



Sweetheart

SARAH MAYBERRY

SARINA BOWEN'S HEART EYES PRESS

SWEETHEART

The World of True North

SARAH MAYBERRY

HeartEyes
♡ Press

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Being married to another writer is truly the gift that keeps on giving. Chris, thank you so much for listening to my rambling monologues about this book and helping me find my way through. I couldn't do any of the things I do without you by my side. Sarina, I am so excited to be playing in your world. Thank you for letting me come on this journey with you. And Mel, you're a treasure and a true friend. Thanks for sharing your smarts with me.

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Starting a new job is like starting a new relationship—for weeks you’re on your best behavior, smiling your brightest smile, laughing at every joke. Pretending you don’t burp, fart, and have occasional moments of stupidity like a normal person.

All that *effort*. All that *niceness*. That’s why I was braced for an exhausting day when I arrived at the Busy Bean for my first shift. I really needed this job to work out for me, and I was determined to be my most sparkling, eager, and diligent self to show my two new bosses they had made an excellent choice when they gave me the job of barista-waitress in their bustling coffeeshop.

But I hadn’t been prepared for my first day to start with absolute mayhem. I walked through the door to find one of my bosses with a mop in hand, doing battle with a tide of water creeping across the wide pine floorboards. I could hear my other boss letting loose a stream of expletives from the kitchen area, with the deeper register of a man’s voice occasionally chiming in. Chairs had been stacked haphazardly on tables, and a wad of soaked dishtowels formed a soggy barrier in front of the kitchen doorway, funneling the water out toward the seating area and away from the refrigerated display cabinets.

“Haley, thank God. Grab this while I run over to the apartments to steal all of Ben and Alec’s towels,” Zara Rossi said, shoving the mop handle into my hands.

“Okay,” I said stupidly.

“Water pipe broke under the kitchen sink. This place was inches deep when I opened up,” Zara explained before disappearing out the front door.

I mopped like crazy for the next few minutes, wringing water into the bucket over and over, fighting what felt like a never-ending battle. Then a cheer sounded from the kitchen.

“By all that is holy, yes!”

Seconds later, my other new boss, Audrey Shipley, exited the kitchen, her blond hair dripping. She was wearing an old, faded T-shirt and what looked like pajama pants, both of which were soaked through.

“Water is off. Finally. Any sign of the plumber?” She pulled up short when she realized she was talking to me and not her business partner. “Haley. Hi. Where’s Zara?”

“She said something about stealing towels from her brothers at the Gin Mill,” I explained.

“She’s a genius. I was just wondering how we were going to get this place dry enough to open for business.”

“*Can* you open with the water shut off?” I asked tentatively. I was no expert on managing a coffeeshop, but running water seemed like it might be one of the basic requirements.

“The plumber said he’d be here— Ah, there he is.” Audrey dashed toward the door, opening it to greet a burly, bearded man hefting a battered toolbox.

They disappeared into the kitchen, and I went back to mopping. A few minutes later, Zara came back with an armful of towels, and together we threw them on the floor and started skate-drying, shuffling back and forth across the floorboards with towels beneath our feet. Early morning sunlight was streaming through the leaded glass windows, painting the hodge-podge of antique and vintage chairs and tables with bars of golden light as we shuffled up and down, up and down.

“Okay, Haley, I think we’re done,” Zara said after a strenuous ten minutes. She pushed her dark hair off her forehead and let out a laugh that sounded more than a little embarrassed. “Welcome to the Bean. What a great introduction.”

“Hey, at least we know the floors are really clean,” I said, because I am a pro at finding the silver lining in every cloud.

“This is true,” Zara said.

I started gathering the towels together. “What do we want to do with these?”

“Let’s throw them in a trash bag. I’ll take them home and wash them.” She checked her watch. “Okay, we’ve got thirty minutes until we’re supposed to open. *Audrey.*”

It took a couple of seconds, but Audrey emerged from the kitchen, a dusting of flour on her cheek, eyebrows raised as if to say, *Why the hell are you screeching my name?*

“Go home,” Zara ordered. “Haley and I have got this. I only called you because I knew Griff would have a pipe wrench handy, and you’d get here faster than the plumber.”

Audrey started to argue, but Zara simply pointed a finger toward the door. “Begone, wench.”

