

Robin Lee HATCHER

How Sweet It Is

Prologue

March
Tacoma, Washington

Jed Henning strode down the hallway toward his father's office. Thomas Henning's assistant had made the message crystal clear. There would be no delaying the meeting this time. No rescheduling. Not for any reason, no matter how urgent it might seem. Jed was fairly certain he knew what the meeting was about: Jed's screw-up brother, Christopher. With any luck, their dad was as fed up with Chris as Jed was.

His steps slowed, and he looked down at his hands. They were balled into fists, a common reaction whenever he thought about his kid brother. Especially lately. The two of them had almost come to blows the last time they'd been together. Shaking out his hands, Jed hurried on toward the end of the corridor.

Thomas Henning, a successful businessman who'd also practiced law for a few years in the early nineties, ran a commercial construction firm and sat on the boards of several corporations, including Jed's. In a family or social setting, his dad was friendly, affable, sometimes even funny. But in his impressive office, with floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a stunning view of Mount Rainier, he was all business. And with each step Jed took, that latter fact about his dad began to bother him. Why had Jed been summoned here? Why hadn't his dad come to the much more low-key Laffriot offices instead?

Brittany Wales looked up from her desk when Jed entered the outer office. "Good morning," she greeted him with a smile. But there seemed to be a warning in her eyes.

That didn't bode well.

"I'll tell Mr. Henning you're here." She reached for the telephone on her desk.

Jed didn't bother to sit down. It was one minute before the hour. His father was nothing if not punctual—something Jed had inherited from him.

Brittany returned the handset to its cradle and looked at Jed. "You can go in now."

In most every setting, Jed was a man who exuded confidence, but he wasn't feeling that way at the moment. Something felt off to him. Again, he suspected it had to do with Chris. But Chris was the problem. Not Jed. So why was he worried?

"Hi, Dad."

His father rose from behind his massive desk. "Jed."

Although they spoke frequently by telephone, Jed hadn't seen his father in person since Christmas. Not since right after his parents had separated. It seemed to him now that his father

had noticeably aged. There were deeper lines etched around his eyes and the corners of his mouth, and his hair seemed more peppered with gray. He still looked distinguished and powerful, yet he had changed too.

“You wanted to see me?” Jed said.

“Yes.” His father motioned to one of the two leather chairs on the opposite side of the desk. “Sit.”

Jed was thirty-one years old. He had his MBA from the University of Washington. He’d proven himself in a topnotch high-tech firm right out of college, then he’d successfully launched his own company. Yet right now he felt like a ten-year-old called to the principal’s office.

He sat.

After regaining his own seat, his dad steepled his hands in front of his mouth while tapping index fingers together. His gaze was intense but inscrutable.

Jed resisted the urge to squirm.

After a lengthy and uncomfortable silence, his dad asked, “Have you talked to Chris?”

“No, sir. Not recently. Not since we fought about his work on the new project.”

“Did you try to call him like I asked you to?”

Jed drew a quick breath. “No. Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not. Because it won’t get us anywhere. Because he’ll tell me I’m wrong and he’s right and he wants to do things his own way and in his own time. But he has no concept of time or the demands of the market, and he doesn’t care either. All he wants to do is sit in a dark room swigging Red Bulls one after the other while he stares at a screen, playing games or thinking up code.”

If Jed could go back four years, he wouldn’t make Chris a part of Laffriot, Inc. He would find somebody else to do the creating. Only . . . even he knew there wouldn’t be a Laffriot without Chris. Jed could start a different kind of company without his brother. Any other kind of company. But he couldn’t found Laffriot.

“Son.” His dad leaned forward, forearms now resting on the desk. “I’m proud of you. You know I am. But it’s time you got things right with your brother.”

Jed bristled. “Did you tell him the same thing?”

“No.”

“So why am I the one who’s supposed to fix things? I’m not the one who took off and isn’t doing the work and isn’t answering calls. I’ve been right where I’m supposed to be. I’ve been living and breathing Laffriot for four years. I’m the one whose hard work put our very first game onto the bestseller list. *Caliban* is going strong, but we’ve got to follow it up with something even better, and we’ve got to do it soon. I didn’t start Laffriot to be a one-hit wonder. If Chris won’t do the work he’s supposed to do, then we’ll hire somebody else. We’ve got the rep now to attract the right people. Chris isn’t the only creative person in the country.”

His dad sighed. “I don’t think you’re hearing me.” He rose and walked to the window, staring off toward Mount Rainier.

