked up at that warehouse store.

Jack-o'-lanterns lined the path and the stairs, some glowing from within while ghosts hung from the trees, genuinely looking like they were floating in the light breeze. A sticker of a witch had been stuck to the window upstairs, making it look like she was flying straight into what used to be Tasha's bedroom.

A sound that was somewhere halfway between a sob and a laugh escaped me, my footsteps speeding up until I was practically running toward the house. I'd been gone most of the day, helping Tasha finish moving the last of her things, and I'd missed Holden so badly it'd felt like a physical ache, but I'd thought he would only be getting home tomorrow.

As I reached for the door, it swung open and Holden appeared on the other side. Wearing jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, his feet were bare and his hair was slightly messy, those gray-blue eyes locking intently on mine.

“Hi, baby,” he said quietly, sliding his hands into his pockets as he stepped out of the way, but his gaze never left mine. “I ordered pizza.”

For some reason, tears welled in my eyes at the statement, another half-sob, half-laugh rising up from deep within. “You’re home.”

“Yeah, I am.” He stepped toward me immediately, brow furrowed as he caught my face in his hands. “Don’t cry. Please don’t cry. Wait, why exactly are you crying?”

“You…” I shook my head, trailing off because a lump the size of a country had wedged itself into my throat. “You decorated the house.”

“Uh, yes? Is that a bad thing? I—”

“No, I love it.” I finally looked up at him through the tears, winding my arms around his neck and letting my forehead drop to his chest.

Holden kicked the door shut and drew me into his strong arms, murmuring against the top of my head. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay, Alicia. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I sobbed, clinging to him tighter as my chest ached with nostalgic agony for a time so long ago, when the porch had last looked remotely like that, but combined with it was also the pain of not knowing where he’d gone or how to fix us when I didn’t even know how he felt. “I just missed you.”

“Fuck.” He buried his face in my hair, then lifted me clean off my feet and carried me through the heavily decorated foyer to the living room. Once we reached the couch, he sat down and arranged me on his lap, drawing his head back to look into my eyes. “Okay, look. You’re already upset and I don’t really understand why, but I’m going to pile on for a minute.”

“Okay?” I said quietly. “Pile on, how?”

“By admitting that I was an idiot, Alicia.”

“What?” I asked through the tears, frowning as I stared into his eyes and saw something different there. A light I hadn’t seen before that made him look younger, lighter, and happier than I’d thought possible. But then, unfortunately, I spotted him biting his lip from the corner of my eye and a jolt of lust shot through me too.

Wow. How am I so messed up when he was only gone for one night? What the hell is happening to me?

He smiled, his grip tightening on my hips and those eyes steadfast on mine. “Well, for starters, I was an idiot for not taking you with me. I know it was only a day, but I missed you too, baby.”

“You did?”

“Oh, yeah.” He exhaled a long, slow breath as he kept staring at me like he’d found something he’d spent his entire life searching for. My heart rate kicked up into a higher gear, racing when I realized this was what Tasha had been talking about.

Holden really did look at me like he—

“I love you,” he said. “I love you, Alicia. I didn’t tell you before because I guess I just didn’t feel like I deserved you. I didn’t feel like I deserved to love you.”

My lips parted and my heart tripped over itself. The tears finally slowed as I wondered if all this was a dream. It sure felt like one coming true, but when I brought my palm to his chest, I could feel the steady, confident thump of his heart and I knew this wasn’t only happening in my head.

“You love me?” I whispered. “Are you sure?”

He barked out a dry, emotional laugh and nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty fucking sure. I know I’ve probably done a good job at making you feel like it’s not true, but it is. I wasn’t pushing you away because of you, baby. I was pushing you away because of me, and I’m sorry. That’s the biggest reason I was an idiot.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, keeping that hand on his chest when I pressed the other to his cheek. “You really were.”

He leaned into my touch, chuckling as he snaked an arm around my hips to bring me even closer. “Look, I’m not used to laying my heart out wide like this, but the bottom line is that I was wrong. I was wrong about you, I was wrong about me, and I think I might even have been wrong about my father.”

My eyes widened. “*That’s* where you went?”

“Yeah.” He rolled both lips into his mouth and inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils. “It was time to put it behind me. I wanted to be ready to move forward and I couldn’t do that if it still felt like the past had my balls in vise, so I went to see him.”

“And?”

“And I realized he’s just a man,” he said, his head shaking. “Court Thayer isn’t some monster or an omnipresent creature who has supernatural

power over my actions or my future. He's a man who made some big mistakes and he's paying for them. I don't have to follow in those footsteps. There's no random glitch in my DNA or a curse on who I will become just because I look like him."

"No, there isn't." I lowered my forehead to his. "That's a lot to have been carrying for so long. It must be such a relief to be able to let it go."

"Yeah," he said, his voice rougher now. "But the point is that I never would've gotten here without you. You're my home, Alicia. Wherever you are, that's where I want to be."

"I thought you didn't want marriage, children, or any of that stuff."

He brought a palm to my cheek, stroking his thumb across it as he chuckled. "That's only because I thought that if I never needed anyone, no one could ever hurt me again, but then you came along and ruined that plan within the first five minutes."

"The first five minutes, huh? That seems unlikely. It was hate at first sight for you because I wasn't wearing a helmet."

He reached for my hand. "Hate? No. That definitely wasn't hate. That was my first taste of the protective beast you awakened deep down inside."

I smiled, swiping at the tears streaming down my cheeks with the back of my free hand. I dragged in a deep breath and finally asked the questions that had been plaguing my every thought for weeks. "Would you still have felt this way if not for the contract? Is there any world in which you would've been with me if Alex hadn't forced you?"

"He didn't force me, baby," Holden murmured, gently stroking his thumb across my knuckles. "Sure, he pitched the idea. Just like he pitched it to you, but neither of us *had* to sign those papers. There was no gun to our heads."

"But?"

"There is no *but*," he said. "I honestly don't know if we would've been together if not for the contract. There's no way for either of us to know that, but I do know that I don't want any version of my life that doesn't have you in it. Not anymore and not for a while now. Hell, I've wanted you since before I even snapped at you about the helmet. I love you and it has fuck all to do with any goddamn contract."

All those doubts and fears that had been raging around inside for so long vanished in the blink of an eye. There could be no looking at him right

now and wondering if he was being honest. When he'd said that he wasn't used to laying his heart open wide like this, I'd known it was true.

I wasn't sure if Holden had ever shown anyone as much of himself as he was showing me right now, but even if he had, this was the real him. The man behind the cool smirks and the snide comments. The guy who lived inside the head of the painfully handsome man who'd so often hidden behind his sharp tongue and sharper cheekbones.

Without giving myself time to get emotional all over again, I grabbed his shirt and kissed him. A surprised sound whooshed out of his lungs when my lips crashed into his, but then he was pulling me tighter against him, holding me so close that I could barely breathe. But I didn't need oxygen right now. I only needed him.

There was no invisible wall between us anymore, just me, my husband, and the fact that our arranged marriage had somehow, by some miracle, become real in more ways than simply existing in the eyes of the law.

"I love you too, Holden," I whispered into his mouth. "I love you so, so much. I just didn't think I was allowed to. I didn't think you'd want me to."

He groaned, sliding a hand up into my hair to hold me to him even as he broke the kiss to speak against my lips. "I want everything with you, baby. For now and forever."

As our mouths crashed together again, he groaned into the kiss, his grip on my hair so tight that shivers of desire mingled with the intense sense of belonging taking root deep inside my soul. Holden and I had both made mistakes in our path to getting here. There was no denying that, but I couldn't deny that in his arms, it felt like I'd finally found home again.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. "I also need you, though. Right now."

The words were out before I could stop them, giving voice to the sudden intensity of the pure, raw want coursing through my veins. *Totally crazy, wanting him like this after just one night. But I suppose it could also be hormones.*

Heaven knew, I'd been all over the place emotionally over the last week or so, which made me suspect I already knew what the result of that test was going to be, and now that he and I were finally in the place it felt like we'd been meant to end up all along, maybe it was time.