Audrey’s mouth kicked up into a smile. “Okay, fine. Whatever. See you at one.”

Zara turned to me once her business partner was gone. “Baptism by fire time, Haley. You up for it?”

“Let’s do this,” I said.

The next half hour passed in a blur as we went through the Bean’s morning routine at the speed of light. I did my best to anticipate tasks and jump into action whenever anyone asked for anything, hoping I wasn’t messing up. The plumber announced he’d fixed the broken pipe and turned the water back on five minutes before the Bean’s official opening time, and by the time the first customers walked through the door, there was no sign the Bean had been a disaster zone less than an hour earlier.

I got sucked into the busy rhythms of the job after that, waiting on tables, packing up take-out sandwiches, wraps, and pastries, cranking out coffees on the Bean’s enormous old Astra espresso machine. Before I knew it, it was one o’clock and time for me to clock off. Zara caught me as I was throwing my apron into the laundry bag in the kitchen.

“Audrey just took the helm. Come have a coffee with me before you head home.” Zara handed me a latte.

“Take one of these while you’re at it,” said Roderick, the Bean’s ridiculously hot baker, passing me an apple and walnut muffin. “You’ve earned it.”

Zara cleared her throat ostentatiously, and Roderick made a show of considering whether she deserved one as well.

“Oh, all right, I guess you can have one, too.”

“Cheeky bastard,” Zara said with a laugh, accepting a muffin.

She led me outside via the employee exit, heading for a bench perched at the top of the river bank. I became more and more nervous with every step, mentally reviewing every possible slip-up I'd made that morning.

Hypervigilance and an almost overwhelming need to find a solution to every problem, even if it had nothing to do with me, were survival skills I learned at a young age. By the time we were both sitting on the bench, I was holding my coffee and muffin in a death grip, grimly waiting for Zara to tell me they'd made a terrible mistake and this would be my first and only day at the Busy Bean.

"Oh man, it's good to take the weight off," Zara said, leaning against the backrest and crossing her feet at the ankles, her long legs stretched out straight. Closing her eyes, she tilted her face toward the sun.

At just over five feet, I was significantly shorter, so I didn't try to emulate her. Instead, I simply sat there, my stomach in knots, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Thanks for being such a trouper today, Haley," Zara said after a moment, flashing a smile my way. "Not exactly how I planned on showing you the ropes, but you worked the Astra like a champ."

She lifted her coffee in a toast to me, and I was so busy processing her praise I left her hanging for a couple of awkward seconds before lifting my mug to clink it against hers.

"Well, thanks," I said. "I was trying not to mess up too much. But I've got a good grip on the table-numbering system now."

"You're already the best barista we've ever had," Zara said wryly. "I've been jockeying that thing for a couple of years now, and I still can't pump out the coffees as fast as you."

"I've had a lot of practice."

Since graduating from high school, I'd worked in a series of coffeeshops, cafés, and restaurants. I could probably make coffees in my sleep if I had to.

Zara let out a little yelp, making me start. Then I realized she was staring at my feet, her gaze covetous.

"Haley. *Those boots*. You have to tell me where you got them," she breathed.

Made from vegetable-tanned calfskin in a warm cognac tone, my flat-heeled ankle boots had a stylized landscape of Vermont depicted in rich greens, russets, and browns painted along the vamp. The brushwork was

some of my best, which was why I was not unfamiliar with the look on Zara's face. I guess you could say I'm used to being a literal walking advertisement for my own work.

"I made them," I said. "That's what I do when I'm not cranking out coffees."

"Are you kidding me? You made *those*?" Zara squeaked, stabbing a finger at my shoes as though I'd just claimed I'd singlehandedly built the Space Shuttle in my yard.

"Yup. I do belts, handbags, and custom shoes and sell them on Etsy," I explained.

Zara blinked. "Wow. I don't think I've ever met a shoemaker before."

"Barista-waitress-shoemaker," I corrected.

"They're really beautiful. Can I ask how much you charge?"

I shifted uncomfortably on the bench. I always found it hard to answer this question, because I never know how people are going to react when I tell them the price I have to charge in order to cover overhead and labor. People are used to buying disposable, mass-produced fashion footwear, not hand-made, bespoke shoes built to last a lifetime.