The silence dragged on so long Jed started to wonder if he’d been forgotten.

“Son.” His dad faced him again. “I’m going to say this as plainly as I know how. You and your brother will work things out, or I will shut down Laffriot for good and sell its assets to a competitor. *Caliban* would turn a tidy profit.”

Jed was on his feet. “You’re not serious.”

“Oh, but I am.”

“Dad, we can’t—”

“Maybe *we* can’t, but *I* can. I own the controlling share of the company, and I am authorized to make this decision by the agreement you and I made when you founded Laffriot.”

“Exactly. *I* founded it.”

“Then do what you have to do to save it. Get things right with your brother. And I don’t mean simply getting him back to work. I mean what’s wrong between you two personally. Do it fast because I’m not watching this drag out forever.”

Chapter One

April

Kuna, Idaho

“I wish I could tell you something,” Ben Henning said, his brow creased with a frown. “But I haven’t heard from Chris. I didn’t even know he was in Boise.”

Jed sat opposite his favorite cousin at the table in the kitchen of the old farmhouse, a large mug of coffee in his right hand. He and Ben had been born the same year, and as boys they’d spent a lot of time together before Jed’s family relocated from Idaho to Washington. That had been more than twenty years ago. Trips back to Idaho some summers had kept the two of them close. Much closer than Jed was with his own brother.

Jed took a gulp of coffee before saying, “Chris left Washington at the end of February. He told Mom he had something personal to take care of. Then he was gone. No idea what that personal matter is, and it’s only recently I found out he’s in Boise.” Guilt sluiced through him. He wasn’t being entirely honest with his cousin. Still, he wasn’t ready to tell anyone, not even Ben, the mess his brother had left behind him. That his absence could put an end to Laffriot.

“He hasn’t contacted me, and Grandpa would have told me if he’d been in touch with him.”

“I’m not surprised, but I was hoping.”

Ben leaned back in his chair, his gaze searching.

For a moment, Jed considered opening up, getting everything off his chest. He just might find a sympathetic ear in Ben. Despite all the dumb stuff Chris had done, their dad always seemed to forgive him, seemed willing to give him another chance and then another and another, always making excuses for him. Dad never did the same for Jed. But then he’d never needed to make excuses for Jed. Chris had dropped out of high school at seventeen. Jed got his MBA at twenty-three, graduating in the top of his class. Chris hadn’t stuck with any job for long. Jed had succeeded in employment and then out on his own. If Chris knew how to read a clock, his tardiness belied it. Chris couldn’t care less about the accolades that had been heaped on Laffriot after the debut of *Caliban*. He had no ambition whatsoever. It seemed to Jed that his brother would be just as content if he was penniless and living on the streets. He’d never even tried to live up to their dad’s expectations.

So why was Jed, who’d excelled in school and business, the one who had to fix things with his brother? The question left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“How long are you going to stay in Boise?”

“Not sure. As long as it takes for Chris to take my calls and meet with me. I’m not going back to Washington until I do.”

“Would you like to stay here at the farm? Nothing fancy, but I’ve got a spare room you’re welcome to.”

“No, thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I think it’ll be better if I stick closer to Boise. Besides, I don’t want to be a bother to anybody, especially if I end up working until all hours.” That wasn’t likely to happen. His dad had shut operations down for the time being and given the employees a month’s leave with pay. Jed had to hope they wouldn’t all spend that time looking for new jobs. If they did, there might not be much to save when he got back.

“Sometimes being your own boss means you work 24/7,” Ben said, intruding on Jed’s darker thoughts. “I’ve learned that the hard way.”

“Yeah. It can mean that.”

Silence stretched between them a second time, Ben’s gaze once again searching. Jed was good at hiding his thoughts and feelings. A man didn’t succeed in business negotiations if his face gave away too much. But he had the uncomfortable feeling his cousin could see through him despite his efforts.

“You know, Jed. I have something I want to give you.” Ben got up from the table and left the kitchen, returning a short while later with something in his hands. When he placed it on the table, Jed saw it was a time-worn Bible. “This belonged to Andrew Henning.”

“No kidding? Great-Grandpa Andrew’s Bible. How’d you come by it?”

“In a roundabout way. He left it as a legacy to his descendants. It comes to one of us and then, when we feel like God says it’s time, it’s supposed to be given to somebody else. I think that time is now. God wants you to have it.”