Holden angled his hips underneath me, snapping me out of my thoughts when the absent little rocking motions I'd been making for the last few

seconds suddenly ended with a burst of pleasure streaking through me. “Oh.”

He groaned again, but then I felt the now familiar bracing of his muscles against mine that always ended the same way. “I want you too, baby. Always. Not here, though. Not tonight.”

Sure enough, seconds later, he was rising with me in his arms, carrying me straight to bed with zero hesitation whatsoever. When he set me down on my feet at the edge of the bed, we undressed each other in the moonlight without saying a word, both of us simply tumbling back together as soon as all the barriers between us were gone.

As always, he made me see stars with his hands and his tongue before finally sinking into me, one hand on my hip as he thrust in a rhythm that soon had me coming apart all over again. Through it all, he kept kissing me senseless, whispering how much he loved me even moments before I felt him lose it deep inside my body.

Afterward, Holden traced absent patterns on my arm with his fingertips, the solid heat of his chest under my palm and his leg draped over my mine like he wanted to touch me in as many ways and as many places as he possibly could. As I lay there, so completely consumed by him inside and out, I glanced at up at the sharp planes of his face in the moonlight, my heart so full and my very soul so confident that we could take anything that came our way that I finally realized I was ready.

“Do you want to take it?” I whispered. “The pregnancy test.”

His eyes snapped open and he propped himself up on his elbow, rolling slightly into me as those eyes found mine in the ambient light streaming into the room from outside. “I’m ready if you are.”

“I think I am,” I said. “It’s time, Holden. Let’s find out if we’re having a baby.”

He kissed my shoulder. “I know what I’m hoping for, but even if there’s no baby yet, there could be soon.”

Surprised, quiet laughter bubbled out of me as I sat up. “You’re actually hoping it’s positive?”

“I told you, I want everything with you,” he said, getting up and offering me a hand after walking around to my side of the bed stark naked. When he caught me staring, he winked and pulled me gently to my feet, catching my lips for a quick but passionate kiss. “Keep looking at me like that and we’re going to start working on getting a positive test right now.”

My heart thumped, kicking against my ribs at the realization that we genuinely might not have to. “There could already be somebody in there.”

“Yeah.” He circled his arms around my waist, holding me tight as he walked us toward the bathroom. “I’ll stay here. Give you some privacy.”

“You’re three feet away from the toilet.”

He shrugged. “That’s about as far away from you as I’m willing to go right now.”

I chuckled, but even that came out nervous as reality started dawning. Finally turning toward the bathroom cabinet, I pulled out the little box and tore open the packaging, forcing myself to just stay calm and take the test.

Excitement fluttered in my chest when it was done, anticipation twisting with nerves in my stomach as I glanced at the innocuous little stick resting beside the sink when I washed my hands. “Now, we wait.”

“How long?”

“Three minutes.”

“How long has it been?”

“Thirty seconds.”

He groaned, grabbing my hand and pulling me close while we waited. His heart thumped against my ear and I smiled. “Nervous?”

“Yeah. You?”

“So nervous.”

“Is it time yet?” he asked.

“No.”

I stayed in the circle of his arms until the timer I’d set on my phone finally beeped. Then I gripped his hand tight as we gravitated toward the vanity together, neither of us saying another word. Drawing in a deep breath, I rested my back against his chest when he slid in behind me, my knees weak for all kinds of reasons as I let my gaze drop to the stick.

Two lines.

At first, for just a fraction of a second, I couldn’t remember what that meant, but then I glanced at the box and my breath caught. Holden went completely still behind me. “Is that…”

“Yeah.”

I turned my head to glance up at his face, seeing shock, fear, wonder, and excitement flickering across his features in the space between one heartbeat and the next. “It’s positive?”

“Yes.”

A laugh broke out of him. He caught my face in his hands when I turned still in the circle of his arms. “We’re having a baby?”

I nodded, suddenly becoming aware that there were tears streaming down my cheeks. “We’re having a baby.”

Resting my head against his chest, I slid my arms around his waist and clung to him, wishing I could pick up the phone and call my parents to tell them. But somewhere out there, they already knew.

Holden’s hand dropped my lower belly, his thumb gently stroking across my skin like he was sending a silent message to whoever was in there that he already loved them. He caught my lips for a kiss that felt like my future, and in that moment, wrapped in the arms of the man I loved, with a tiny life we’d created together growing inside me, in the house left behind by the people who’d wanted me to have everything, I finally felt whole again.

Like I’d come full circle, able to fill these walls with joy, laughter, and the pitter-patter of little feet once more.

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CHAPTER 49

HOLDEN

It turned out that domestic bliss wasn't bullshit. In fact, it was actually pretty damn blissful. *Who would've thought it?*

Sitting in a folding chair in my driveway dressed as Batman, I wore a black cape that kept catching on the armrests every time I moved, and I'd *still* never been happier. The firepit was going, the grill was smoking, and the scent of hotdogs and roasted marshmallows wafted from every house on the street.

A neighbor up the block had a speaker outside, blaring a Halloween playlist that seemed to be never-ending, and not even that annoyed me. Every few minutes, another group of children appeared at the bottom of the driveway, shrieking as they ran toward the house.

Alicia was on the porch in a witch costume, dishing out candy. I'd volunteered to help, but she'd turned me down because according to her, I had the bedside manner of a serial killer. I'd argued initially, but when I'd smiled at one kid and she'd started crying, I'd realized my talents would probably be better off deployed at the firepit.

Something to work on before the baby comes.

I grinned as I lifted my bottle of water to my mouth, taking a long sip before setting it down on the side of the grill. *So this is what it feels like to be living your best life, huh? It's really not so fucking bad.*

"Batman."

I looked up to find Rex making his way across the street, dressed for the occasion in a black baseball cap and a sweatshirt with a skeleton printed on

it. Chuckling as I stood up, I extended my hand toward him. “Skeletor?”

He laughed. “Next year, I’ll have to go to the store. Pick me up one of them fancy costumes, like yours.”

“This old thing?” I motioned toward the brand new suit I’d custom ordered from LA and had overnighted a couple days ago. “Nah. You don’t need it.”

“Apparently, I do.” He inclined his chin toward the brand new, small wooden sign planted near the sidewalk. “Congratulations seem to be in order. You won.”

I smirked. “May the odds be ever in your favor for the contest at Christmas, old man. In the meantime, I’d be happy to take you out for a slice now that I have that shiny gift card.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, boy,” he growled jokingly. “Christmas is mine.”

“Oh, you’re on.”

He laughed. “You’ve started something here, but I’ll finish it.”

“Good luck with that,” I said. “First thing next weekend, I plan on revisiting the treasure trove of a store where I got all this stuff. I’m sure they’ll have their Christmas decorations out by then.”

“Son, I have thirty years’ worth of Christmas decorations in my house. One shopping spree won’t touch what I already have.”

I gestured around the yard. “All of this was the result of one shopping spree too.”

He sighed, his gaze flicking across the yard once more. “Well, I suppose we’ll just have to see when the times comes.”

“For sure.” I sat back down and nodded at the vacant folding chair next to mine. “Would you like to sit for a minute?”

He grimaced as he glanced toward the street. “There are more kids coming. I just thought I’d take the break between the groups to come over and congratulate you.”

“Right. Okay, well, my little brother and Tasha, who used to live here, are coming over to watch a movie later if you’re interested in joining us.”

“Thanks, but by the time we’ve put all these little miscreants on a sugar high, it’s going to be way past my bedtime. Watch a movie in the afternoon next time and I’ll join you for sure.”

I chuckled. “Fair enough. I’m pretty sure it’s going to be past our bedtime too, but Alicia said it’s a Halloween tradition for her and Tasha.

Wyatt and I are just crashing their party."

"I'm pretty sure it can't be called *crashing* if you live here," she called from the porch, then waved at Rex when he turned to look at her over his shoulder. "Better luck next year!"

