

# Keep Holding On

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**\*\*Exclusive Sneak Peek\*\***



## Chapter 1

He'd tell his family tonight. After the wedding. Before he turned himself in to the police.

Beckett Walker pried his fingers from the steering wheel of the rental sedan, wary gaze slanting to the church, its steeped roof reaching into a burning sky. He'd made it on time, at least. Caught a last-minute flight this morning—Boston to Chicago to Des Moines—before wilting in a forever-long line at the car rental counter.

An hour's drive later, here he was in Maple Valley, wrinkled clothes and a gallon of gas station coffee roiling in his stomach. He rubbed one hand over his stubbled jaw. Probably should've shaved this morning. Gotten a haircut or at least taken the time to smooth it back.

"Whatever, I'm here." Whispered words, a tussling of reluctance and resolve.

Until, finally, Beckett slid from the car, dragging with him the suit jacket he'd discarded long before the plane's wheels even lifted from the tarmac. The faintest cool hovered in the early-August air, mingling with the beams of coral and orange sweeping overhead.

Six years. Six years since he'd come home.

He slipped his arms into the jacket, rumpled reflection glinting back at him from the car's window.

"Beck?"

No mistaking his sister's voice, nor the surprise in her tone. He barely turned before Raegan barreled into him. "Beckett Flynn Walker, you crazy . . ."

She let her words trail as she squeezed, then stepped back. She'd ditched her brow piercing and the usual dozen bracelets she liked to cram onto her wrists. But a few streaks of purple colored her otherwise blond hair. At least one thing hadn't changed.

"You crazy what?" he prodded.

She crossed her arms over a shimmering bridesmaid dress. "You crazy . . ." Raegan drawled, then dropped her arms and grinned. "You crazy, awesome brother. I knew you'd show up."

"Not possible. I didn't even know myself 'til last night." He'd meant it last week when he'd told his cousin Seth he probably wouldn't be able to make it to his wedding. After all, it wasn't like this was a normal event with invitations sent in advance and plenty of time to clear his overcrowded calendar—court dates, depositions, meetings. "Who plans a wedding in less than two weeks, anyway?"

"Besotted lovebirds, that's who." She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the church. Its white exterior glowed against the dusk, faint music lilting from inside. "Seth proposed and Ava didn't so much say 'yes' as 'when?' Too in love to wait, I guess."

Almost the exact wording Seth had used when he'd called with the news. And if he'd figured there was anything else behind Beckett's inability to attend than a crazy workload, he hadn't mentioned it. Despite the guilt, Beckett had resigned himself to missing out on yet another family event with yet another lame excuse.

But that'd been before yesterday's phone call. The one that might very well change everything. And he'd just known: It was time to come home.

*Home.* The word coiled itself around his heart—a comforting embrace or maybe a too-tight squeezing hold, he didn't know. Maybe both.

His steps slowed. "I don't want to make a scene, Rae. It's Seth's night. I was going to sit in the back and—"

"Don't be a moron. You belong on stage with the rest of the wedding party."

"I'm not *in* the wedding party." Because he wanted to avoid attention, needed to. If the wrong police officer found out he was home before he had a chance to clear things up . . .

They'd reached the church entrance now, Raegan still pulling him along, and as they spilled into the foyer, suddenly, forcefully, the long-since-evicted memories of his last Maple Valley wedding came squirming back in.

His reckless outburst at the back of the sanctuary. Hundreds of pairs of eyes all bearing identical shock turned in his direction. And the relief on Kit's face.

Relief that'd turned to regret not an hour later.

"Am I seeing things?" His older brother's voice punctured the memory. Beckett had to blink to adjust to the present.

"Logan. Hey."

Like Raegan, Logan went straight for a hug. But when he stepped back, his expression was as much question as it was welcome. "I'd interrogate you about what took you so long, but the wedding's in twenty minutes. We don't have time."

The summer sky poured through the foyer's windows in a cloud of light and color, the scent of flowers and perfume trailing over him.

There'd been lilacs at Kit's wedding. And hers had been earlier in the day.

He dislodged the unbidden echoes with a shake of his head. He should've expected this—all the thoughts of Kit trying to worm their way in. But at least they were only that—thoughts. He wouldn't have to see her. Last he'd heard, she was off in London or somewhere.

"I'll just find a seat—"

Logan cut him off with a laugh and yanked him toward a hallway. "Nice try." He half-shoved him into a bathroom and slapped on the lights. "All right. Strip."

"Huh?" Surprise held him in place as Logan peeled off his jacket, tossed it aside, and reached for his tie. "Why are you undressing me?"

The door swung open before Logan could answer. "Beckett!" And that would be his last sibling. Kate squealed, her dress swishing as she crowded past Logan, apparently not caring that she was barging into a men's restroom. "You're really here."

His third hug of the day, third swell of strained happiness. "Hey, Kate." Man, he loved these people—*his* people. Missed them. Wished for the thousandth time the consequences of his own stupidity hadn't kept him away so long.

But it had been for the best, hadn't it? After yesterday's phone call, wasn't he on the brink of what most people would consider success? Busy career about to take a new turn, the kind that came with a uniform and a title bearing so much more weight than junior associate practicing corporate law.