“Me? But why—”

“It’s hard for me to explain why. Just a nudge in my spirit. That old Bible meant a great deal to me as I was getting the equine therapy program off the ground. Sometimes it seemed I could feel Grandpa Andrew’s prayers for all of us as I sat holding it, reading it. It was as if he’d prayed for me and what I would one day do on this farm.” A fleeting smile curved the corners of Ben’s mouth. “I imagine he did pray for us. All his descendants. Those who’d been born, by name. Those who hadn’t been born yet, in a more general way.”

“Did he know my name?”

“Sure. He died the year after you and I were born, and from what my grandpa told me, Andrew Henning was as sharp as a tack right up to the last week or two of his life.”

Jed looked down at the Bible again, this time opening its cover. It fell open to the title page, and he paused long enough to read the words scrawled there.

*To our beloved son,
Andrew Michael Henning,
on the occasion of his graduation
from the university.
Follow God and you will never lose your way.
Papa and Mama
Kuna, Idaho
1929*

“Follow God and you will never lose your way.” Jed looked up.

“Good advice, I’ve found.”

Have I lost my way? It wasn’t a question Jed had asked himself before. He wasn’t the kind of man who spent time on doubts or even much in the way of self-examination. He determined something to do, then he did it. He decided what he wanted to be, then he became it.

Have I followed God? That question caused a bit more discomfort. He knew the answer: not in a long time. Who had time to go to church or get involved with small groups or even pray when getting ready to launch a new business or while working to make a success of it?

He closed the Bible and held it as he rose from the chair. “I’d better get going. I’ve got some phone calls to make this afternoon.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay here at the farm?” Ben stood too.

“I’m sure. But thanks for the offer.”

“Okay. You’ve got my number. Call if you need me. For anything.”

“I will.”

Holly Stanford groaned as she reached to turn off the alarm on her phone. Here she was, napping in the afternoon when she had a million things to do. But all she wanted was to stay there and sleep straight through the rest of the day and the night as well. She was so blooming tired. It seemed she was always tired.

“No rest for the wicked,” she whispered, quoting her grandmother.

She allowed herself about thirty seconds to lie back with her eyes closed before she shoved aside the sheet and blanket and sat up on the side of the bed. Hopefully a quick shower would help open her eyes all the way.

Within a few minutes, she stood beneath a fine spray of warm water, still wishing she could go back to bed. It seemed she hadn’t had two minutes to herself in ages. She was either working on repairs to the house or working at the restaurant. Working but never accomplishing enough. There was always something more that needed repaired or replaced. There was always a need for more money than what she had available. There were always decisions to be made. She was so incredibly tired of making decisions. Especially since she’d made more than a few poor ones.

“God.” Eyes closed, she pressed her forehead against the tile. “I hate my life. I thought Nathan was Your plan, but he wasn’t. I thought the restaurant was Your plan too. Now I don’t know anything. Nothing’s going the way I want, the way I imagined. I don’t see a way through. I don’t see a way out. I’ve already lost so much. Am I going to lose everything that’s left? Can You help me, please?”

It was a pitiful, complaining, self-pitying kind of prayer, one she’d prayed more than once over the past year, the kind that left her feeling guilty for even voicing the words aloud. Yet her younger sister, Trixie, would tell her it was honest and raw and that God could handle it. She hoped Trixie was right, because it seemed to be the only kind of prayer she uttered.

Move forward, Holly. Just keep moving forward. You’re tired and discouraged, but you aren’t beaten yet. Don’t give up.

With a sigh, she turned off the water and reached for a towel.

Half an hour later, she was outside, readying her flowerbeds for spring planting, when she saw a man on the sidewalk, staring at her. He didn’t move at all. Simply stared. Flustered, she

pushed loose strands of hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist. Then she realized he wasn't looking at her but at the *Furnished Apartment For Rent* sign behind and above her.

Oh, please, she thought as she stood. *Let him want it. I need that extra income.*

At last he seemed to notice her. After a moment more, he moved toward her, climbing the two concrete steps midway up the sidewalk. "Hi," he said as he approached. "Is this your house?"

"Yes." Her pulse quickened with hope. He looked both normal and respectable. "Are you here to see the apartment?" She removed her gardening gloves and dropped them on the lawn. "I can show it to you if you'd like."

His gaze flicked to the *For Rent* sign again, then to the entrance of the basement apartment. "If you've got time, I'd like that."

"Of course." *Oh, please, God. Let him want to rent it.* She turned and led the way to the steps on the east side of the house.

For much of the past eight months, she'd used the apartment as a vacation rental. But the demands of the restaurant made it difficult to have people coming and going all the time. With rotating guests, sheets always needed changed and the apartment needed cleaning. And too often there were vacancies when she wanted it—needed it—occupied. She'd finally decided that renting in a more conventional manner would work better for her. Let the renters take care of their own bedding and cleaning.