He laughed. "You two are as bad as each other. Alright, well, I'd better get back before the kids start helping themselves to all that candy."

"How many bags you got?" I asked.

"Eight. You?"

"Six." I groaned. "It'll be ten next year."

"Nope. I'm putting my foot down on that one," Alicia chimed in. "That's already fourteen bags just between these two houses. At some point, there is such a thing as oversupplying."

Rex and I exchanged a glance. Then he grumbled under his breath as he nodded at me before heading back across the street. "Ain't no such thing as too much candy for a kid. Just another one of those modern hoaxes."

As he disappeared back onto his porch, I laughed and leaned back in my chair, watching Alicia welcome the next group of kids when they ran up. Nearly tripping over each other to get to her, they laughed at something she said, her witch hat crooked and a spot of chocolate on her chin from a bar she'd devoured a few minutes ago.

As far as I was concerned, she'd never been more beautiful. Even if she was convinced she was already getting fat.

She wasn't. Although, to be fair, I couldn't wait until she did. I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be able to keep my hands off her once her belly started getting round with my child. As it was, I'd barely let her out the door in time to start my fire alongside our neighbors.

I stood up again to turn the hotdogs, once again getting the cape stuck on the armrest. As I wrestled it free, she chuckled, smiling at me like I was her favorite person in the world when I looked up and saw her watching me.

"You're very intimidating, Batman."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment," she said in a sing-song tone. "How are you going to ravage the witch later if you can barely stand up without getting all tangled in your chair?"

I deliberately let my voice drop into a low, rough register. "I'm Batman."

She burst out laughing again, fanning herself with a hand before winking at me. “Works every time.”

I grinned, still watching as another group of kids ran up to the porch. Alicia complimented every last one of them on their outfits, taking the time to notice the little details and joking around with them as she dropped some candy into hats, baskets, and bags.

God, she really is such a natural. She’s going to be the best mother in the whole damn world.

In my chest, some kind of heat flared until it was an inferno that tasted like satisfaction on the back of my tongue. I honestly couldn’t believe this was how good it felt to be happily married, with a baby on the way, and a competitive neighbor to beat at every major holiday.

I was brimming with it until the street finally went quiet and the fire had burned down to glowing coals. Once the final group of teenagers had left, Alicia and I packed up our goodies and she leaned against the door after shutting it behind us.

“Gosh, that was exhausting, but our planning was perfect. I just dished out the last of the candy to those kids.”

“Damn it. I was hoping we had some left for the movie.” I set down our chairs in the foyer and carried the containers that had held the candy to the kitchen. “Are you sure there’s nothing?”

“You already ate three full-sized chocolate bars.”

“Yeah, but Batman needs fuel. How else am I going to keep Gotham safe?”

She rolled her eyes. “Try eating a few carrots.”

I scoffed. “Carrots are not an acceptable food for a superhero.”

“And chocolate is?”

“Yep.” I finally pulled the cape off and laid it over the back of the couch. “Although I think I’m done being Batman.”

“Good,” Tasha called from the armchair she was already occupying. “You look ridiculous.”

Alicia smiled coyly as she pushed away from the door. “She’s not completely wrong. I was joking when I asked if you wanted to dress up as Batman for Halloween.”

“I think I killed it.”

Wyatt looked up from where he was stretched out on the other couch in sweatpants and a hoodie, his feet propped up next to the bowl of popcorn on

the coffee table. “I think what you mean is that one of us will probably kill *you* if you ever try wearing that thing again.”

“Why?” I glanced down at the costume. “I think I look hot.”

“You think wrong,” he said.

“Now that, I don’t agree with.” Alicia came up next to me, her fingers brushing mine before she collapsed onto the couch they’d left open for us. “He does look hot.”

“Thank you.”

“That being said, you should go change before the movie starts.”

“Why? It’s not that uncomfortable.”

Her cheeks flushed as she looked up at me, and instantly, I knew where her mind had gone. A smirk tugged at the corners of my lips, but Wyatt shut me down before I could proposition her. “For God’s sake, just go change. I have a reputation to maintain and it doesn’t include watching scary movies with a wannabe Batman, continuously trying to chat up his own wife.”

“This is our house,” I protested, smacking his feet off the coffee table before sinking down next to her still in my costume. “If you don’t like it, you’re free to leave.”

“No, thanks. Someone might see me with Batman when I open the door to go.”

I flipped him off and he laughed, putting his feet right back up on the coffee table and relaxing into the couch. Tasha glanced between us like she was waiting for a fight to start, but Wyatt and I generally communicated in insults because it was easier than being sentimental.

When we’d been kids, he used to follow me around until I got so annoyed that I’d snap at him before telling him to just join me with whatever I’d been doing. When he’d broken something in the house, I’d helped him fix it and vice versa. As teenagers, we used to sneak beer into the house together. After Court’s arrest, he’d been the person I’d been most worried about.

While none of us had been able to fix what was happening, I’d made sure that he ate and I’d gotten him out of the house when the reporters were bad. I’d taught him how to drive and then he’d stolen my car.

Twice.

“Have you picked a movie yet?” I asked, sliding an arm around Alicia’s shoulders and pulling her into me. “We’re going for scary in honor of Halloween, right?”

“Yep.” Wyatt reached for the remote control. “I heard about this one from a guy at the office. He swore up and down that it’s the scariest movie you’ll ever watch.”

“Ooo,” Tasha said, rolling her eyes as she got up to get the lights. “I’m so scared now.”

“You will be,” he muttered. “None of us are sleeping tonight. Guaranteed.”

Tasha scoffed, flipping the switch before moving back to her chair. As Alicia leaned into me and the movie started playing, Wyatt and Tasha kept arguing quietly about whether the protagonist was going to die, but honestly, I didn’t even know which character they were talking about.

With my wife in my arms and the soft warmth of her pressed up against me, the exhaustion of grilling approximately seven thousand hotdogs was catching up. I leaned my head back against the couch, my eyes sliding shut until I felt her cheek shift against my shoulder.

“Should we tell them?” she whispered when I cracked open an eye to find her staring up at me. “About the you-know-what.”

I did know what. For the last few days, the result of that pregnancy test had been the only thing I’d been able to think about. For safety’s sake, I’d gone out the morning after to buy a few more. Just in case. But they’d all come back with the same result.

Alicia and I were definitely having a baby.

Smiling as I leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead, I whispered, “Let’s wait. I like having something that’s just ours for now.”

Across the room, Wyatt was laughing at Tasha, who was providing rapid-fire commentary on a plot hole she’d apparently uncovered, both of them completely unaware that there was another little person in the room with us right now.

Part of me was dying to tell my brother. Seriously. I’d never been one for gossip, but this wasn’t that and I genuinely wanted to share the good news with him. For now, however, Alicia and I hadn’t even been to the doctor yet.

Just for a couple more weeks at least, I was perfectly happy basking in the joy of our little secret without sharing it with anyone else. She smiled back at me and rested her head against my shoulder again.

“Okay,” she whispered as she settled in, the faint traces of that smile still on her lips. “I like it too, so let’s wait.”

She tucked herself closer against me and I kissed the top of her head, tightening my grip on her fingers when she slid them between mine. The movie kept playing, Wyatt laughing whenever someone got chased by the killer and Tasha occasionally throwing popcorn she'd sworn to pick up herself at him.

Since I hadn't been following the movie, I let my mind wander to what Alicia had spoken to me about a couple of days ago. She wanted to fund reading corners in community centers across the city, bringing books to kids who couldn't always get to a library. While she was at it, she was going to volunteer her time at those reading corners, teaching kids who were struggling to read and bringing her passion for her former job directly to those who needed it most.

It had gotten me thinking about how I used to believe that wealth made people greedy, snobbish, and excluding of others. But together, she and I could use *our* wealth to leave the world a little better than we'd found it.

Along with the fact that we were starting a family, the future we'd been talking about was something I was genuinely looking forward to. It was crazy.