*United States Army JAG Corps.*

The thrill of possibility careened through him all over again. Travel. Respect. The chance to use his law degree to follow in Dad's military footsteps, maybe even make some kind of difference in the world.

Maybe, hopefully, make up for too many wasted years.

Of course, the phone call had been only the first step—lining up an interview with a field screening officer. He still had to complete the application and impress the board and make it through training and—

*Get the Maple Valley police department off your back.*

Soaring hope wobbled on fatigued wings. If he couldn't clear his record before that interview, well, there wouldn't be any point to doing the interview.

"I can't believe Raegan was right." Oblivious to his tension, Kate tucked a piece of russet hair behind her ear and punched his arm. "Thanks a lot. Now I owe her fifty bucks."

"Nice way to welcome a guy home."

"You could've called or something."

"What would have been the fun in that? Besides—" He stopped, distracted by Logan unzipping a garment bag. "Don't tell me—"

Logan thrust a shirt on a hanger at him. "Spare tux. Hurry up and change."

Kate nodded. "He's right. We can catch up later. Raegan went looking for Dad. I'll go find a razor."

"I don't need a razor."

Logan rolled his eyes as Kate exited. "Because obviously you've forgotten how to use one."

Beckett met his older brother's eyes—same inky shade as his own. Logan had a couple inches on him, and when they were younger, the height difference had always left Beckett feeling like Logan was looking down on him. And rightfully so most of the time. Logan was the kind of guy everyone wanted to be. Solid. Dependable. Smart.

Even when his life had been in tatters, somehow Logan had held on, come out of the tragedy even stronger.

Now all Beckett saw in his brother's scrutiny was genuine consideration. "You guys were this sure I'd show up?" Absently, he started unbuttoning his shirt.

Logan nodded. "It was Dad's idea to save you a spot in the wedding party. Ava's brother-in-law, Blake, was prepared to stand in just in case. But we all hoped . . ."

Right—Ava. He'd thought he might have arrived early enough to catch Seth's bride before the wedding. Introduce himself and tell her how lucky she was to have landed his cousin. *You got one of the good Walkers.*

But that was before Logan had dragged him in here. "I really can't do this."

"Wait 'til Seth realizes you're in the lineup. He'll be pumped." Logan pulled the tuxedo jacket from the garment bag.

"You don't understand—"

"We already did photos, so you missed that fun. And by *fun* obviously I mean torture. But at least you'll get to stand up with us."

"You're not listening, Logan. I'm telling you I can't do this."

Logan paused, meeting his eyes under the jarring fluorescent lights over the bathroom mirror.

"I've got good reason—"

"Don't play cryptic, Beck." Impatience curled in his tone.

"I'm not playing anything. There are things you don't know."

Logan's gaze darkened. "What I know is, you haven't bothered to come home for seven years—"

"Six." The word came out tinny. Futile.

"You've missed tons of stuff. The only holidays we've spent with you are the ones we came out to Boston for." Barely veiled frustration crackled in Logan's voice. "My daughter hardly knows her uncle."

Beckett watched himself flinch in the mirror. The accusation couldn't have bruised more swiftly if it'd been a punch. But what could he say? Logan was right, and he'd offered too many long-distance apologies over the years to think another would do any good now.

But if Logan would just hear him out . . . Not now—there wasn't time—but tonight. He'd explain why he'd stayed away. Why he'd finally come back. All the ways he was working to make things right.

The door swung open then. "I heard someone needs a razor. I ran into Kate and she gave me this and told me—"

The voice halted the same second Beckett's focus landed on the face staring back at him from the mirror.

*Kit.*

The razor clinked to the ground.

He stared as the last of his confidence crumbled.

She stepped into the room. "They said you weren't coming."

She'd grown out her hair since he'd seen her last and it dangled past her shoulders in honey-gold waves. She wore a simple navy blue dress and—his gaze traveled to her feet—strappy heels? Since when did Kit Danby run around in anything other than flip-flops?

Since when was she *here*? He swallowed hard.

And then she was smiling that crooked Danby smile that always started on one side before filling out. "I'm so happy to see you."

Logan cleared his throat. "I'll just, um, give you two a moment."

"No." The word released in a heated whoosh. Kate, Logan, neither of them knew . . . He shook his head, felt the tightness course through him and pushed past his brother, intent on the door.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

He flung the door open and spilled into the hallway, unbuttoned Oxford flapping against his thin undershirt. Raegan and Kate stood in a clump of bridesmaids in the foyer. More people, enough of them turning to stare for him to realize what he must look like—half undressed, disheveled, angry.

"Beckett."

Kit's voice sounded behind him, and he turned. He saw the hurt mixed with pleading in her eyes. And maybe something else . . . hope? Did she honestly think they were about to have a happy reunion right here?

But then her expression shifted to confusion, her focus angling behind him.

"Beckett Walker?"

He could feel the hush of the onlookers before he even turned. And somehow, he just knew.

A police officer. In uniform, face older but familiar. Looking none too happy to be here. "You're Beckett."

"You know I am. We went to school together, Hastings." Why, even now, when he knew what was about to happen, did he have to be sarcastic?

"Sorry about this, man." The officer sighed. "Beckett Walker, I'm here to place you under arrest."

Beckett and Kit's heartwarming story continues in *Keep Holding On*.

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