But it hadn't been as easy as she'd hoped to find the right renter, even in this market. Perhaps she was asking too much for a one-bedroom basement apartment in an older section of town. Perhaps she was too particular about the type of renter she'd allow to live below her. At least this guy looked like he could be gainfully employed.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and faced him again. "I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm Holly Stanford."

"Jed Henning." He put out his right hand. "Nice to meet you."

She guessed him to be about her own age. Thirty or so. Dressed in Levi's and a blue shirt, he was tall with longish brown hair and a close-trimmed beard—the kind that was just a bit more than a five o'clock shadow. It was a good look on him, she thought as she shook his hand. Not that she cared. Her interest was only in his ability to pay rent. "Nice to meet you too." She started down the eight steps to the door. "Are you from around here?"

"No. Not really."

She glanced over her shoulder. "Not really?"

He smiled. "I was born in Boise but grew up in a town in Washington, outside of Seattle. I've been back to Idaho for family reunions over the years. I've got plenty of cousins and an aunt and uncle who live around here."

"Ah." She opened the door and led the way inside.

Built to bring in extra income for the owners—as had been common back in the forties and fifties—the one-bedroom apartment took up half of the basement. It had a living room, a small kitchen, a postage-stamp-sized bathroom with shower stall, and one bedroom. It didn't take long for Holly to show her potential renter around. He asked a few questions, including how much the rent would be, and he didn't seem concerned about the amount when she answered. She took that as a good sign.

While staring into the bedroom closet, he asked, "Are you willing to rent on a month-to-month basis?"

Her heart fell. “I wanted a year’s lease.” *I want to know I’ve got money coming in every month.*

“What if I doubled the rent you’re asking?”

“Doubled’?”

He faced her. “And I’ll give you first and last month’s rent up front, of course.”

“I’m not sure . . . I don’t know. I—”

“Ms. Stanford, I’m—”

“Call me Holly. Please.”

He nodded as he cleared his throat, then continued, “To tell you the truth, I didn’t come here to rent an apartment. I was just having a look around Boise. But now that I’ve seen your little place, I really would prefer it to staying in a hotel. Even paying twice your asking price, it’ll still cost me less than where I’m staying. Not to mention being able to cook for myself when I’m in the mood. I’d consider it a bargain.”

Double the rent was tempting. But month-to-month?

As if he’d read her mind, he said, “How about a three-month guarantee?”

Three months at double the rent. Half a year’s worth. Better than nothing. And far less trouble than the vacation rentals had been. “All right. It’s a deal.”

He grinned, and her heart did a little flip in her chest. Not a welcome sensation. She wanted a quiet renter who added no complications to her life.

He closed the closet door. “I’ll be happy to provide references, of course.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t believe she’d forgotten the application. Desperation had made her foolish. She knew nothing about this man, and she’d committed to renting to him without checking a single fact. Well, if she found something wrong, she would be within her rights to cancel the arrangement. At least she believed that would be her right.

“Have you got a form you need me to fill out?”

That was the second time he’d guessed her thoughts, and she didn’t like it. “Yes. I’ll get it for you.”

“I’ll wait here,” he said as she hurried away.

After Holly Stanford left the apartment, Jed returned to the living room and sat on the sofa. It wasn’t the most comfortable piece of furniture in the world, but then he didn’t plan to spend a lot of time sitting on it.

Am I crazy?

He had no idea how much longer he would be in Boise. Now he’d committed himself to three months of rent. Funny thing was he’d only come here to see where Andrew and Helen Henning had lived back in 1929. He’d needed to stretch his legs, and he’d been curious. That was all. But for some reason, once he’d stepped inside the apartment, he’d felt an irresistible urge to stay awhile.

He looked around the living room again. Besides the sofa, there was a coffee table, an easy chair, two end tables, and a small entertainment center complete with a television. The tops of the long, narrow windows were at ground level and had window wells to let in the light. Enough light that the apartment wasn’t grim. The flooring was tile with a couple of large area rugs breaking up the space. The place would suit him for the time it took him to find and talk sense into his brother.

He heard the sounds of Holly's footsteps on the concrete steps and rose from the sofa before she came through the open doorway. She looked a little flushed, and he suspected she'd rushed to return before he could change his mind. The color in her cheeks matched the pale pink of her shirt. Nice. Very nice.