All my life, I'd judged people who claimed to be as happy as I was right now. I'd thought love was for suckers and kids for people interested in enduring cruel and unusual torture for at least eighteen years. But I'd also never thought I could actually have it.

Alicia had proven to me that I could. She'd shown me what it was like to be loved despite the darkness inside. She'd taught me the greatest thing I could leave behind wasn't money or a name. It was the family we were going to build.

A growth chart carved directly into the wood. Pictures of memories we'd created together. A home built on love, warmth, and all that other shit I never used to believe in.

Frankly, sometimes, it felt like I'd had a personality transplant, but then I'd realized it hadn't been that. Alicia had simply melted the ice I'd spent my entire life hiding behind.

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EPILOGUE

ALICIA

It was late November, and although we were still a couple days away from the calendar officially bringing us to winter, fall was firmly in our rearview mirror. Snowflakes drifted lazily past the kitchen windows, already collecting along the back steps and turning the garden white.

While it wasn't enough yet to stick everywhere, it had settled on the bare branches of the trees and dusted the porch railing, making Holden itch to start decorating for Christmas. I'd made him promise to wait until December first, but he was raring to go.

Which meant he was now climbing the walls and practically bouncing on the balls of his feet as he watched me fill out the final part of my application. I sat at the kitchen island with my laptop open, one hand resting against my stomach while I stared at the heading of the page.

Master of Library and Information Science.

I'd already filled out almost everything, providing information on my education, employment history, and references. I'd uploaded a personal statement. All I had left to do was this one section, but Holden stood so close behind me that I could feel his breath ghosting across the back of my neck.

"You know, there's still time to reconsider," he murmured, both hands sliding onto my hips and tugging me back until I was firmly fitted against him. "Give yourself a break until after the baby gets here."

I glanced up at him, leaning my cheek against his chin as I fought the shiver of desire that wanted to race through me now that he was touching

me like this. “I’m aware, but it’s been almost two months at home for me and that’s enough. I can’t take it anymore. I need to do something.”

“So do *me*.”

I laughed. “Again? No. Shoo. Let me finish this.”

He leaned into me, bracing one hand against the island as the other slid to the waistband of my pants. “Let me finish *you* instead.”

I groaned. “What is with you? I thought you supported me doing this.”

“Of course, I do.” He kissed the top of my head and immediately eased back. “All I’m saying is that there’s no rush. We’ve got the community center project to get off the ground, a baby to grow, and a house to decorate. We’re slammed right now.”

I smiled. “I’m proud of you for saying the word slammed without turning it into an innuendo.”

“Hey, I can be mature when I have to, but the rest of the time, I’m a newlywed. I’m told that means I can be a horndog and get away with it.”

“You’re really leaning into this whole newlywed thing, huh?”

He shrugged, those blue eyes twinkling with barely restrained laughter. “Yeah, well, I missed out on it right at the beginning. We’re playing catch up here, and besides, until now, I haven’t heard you complaining.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” I assured him. Very seriously. Because I, most definitely, was not complaining. It turned out that having a hot husband who was very much in love with you and not afraid to show it was an absolute pleasure, in all the ways, but right now, I had to get this done. “I’m just trying to submit this application before you distract me.”

He put his hands up in surrender and moved to the other side of the counter, shirtless despite the cold outside. As my gaze tracked across the hard planes of his chest and bulges of muscle at his biceps, he sighed.

“Seriously, that time wasn’t my fault.”

“You knocked me up. That’s where all these hormones are coming from,” I said. “That means it’s still your fault.”

He chuckled, but I didn’t miss the way his chest puffed out a little bit. “Fair enough. I did do that and I’m going to do it again. As often as you’ll let me.”

“You’ve gone from wanting no kids to wanting however many I’ll let you have?”

He shrugged. “A round dozen sounds good.”

My eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“I’m from a big family, but it could’ve been ever bigger.”

“There are six of you. A dozen is double as many.”

He smirked. “Yeah, that’s the math.”

I shook my head. “Let me submit this application before I accidentally turn into the mother of an entire nation.”

“That’s okay,” he joked. “I’ve got a few minutes today. I can wait.”

I laughed but turned back to the screen and the cursor blinking beside the final question. Holden watched as I typed out the answer, staying but not interrupting again as I attached the final documentation required.

After rereading the answer twice and double checking all the documents, I glanced up at him again, that blond hair all mussed after a morning spent in bed and carrying all the furniture out of Tasha’s old room.

“Are you ready?” I asked. “Once I press this button, it’s final.”

“Do it,” he said without hesitation, those eyes confident as they locked on mine. “This is what you want, Alicia. It’s your dream. If you’re sure you’re ready to go after it, then I’m right there with you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut as I clicked on Submit, and when I reopened them, the page had loaded to tell me that the submission had been successful. For a second, I just stared at those words, recognizing that this was another dream that could come true.

Holden grinned at me from across the counter. “How do you feel?”

“Good.” I drew in a deep breath and finally walked around the island, staring up into those blues and feeling like I could just drown in them. “Happy.”

He smiled, pressing a kiss to my forehead as he slid his arms around my waist and pulled me closer. “Congratulations in advance, baby. You’re going to get in.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but maybe not. We’ll see. In the meantime, you could tell me what you’re really doing here.”

“What?” He raised an eyebrow at me. “I live here, remember? Jeez. Pregnancy brain is a real thing, huh?”

I gave his shoulder a playful smack. “You know what I mean. You’ve been hovering the entire time I was filling out the application, so what is it?”

He sighed. “Fine. I have a surprise for you.”

My eyes narrowed. “What have you done?”

“Nothing too radical.” He reached down and took both my hands in his. “We just never went on our honeymoon, is all.”

“So?”

“So after my midterms, we’re going somewhere. Just the two of us.”

My eyebrows inched up. “Okay. Where are we going?”

He shrugged. “Anywhere you want.”

“You mean you haven’t decided yet?”

“No.” He squeezed my hands. “I thought we should decide together. We never got to have the part where we were just married, and in love, and exploring someplace together where we’ve both always wanted to go.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “At least that gave me time to discover that you’re secretly a good person.”

He smirked. “Don’t go spreading that around now, but yeah. I want to take you somewhere, just us, for a few weeks to unwind before we tell everyone our news.”

As I looked up at him, my brain suddenly started cycling through all the places I’d always wanted to go but had never thought I’d actually be able to visit. For so many years, to me, travel had existed only online or as pictures in magazines, but now?

“I want to go somewhere warm,” I said, unable to stop my grin. “With a beach and a room with a balcony.”

“Done,” he agreed immediately. “It should also have good food and require you to wear nothing but a bikini while we’re there.”

I groaned. “Holden—”

I cut myself off when I felt the familiar twist in my stomach and I swallowed hard. Holden’s brow furrowed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just feeling a little sick again.”

Immediately, he let go of me and was on the move. “Do you want some water? Tea? Oh, wait. I got it. Let’s get you some crackers.”

I chuckled. “God, you’re becoming unbearable.”

“You’ve been sick for weeks. I’m allowed to be unbearable.” As he winked at me, he turned and headed into the pantry anyway, coming back with a box of crackers.

I took one, smiling even as I shook my head at him. “Thank you.”

“That’s better.” He grinned, but I could still see the worry in his eyes. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” I nibbled at the corner of the cracker, grateful for the dry blandness as it hit my tongue.

Pregnancy really wasn’t for the fainthearted. I wasn’t even really showing yet, but I’d already learned that there were many other ways in which my body was going to change. One of them was my sudden aversion to the scent of grilling meat. I couldn’t stand it. Unfortunately, I also couldn’t stand the sweet scent of my own shampoo anymore, which meant I’d started using Holden’s—and having the scent of him on me all day was not doing my hormones any favors.

And round and round we go. I’d been told it eased up in the second trimester, but I wasn’t quite there yet.

Holden kept telling me his mother had all sorts of home remedies that were supposed to work for the morning sickness, but we still hadn’t told her or the family our news. Despite how often Holden had told me we could speak to his mother if I wanted, even if only on the off chance one of those remedies actually worked, we wanted this secret to belong to us for just a little while longer.

Maggie was due in the new year, so there was enough excitement around babies in the family without us adding ours to the chaos just yet. So for now, this was ours.

I reached for his hand. “What about Christmas?”

He smiled. “What about it?”

“I want a real Christmas this year.”

“Define real.”

“Lights. Tree. Too much food. Ugly sweaters.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Matching pajamas.”

“Definitely not.”

“A family dinner.”

“Fine.”

“Cookies.”

“Fine.”

“Your family.”

He sighed.

“Unfortunately.”

I laughed.

He squeezed my hand.

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“What do you want?”

I thought about it.

The answer should have been complicated.

It wasn’t.

“You.”

His expression softened. “Already got me.”

“I know.”

“And the baby.”

I rested my hand over my stomach. “And the baby.”

“And your master’s.”

“And my master’s.”

“And the honeymoon.”

I smiled. “And the honeymoon.”

He leaned over and kissed me. Slowly. Tenderly.

There was no grand declaration. No contract. No bargain. No condition attached. Just us.

When he pulled back, I looked out at the snow again. The world outside was cold and white and changing. Inside, Holden’s hand was warm around mine.

I’d once thought happily ever after was something that happened when you found the right person.

I’d been wrong.

It wasn’t an ending.

It was this. Choosing each other on ordinary mornings. Fighting and forgiving. Building something. Making plans. Changing them. Dreaming bigger. Learning how to be a family. And waking up every day with the person you wanted beside you.

Holden rested his forehead against mine. “So,” he said. “Where are we going?”

I smiled. “I don’t know yet.”

“Good.”

“Why?”

“Because we have ten years to figure it out.”

I laughed. “Ten?”

“At least.”

I looked at him. Then at the snow. Then down at our joined hands.

“Okay.”

He kissed me again. And for the first time in my life, I didn’t need to know exactly what came next.

I had my home. My dreams. My family.

And him.

That was enough. More than enough.

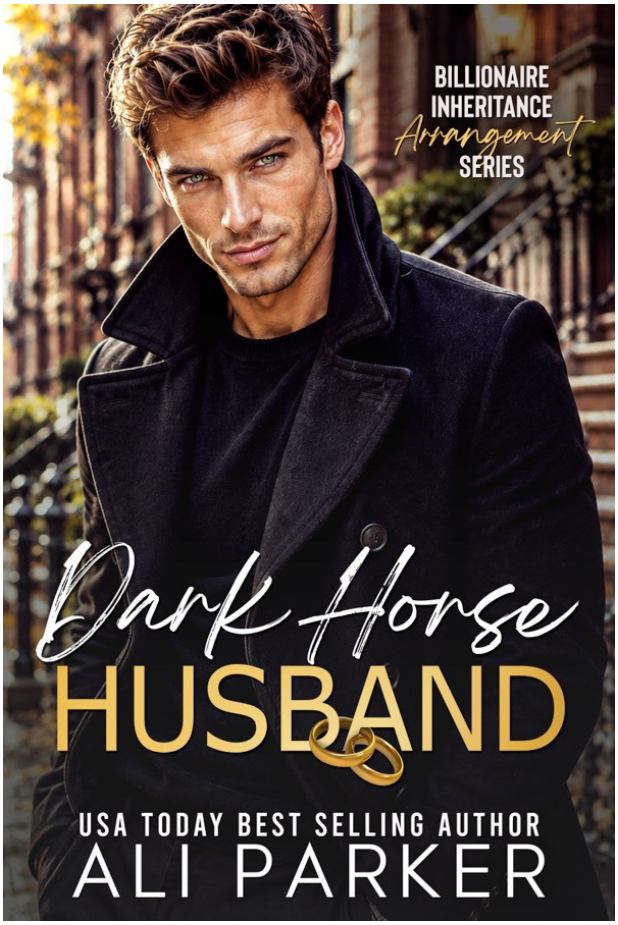
It was everything.

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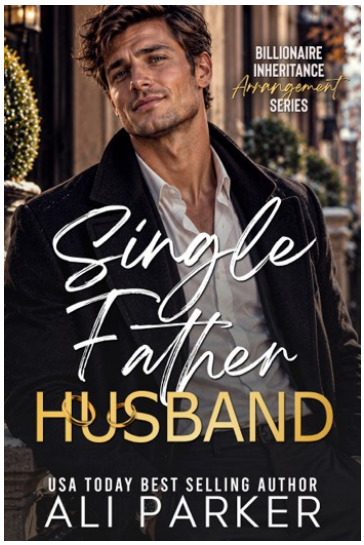
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Go read book 16 in the Inheritance series, Single Father Husband!



I don’t believe every man is meant to settle down.

Personally, I was doing an excellent job avoiding it.

Great career. Beautiful home. Plenty of women.

Not a single Lego in sight.

Then I find out I have a five-year-old son.

Surprise.

One day I’m a happily single billionaire. The next I’m responsible for a tiny human who has my eyes, loves anything with wheels, and deserves a father who actually knows what he’s doing.

I do not.

Enter the beautiful French woman who takes one look at my parenting skills and starts issuing orders.

She’s not my son’s mother.

She’s also not impressed by my money, my charm, or the smile that’s gotten me pretty far with everyone else.

Naturally, I’m fascinated.

Then my family decides we should get married.

Because apparently discovering I have a secret son wasn’t enough excitement for one month.

The marriage is supposed to be practical.

My attraction to her is anything but.

I want the late-night phone calls to become late nights in my bed. I want to make her laugh when

she’s trying very hard to boss me around. And when I see her with my son, I start wanting something I’ve spent my entire adult life avoiding.

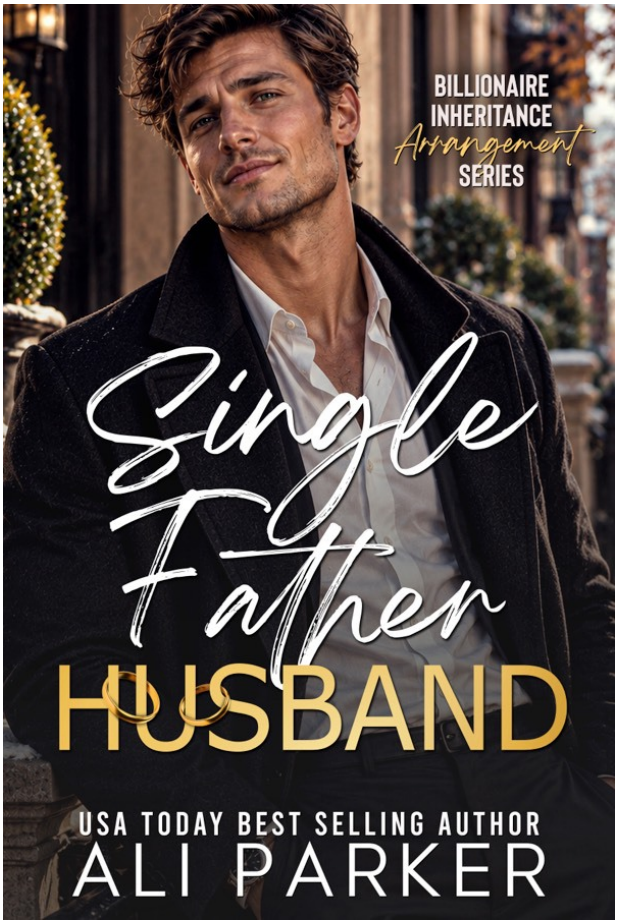
A family.

Because these two might be the first thing in my life I don’t want an escape plan from.

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CHAPTER 1

WYATT

I *’m screwed. I’m so screwed.* Those words rattled through my head on repeat as I looked through the windows of the whiskey bar I was about to walk into. *I’m just… I’m screwed.*

An hour ago, I’d been laughing with my friends, so damn smug thinking I’d avoided the very conversation I was about to have, and now I was here, hand-delivered by my very own brother to our family’s self-appointed, matchmaking fairy godfather, Alex Westwood.