She smiled as she held out a pen with her left hand and a clipboard with a form on top with her right one. "Here you go, Mr. Henning."

"If I'm supposed to call you Holly, you'd better call me Jed."

She nodded as he took the items from her and settled onto the sofa a second time. The form was basic. He wrote his name, Tacoma address, and mobile phone number quickly. For credit references, he put his mortgage company and a credit card. For employment, he wrote "Self-employed" instead of entering the name of his company, not stopping to analyze why. Finally, for personal references, he entered the information for two of his local cousins: Ben Henning in Kuna and Jessica Chesterfield in Hope Springs, assuming that Idaho references would be preferred. For the third name he chose his friend Mike Hanover who worked for him at Laffriot. At least, he hoped that was still the case.

Finished with the rental application, Jed stood and handed the clipboard and pen to Holly. "My mobile number's on there. Once you're satisfied that you want to rent to me, call and I'll bring you a cashier's check. I'll bring it today if I know early enough to get to the bank."

"You sound as if you're in a hurry to move in."

"Not so much in a hurry to move in as I am eager to leave the hotel." He smiled, hoping it might help convince her.

"I'll call you and let you know as soon as I can." She glanced at the form on the clipboard. "It will depend on if I can reach your references right away."

"Of course." He took a few steps toward the open door. "I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for your time."

Friday, May 30, 1969

In southwest Idaho, a person never knew if Memorial Day would be cold, a scorcher, or somewhere in between. This year the weather was pleasant as Andrew and Helen walked across the small cemetery toward the grave of their middle son, Oscar. This was the twenty-third time the couple had made this walk on a Decoration Day, as it used to be called, and although the sense of loss was different after more than two decades, the grief never completely went away.

Andrew held his wife's arm close to his side, offering silent comfort. When they reached Oscar's gravesite, Helen handed the jar of flowers to Andrew before kneeling on the ground and sweeping the white headstone—and the grass surrounding it—clean. When she was finished, she held out her hand for the jar of flowers. First she poured the water from the jar into the receptacle in the ground, then she placed the red and white peonies from her garden into the water, arranging them carefully. When she was done, Andrew leaned over to place a small American flag into the ground beside the flowers before helping his wife to her feet.

"He would have turned forty-two in March," Helen said softly.

Andrew nodded, his thoughts shifting to their grandson, Ted Valentine, now serving in Vietnam. Ted was twenty-one, already older than his Uncle Oscar had been when he died during the battle for Okinawa. But still young. Too young. The soldiers and sailors and marines were always too young. And this current war, more than any other he'd witnessed in his lifetime, was controversial. The country was ablaze with angry protests, sit-ins, and draft-card burnings.

Sometimes it seemed to Andrew that the way of life his oldest sons had fought to preserve in the second world war had been lost already.

Helen patted his arm. He assumed she'd guessed the direction of his thoughts, as she so often did.

"Let's go home," she said.

"Yes." He offered his arm again, and she hooked her hand in his elbow.

At least they could be thankful that no new graves had been added to this small cemetery because of Vietnam. Not yet. He hoped it would remain that way, just as he continued to pray the war would soon come to an end.

He glanced one more time at the grave of their son before he and Helen walked back to the car. After helping her into the Jeep—the vehicle she called his late-in-life crisis—he went around to the driver side and settled behind the wheel. Pain jabbed his lower back as he reached to insert the key, and a gasp escaped him.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just a twinge in my back."

"Again? You should see the doctor."

He grunted as he turned the key, starting the engine. He wasn't about to waste good money on a few aches and pains. He was in his mid-sixties. Aches and pains were a part of aging. He'd accepted that. He'd have thought the same was true for Helen. He'd seen her rubbing her hands and fingers at the end of the day, as if to loosen her joints.

"We should have planned a dinner or a picnic with the family," she said as Andrew steered the Jeep onto the road.

"Everybody had plans already."

"I should have tried sooner, before they made other plans. It's good that you and I like each other."

He glanced over at her. "What does that mean?"

"Because we spend so much time together, just the two of us. Our kids and grandkids are always so busy."

"I hope you're not complaining about being stuck with me."

"No." She laughed softly. "Remember when I used to complain because some days I didn't have two minutes to myself. Back when all the kids were at home. Glory. That seems so long ago."

Without taking his eyes off the road, he reached over and covered her hand with his. "It was a long time ago, my girl."

"Funny. As I get older, those times from long ago feel more real to me than what I did yesterday. Am I getting senile?"

"Not hardly."

She turned her hand over and squeezed his.

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