Holden made his getaway, tires squealing behind me as he pulled away from the curb. I stood on the sidewalk outside the bar, staring at the dark wood of the interior, the heavy brass lights floating above the tables, and the rows of whiskey bottles glowing behind the bar.

Personally, I preferred to do my drinking in places where the menus came with prices and the options were limited to Jim, Jack, and Jose, but here, financial information was revealed only after ordering and the liquor was so old, it could’ve fought in the Second World War.

Alex thrived in places like this. Seriously, for all his faults, my brother-in-law never chose an establishment with mediocre food or alcohol prone to giving hangovers straight from hell. Inhaling a deep, steadying breath, I shook off my unease, squared my shoulders, and decided to make the best of drinking the good shit on his tab tonight.

I still had no idea why he’d summoned me here or why Holden had been so squirrely about answering my questions. He’d simply arrived at the

bar I'd been at before, insisted that I get in his car, and then drove me straight to Alex, all without offering a single explanation.

The fact that he'd abandoned me outside like a teenager he'd dropped off at a party didn't bode well either. All I knew at this point was that apparently the assumption I'd made earlier had been wrong.

When I'd seen Alex waiting for me in my office this afternoon, I'd thought he was there to talk me into an arranged marriage. That was kind of his thing. Whenever he showed up in someone's office out of the blue, that person inevitably wound up in front of an altar within the next couple months.

I strode past a doorman who looked me up and down like he wasn't sure he should permit me entry to the premises, but when the hostess spotted me and came right over, he fell back. She offered me a bright smile, waving a hand toward the lounge at the back. "Wyatt Thayer? Mr. Westwood is expecting you."

Unfortunately. "Yeah. Thanks."

"If you would please follow me." She spun around and led me past dark leather booths lining the walls, leaving me to wonder why Alex had chosen a more private spot for this conversation.

He usually liked to perch himself at the bar, so the fact that he wasn't there could be either considerate or foreboding. When she pushed open the door to the private room, however, some of the tension left my shoulders.

Alex was with Marcus and Nash Pembroke, which meant they might've needed the privacy for their meeting instead of ours. While that still didn't explain what Alex wanted to talk to me about so urgently, it made me feel marginally better that they were here.

I'd known them since we'd been kids. Our families had been inseparable for a while there, and now that my brother was married to their sister, we were seeing a lot more of the Pembrokes, despite them being based in New York.

Nash grinned when he spotted me. "Hey, Wyatt. How're you doing, man?"

"Good, you?" I gave him a brief, back-thumping hug when he half-rose as I walked around the table. "What are you two doing here?"

Nash chuckled. "You can't keep a weed from growing. We thought it was about time we annoyed you with our presence."

“If that was the goal, you should’ve tried harder,” I joked, then turned to his older brother. “Hey, Marcus.”

“Hey, man,” he said. “It’s good to see you. You ready to become an uncle again?”

“Are you kidding?” I scoffed. “I’m always ready for a new niece or nephew. As long as I can give them back after spoiling them, I’m happy.”

Marcus laughed. “Maggie has already warned us against spoiling the kid too much. She’s convinced that if she lets any of us have free rein, the baby is going to be a brat before it can even walk.”

“Well, I mean, it’s a Pembroke and a Thayer.” I glanced at Alex, who was seated at the head of the table. “With some Westwood influence thrown in there too. I can pretty much guarantee it’s going to be a brat.”

Alex scoffed, humor shimmering in those ice blue eyes as he shook his head. “As the only one at this table who actually has children, I feel duty bound to tell you to listen to Ryan and Maggie. They’re the parents. Whatever they want goes.”

“Buzzkill.” Nash sighed as he dropped back into his chair. “She’s my little sister and she’s having a baby. I think that entitles me to certain privileges.”

Alex chuckled. “It’s also going to be your parents’ first grandchild. Trust me, she’s already going to have her hands full with them. The best thing you can do is support her. *That’s* your privilege.”

Marcus nodded slowly, leaning back in his chair and picking up a tumbler to take the last swig of his undoubtedly expensive whiskey. “You might be onto something there, but anyway, we should get going.”

My eyebrows inched up as I took a seat across from him. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, we were just finishing up.” He glanced at Alex and pushed his chair back. “We’ll talk more tomorrow?”

As Alex nodded, I shook my head and waved at the menu. “You should stay. Have another drink. Unless you’re desperate to leave me alone with Alex, that is.”

Nash reached for the menu immediately. “I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

“Neither do I, actually.” Marcus frowned like the thought was foreign to him, looking vaguely confused for a moment before he shrugged. “Yeah, sure. We’ll stay. Why not?”

A waitress in a white button-down and a black vest pushed open the door, taking our order for another round of drinks. As she bent over to collect the empty glasses, her eyes caught on mine and I let one corner of my lips curve into a smile.

She flushed, her teeth sinking into her lower lip as she tried to fight a smile of her own. My gaze lingered on her back for a moment as she left, appreciating the view of her curves in the fitted vest until Alex cleared his throat.

"She's here to work, man," he said lightly. "Let's not distract her with the Wyatt Thayer charm."

I smirked. "It's not my fault. I can't turn it off. Besides, Holden assured me this isn't a conversation about marriage, which means that I'm free to *distract* whoever I want."

"It's not about marriage."

Nash frowned. "Marriage? Why the hell did you think it was about that?"

"He was in my office when I came back from lunch," I said as if that explained everything.

Thankfully, it did. Maybe most people wouldn't have understood the significance of that statement, but the Pembrokes were *not* most people.

Nash nodded solemnly, sighing as he reached for his tumbler. "Ah, I get it. You're the last man standing in your family now that Holden's all loved up."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I do talk to people about other things on occasion too. It's not always about marriage. How do you know I wasn't there about the baby? Maybe Jane and I are planning a surprise for Ryan and Maggie the next time they're in town."

"To be fair, you were literally just talking about marriage before he walked in," Nash said, shooting daggers at his brother from his eyes as he fixed him with a lethal glare. "Just so we're perfectly clear on that front, I don't care what Dad's plans are. I'm not falling on my sword on this one."

Marcus sighed, exchanging a frustrated look with Alex before focusing on Nash again. "You can kick and scream as much as you want. The fact remains that we have familial obligations to fulfill if we're going to receive our inheritances. If you don't play ball, you're out. It's as simple as that."

I groaned. "God, why do all the old families have these stupid traditions around arranged marriages? Were our ancestors incapable of wooing a girl

the old fashioned way? I mean, it's not that hard. Buy her drink and smile, for fuck's sake. You don't have to make her sign her life away for the questionable privilege of having your ring on her finger."

Nash lifted his glass toward me. "Amen, brother."

The waitress returned with our drinks and Alex sighed when I caught her eyes again as she handed mine over. Even as I toasted with Nash, I held her gaze, silently vowing to get her number as soon as Alex left.

Nash was right. He really is a buzzkill tonight.

Once she was gone again, Marcus leveled his younger brother with a look that suggested he thought Nash was simply throwing a tantrum. "You don't have to like it, but we grew up knowing we were going to have to meet these requirements."

Alex focused on me, quickly filling me in on what I'd apparently missed. "Mr. Pembroke has started talking about strengthening their family position through an alliance with the Bexleys in New York."

"The Bexleys?" I arched an eyebrow at Nash. "You know they're probably criminals, right? Have you heard the rumors?"

"Everyone has heard those fucking rumors, man." He widened his eyes. "It's crazy that my dad is even considering it, let alone—"

"Potentially," Marcus interjected. "He's talking about *potentially* strengthening our position through this alliance. It's not a done deal and it doesn't necessarily mean he's considering marriage."

Nash's eyes rolled so hard, he probably saw his childhood memories in technicolor. "Dude, unless our father has discovered a new and innovative way to merge two families through friendship, somebody is getting married."

I nodded my agreement. "Definitely."

Marcus exchanged another look with Alex before shaking his head at his brother. "Our inheritance obligations are simply part of being a Pembroke. It's time you accept that."

"Precisely," Alex agreed, lifting his drink for a toast with Marcus this time.

I laughed. "It's like someone gave you two a list of conditions at birth and told you to complete them all, and you organized them into a color-coded binder and thanked that person for the clarity."

Alex considered it for a moment before he shrugged. "My father sat me down with my trust documents when I was six and outlined what would be

expected of me in the future. I might not have been given the list at birth, but I couldn't read then, so it would've been a bit of a waste of time."

I scoffed down another laugh. "Only you, man. I swear, only you."

Marcus immediately disagreed. "It's not only him. I think I was eight, but my father had the same conversation with me. For what it's worth, he had it with Nash too when the time came. All five of us were informed early of our duty to the family. It's not like this has been sprung on us."

Nash snorted. "I'm still not doing it."

I clinked my glass against his. "To the resistance."

Marcus sighed. "You two are children."

"Thank you," Nash said. "That means we're already fulfilling our duty to our families as the youngest brothers, so there. We've done our part. Leave us out of the rest of it."

Marcus shook his head, but amusement flickered in his eyes as he took a long sip of his drink. Our conversation moved on after that, but every time Alex glanced in my direction, there was something off about the look in his eyes.

Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to know what the hell was going on that would've made Holden drag me away from my friends and personally drive me over here just to make sure I didn't bail.

"Okay," I said finally. "Why am I here, Alex? It's been great getting to catch up with you all, but obviously, you asked Holden to bring me for a reason."

As he looked back at me, my stomach dropped straight out of my ass and my earlier suspicions that this wouldn't be good returned with a vengeance. Alex wasn't the type to look careful, sympathetic, or maybe even a little bit scared, but I suddenly saw all those things in his eyes, the tightening of his jaw telling me this wasn't easy for him either.

He tossed back the rest of his drink in one gulp, like he needed the alcohol to fortify him. Then he dragged in a breath so deep, his chest rose with the effort. "I don't really know how to say any of this, so I'm just going to give it to you straight. Do you remember Anastasia, Wyatt?"

Surprise smacked into me. I didn't even remember Alex ever meeting her, but clearly, he knew who she was. "Yeah, of course, man. She was my first girlfriend. That's not the kind of thing a guy forgets."

Nash and Marcus had fallen silent, but Alex was so focused on me, it didn't even look like he remembered they were there. "When was the last

time you saw her?”

I frowned. “We ran into each other once when I was home from college for the weekend. Why?”

Shit, I couldn’t even believe it had really been that long, but I wracked my brain trying to find a more recent memory of her and came up empty.

Alex held my gaze. “You never saw her again after that?”

“Nope. That’s it.” I cocked my head, unease burning a hole through my gut as I stared back at him. “Why are we talking about her, Alex?”

He winced, suddenly looking like he’d rather be anywhere else, talking to anyone else about anything else, and the tips of my fingers went cold in response. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but she died six months ago.”

I blinked hard. “What? How?”

He shook his head. “I think it might’ve been cancer. I don’t have all the details yet, though.”

“Wow. Fuck.” A burst of pain shot through the disbelief clouding my mind. “That’s terrible. She was so young.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “That’s not really what I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

I slumped back in my chair, reeling after being hit with the very last news I’d expected to get when I’d seen him in my office earlier. “What is it, then? Just land the plane, Alex. I’m not really in the mood for the dramatic build-up right now.”

He folded his hands on the table, sympathy softening his eyes, but that same something that had been off all along was still glinting in them too. “She left behind a five-year-old son, Wyatt.”

My heart cracked in half. “Shit. I didn’t even know she was a mom. She’d have been great at it, though. Poor kid. What an awful loss.”

“Yeah. *That’s* what I wanted to talk to you about,” Alex said calmly. “You’re almost certainly his father. I’m arranging for a paternity test to be done as soon as possible, but I’ve seen a picture of him and the resemblance is uncanny. You’re his dad, Wyatt. I’m ninety percent sure that he’s your biological child.”

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CHAPTER 2

COLETTE

I barged into my father's dusty, sun-drenched study, a room that hadn't been renovated or modernized for at least the last hundred years. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, most of them filled with tomes that hadn't been opened since my grandfather's time.

Our chateau in the Loire Valley had been in the family for generations, some of them making more of an effort with the maintenance and upkeep than others. Back in the days when nobility as a class had still existed, the place had been a bastion of status and strength, but that was certainly not the case now. And it was also the exact reason why I'd come to interrupt Papa's call as soon as Mari, our housekeeper, had told me he was talking with the estate lawyer.

He sat behind his elaborate, antique desk with one hand pressed to his forehead and his phone in the other. The sunlight pouring through the open windows illuminated not only the dust motes drifting lazily through the air but also the deep lines etched into his features as he listened to whatever the lawyer was saying.

As soon as he glanced up and saw me, alarm registered in his eyes and he slid a palm over the microphone, waving me off with his free hand. "Go away, Colette. Not now."

I shook my head and held out a hand. "Give it to me."

"No."

"Please?"

“Still no.” He sighed and returned to the call, giving me a stern look as I crossed the room and sat down on the edge of his desk.

Completely ignoring his ire, I inched closer, desperately trying to make out what the lawyer was yammering on about on the other end of the line. My father would tell me later anyhow, but while he’d spent the last twenty-five years trying to teach me patience, it still wasn’t a virtue I possessed.

When he glanced back up, I extended a hand toward him once more, beckoning for the phone with my fingers. “Give it to me.”

“No,” he hissed. “Just wait.”

“No. The estate is my future, which means that I should be involved in any conversations about it.”

Exasperation lit his deep blue eyes, but he finally accepted that I wasn’t going to go away and handed me the phone. I smiled as I took it, then pushed up from the desk and strode over to the windows. “Bonjour, Philip. This is Colette.”

“Oh,” the man said, not my greatest fan after our previous discussions. He sighed. “Bonjour, Colette. I’m afraid it’s Jean I need to speak with, not you. If you’d be so kind as to put him back on for me, please.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Obviously, you have an update about who the estate and the title will pass to. As that will only become relevant once my father is no longer with us, I’m who you need to speak with.”

“Colette—”

“Philip,” I interrupted, looking out at the grounds the Montmorencies had been entrusted with for centuries and feeling a sinking pit of despair open up deep in my soul. After all this time, I would *not* be the last Montmorency to call this place home. I absolutely refused. No matter the fact that I hadn’t been born with a swinging appendage between my legs, I would fight for our estate until my dying breath. “If you have received final answers to the questions surrounding *my* inheritance and *my* future, I deserve to know the verdict.”

“You must understand that this isn’t personal, Colette,” he said. “Titles in France, as well as any associated estate rights, are passed down through the generations by the historical laws that created them. Those laws dictate that titles can only pass through the male line. I’m sorry, but there is no way around this. As you are female, you cannot inherit the title or the estate.”

A sharp, twisting pain shot through my chest. “What about equality?”

“There was no equality when those laws were created,” he said bluntly. “What that means for you is that the family’s own money, investments, artwork, furniture, jewelry, and personal possessions will pass to you, but the estate will not.”

“What if there is no living male heir?” I asked, scoffing. “Surely, there has to be precedent for a situation like ours.”

“There is,” he said. “If there is no male heir, the estate passes to the next male relative.”

Dry, disbelieving laughter bubbled up from deep within my being. “Well, I suppose you’ll have to arrange a séance to tell my closest cousin, who died before I was even born, that he can now call himself Baron Montmorency and haunt *my* chateau. I hope you have a medium on retainer because you’re going to need one.”

Philip mumbled something incomprehensible and I shook my head, red-hot tentacles of frustration wrapping around my vital organs. “No, I’m genuinely curious. Will his ghost inherit the vineyard as well, or only the title?”

My father buried his face in his hands and started laughing, the sound muffled but clear enough in the quiet study that I turned away from the window to wink at him. While none of this was funny, we were either going to laugh or cry about it.

Between my father and me, we’d always preferred tears of laughter. Moping around and bawling our eyes out wouldn’t get us any closer to a solution. “So just to be clear, there is absolutely no provision under which I can inherit the estate?”

“No,” he said. “Not unless you have a son.”

I almost doubled over when he said it, feeling like I’d taken a punch to the gut from a professional fighter. “Well, you and I both know that’s not going to happen.”

“I’m sorry, Colette. I understand that this is a blow, but the laws—”

“Yes, I understand. Several centuries ago, a few men got together and wrote those laws without caring what would happen to the women in their lives because we’re far too hysterical to ever be considered worthy of the responsibility of having a title pass to us. Thank you, Philip. We’ll speak again.”

I hung up on him without waiting for a response and my father sighed when he looked up at me. “I was still talking to him.”

“About what?” I asked, striding back to his desk to set the phone down with a soft click. “Do you need to discuss how we’re going to go about telling my dead cousin that he’ll be inheriting my home?”

“That’s the law, Colette. Philip can’t do anything about traditions that have existed for centuries. He’s a lawyer, for heaven’s sake. He can’t resurrect a dead king to tell him he was an idiot and force him to change the rules of succession.”

I sniffed. “Well, then he clearly isn’t the kind of lawyer who goes above and beyond.”

“Very well.” Dad sighed, solemnly folding his arms in front of him. “I shall tell Philip to gather a priest and a shovel. Perhaps we can exhume an ancestor and bring him back to threaten him with a lawsuit.”

“Excellent. See, that’s the kind of progressive thinking we need to solve this problem.”

Papa chuckled. “Honestly, you’re acting like I have one foot in the grave already.”

“It’s never a bad idea to be prepared,” I countered. “Plus, this is an issue we need to resolve while you’re alive, lucid, and able to fight beside me. As things stand, they’ll sooner resurrect cousin Jean-Paul than allow the title to pass to me.”

The lingering smile faded from my father’s lips, the amusement flickering out of his eyes. “We’ve spent years trying to fight this, Colette. There’s nothing more we can do.”

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair, turning back to look out at the rolling green hills and the vineyards beyond them once more. Papa wasn’t kidding or exaggerating. He truly had spent years trying to find a loophole in the rules of succession.

We’d consulted lawyers, historians, and administrators. We’d met with other families in similar situations and tried to petition for the old laws to be changed, but the trouble was that titles of nobility no longer enjoyed legal status in modern France.

Nobles as a class had been abolished over a century ago. My father was simply a Baron because his father had been one and his father before him, but it no longer meant that we received privileges or grants. It was merely a title.

Unfortunately for me, that meant modern society was simply waiting for the old family lines to die out so we could rid ourselves of the relics of the

past once and for all. No one cared enough about it to take up the fight to change the rules.

If it had only been the title I couldn't inherit, I would've been perfectly alright with it. I couldn't care less about being a Baroness. What I did care about, however, was the estate itself. This chateau was my home and the small but decorated vineyard we operated was my pride and joy.

"We need to do something, Papa. We cannot let them win."

He leaned back in his chair. "I cannot wait until you marry so you'll have another man in your life to boss around. I'll finally be able to have a break. What do you want me to do, ma cherie? We have been defeated by paperwork."

"We have survived revolutions and wars," I said. "We simply have to make the executive branch understand that the world will not collapse if a woman inherits a piece of property with a title attached to it."

"Oh, it's that simple, is it? Why didn't you tell me? I would have had it done hours ago."

I couldn't fight the smile that broke out across my lips, but I finally walked back across the office and pressed a kiss to his temple before I left. "I will find a solution, Papa. In the meantime, I should get back to my to-do list. Perhaps once I free up some valuable brain space, an answer will come."

He chuckled. "Good luck with that, and don't be too tough on Henri. He's doing his best."

I sighed. "I know. It's not his fault that the last two winters have been brutal. I won't forget."

I also wouldn't take it easy on him, but Henri would expect nothing less. He'd been working on this land since before I was born, his influence helping shape me into who I was today. If I suddenly stopped demanding excellence, he'd be worried about my mental health.

As I finally left Papa's office, I turned my attention to my actual work. The succession issue would have to wait for now. As much as I hated it, my hands were tied.

There was no use in sitting around, feeling sorry for myself about it all day. We'd been waiting months for the final answers to come. At least we had them now. Even if they weren't the answers we'd been hoping for.

I left the house and took a stroll down to the vineyard, using the time to clear my mind as effectively as I could. Ancient laws were the least of my

actual worries today. Here, in the present, we'd only be worse off if I couldn't figure out a way to keep the business on its feet.

Henri and I spent the next couple of hours walking through the vines and the winery, and we were just wrapping up in my office when my phone started ringing on my desk. He stood up, sliding the folder he'd been carrying with him under his arm.

"We'll figure it out, Colette," he said gently, waiting until I'd inclined my chin before he left.

I swiped my phone up, turning it over to see the name of a friend I hadn't spoken to for months. Despite the exhaustion of the day, I smiled as I answered the call. "Jane, hi. How are you?"

"Not great," she said, sounding just as tired and worn down as I felt. "We'll catch up soon, but I'm afraid this isn't a social call. I have an odd proposition to make and I'd like to talk to you about it."

"Alright," I said slowly. "How odd?"

"Very."

I frowned, turning my chair until I was looking out the window at the sun setting over the vineyard, casting the entire world in a warm, orange glow. "Okay, shoot. What's going on?"

She hesitated. "It's a little bit hard to explain over the phone, but, uh, how soon do you think you can be in the States?"

***

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I don't believe every man is meant to settle down.

Personally, I was doing an excellent job avoiding it.

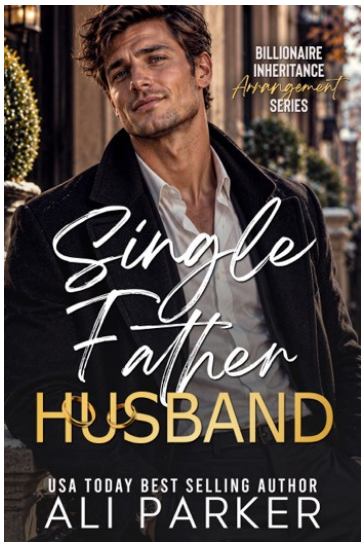
Great career. Beautiful home. Plenty of women.

Not a single Lego in sight.

Then I find out I have a five-year-old son.

Surprise.

One day I'm a happily single billionaire. The next I'm responsible for a tiny human who has my eyes, loves anything with wheels, and deserves a



father who actually knows what he's doing.

I do not.

Enter the beautiful French woman who takes one look at my parenting skills and starts issuing orders.

She's not my son's mother.

She's also not impressed by my money, my charm, or the smile that's gotten me pretty far with everyone else.

Naturally, I'm fascinated.

Then my family decides we should get married.

Because apparently discovering I have a secret son wasn't enough excitement for one month.

The marriage is supposed to be practical.

My attraction to her is anything but.

I want the late-night phone calls to become late nights in my bed. I want to make her laugh when

she's trying very hard to boss me around. And when I see her with my son, I start wanting something I've spent my entire adult life avoiding.

A family.

Because these two might be the first thing in my life I don't want an escape plan from.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi! I'm Ali Parker, a USA Today bestselling author who has been writing contemporary and new adult romance for over a decade, creating heartfelt, swoony stories that give readers a place to escape and feel a little lighter. Every book I write starts with a simple "what if" and is crafted the old-school way; with imagination, long nights, too much coffee, and a deep love for storytelling (no AI here, just heart and a dedicated human team I treasure like family).

I left my career as a CPA to follow that calling, inspired by the power one great story can have to bring hope and joy. These days, I live in Tennessee with my husband (my real-life book boyfriend), our family, and my sweet grandbabies who make life even sweeter. When I'm not writing, I'm dreaming up new stories, crafting A LOT, and soaking up every moment with the people I love most. Oh, and drinking way too much coffee. Don't judge.

Welcome to my stories, your escape, your adventure, and maybe even your next favorite love story.

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Dark Horse Husband

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