"For a custom pair of boots like these, I usually charge four hundred and fifty," I said.

Zara nodded slowly. "That makes sense. A lot of work went into them, right?"

I beamed at her, pleased she understood without me having to explain. "Days."

Not to mention the years I'd spent perfecting my craft.

"So how does a person become a shoemaker, anyway?" Zara asked. "I'm guessing this is not something a person learns off the Internet."

"They live next door to one when they're growing up," I said. "Mr. Zametti had a workshop in his yard, and I think he got sick of me hanging around and asking questions, so he put me to work. It was supposed to scare me off, but I loved it."

"So this is your passion," Zara said, her dark eyes bright with interest. "Is the dream to be able to make shoes full time?"

"I would love to be able to survive off the earnings of my Etsy store." My declaration came out sounding weird and unnatural, like someone had coached me to say it for a class presentation. Maybe one day I'd get better at asking for what I wanted, but this was clearly not that day.

“I’m going to start saving my tips,” Zara declared, eyeing my boots again. “I want me a pair of those boots.”

We chatted about Bean business for a few minutes after that, Zara filling me on what I could expect from the coming week. I already knew that either she or Audrey would be there during my shifts this first week to make sure I was getting the hang of things. After that, I’d be tackling all the early opens alongside Roderick, leaving Audrey and Zara free to look after their young families.

“We had our best month ever last month,” Zara said as we collected our empty mugs and headed inside. “Long may it continue.”

She gave me a squeeze on the shoulder as I grabbed my bag and jacket, thanking me again for pitching in and helping save the day. Her praise—her acknowledgement—made me feel so good I couldn’t keep the smile off my face during the walk up the hill into town. Not a bad first day, even if it had started with a burst pipe.

It didn’t take me long to get to my place. I lived on a street just off the town green, in a two-story white clapboard house that looked exactly like the doll’s house my sister had when we were kids, down to the dark-gray shutters and the cute front porch. My apartment occupied the entire lower floor, with my upstairs neighbor, Marion, accessing her apartment via a staircase at the rear.

I let myself in the front door and dumped my things on my bed in the front room. I’d planned on having lunch before getting started on my latest commissions, but the coffee and muffin would keep me going for a while. I made my way down the hallway past the tiny pocket living space with its fireplace, through the even tinier kitchen, and out to the closed-in back porch. The afternoon sun was streaming through the porch’s windows, and the smell of leather, paints, and adhesive hit me in a warm wave.

I opened the backdoor to let in some fresh air, then got everything organized to work on the custom leather belt I was decorating for a commission. I’d exchanged a couple of emails with the customer before we’d settled on a design that incorporated apple blossoms and delicate leaves.

Dipping my finest brush into white paint, I went to work. The next time I looked up, the sun was low in the sky and I had a stiff neck from sitting too long in one position. The belt was done, though, the blossoms trailing in delicate swirls across deep, rich brown leather.

It was pretty frickin' gorgeous, if I did say so myself, and I was confident my customer was going to be very happy with it. I spent ten minutes cleaning my brushes and tidying up my workspace, then locked the porch door and wandered into the kitchen to contemplate dinner.

A couple of hours later, I was in bed, my alarm set for five a.m. As I drifted off, it occurred to me that I hadn't felt this good about my life in a long time.

Everything seemed to be coming together. It was tempting to be cynical and tell myself it couldn't last, because if life had taught me anything, it was that what goes up must come down. But it seemed like a waste of a perfectly good natural high to rain on my own parade.

Maybe I was simply coming into my own. Maybe this was my time.

Whatever was going on, it would be stupid not to enjoy the ride while it lasted.

The ride lasted three weeks and two days and ended abruptly when I glimpsed the weekly receipts tally that Audrey and Zara kept in the drawer beneath the register. The tally was supposed to help us predict demand, but what it told me was that our coffee sales had dipped noticeably in the past couple of weeks.

I frowned at the curling ribbon of paper, but the numbers didn't magically rearrange themselves into a more acceptable total. Why on earth would the Bean be losing coffee sales for the past two weeks? It just didn't make sense.

Unless the person making the coffees was doing something different, and the regulars didn't like it.

The thought slid into my brain like a well-placed dagger, in the way of all self-defeating thoughts. Who better to know your weak spots than yourself, right?

A tight feeling in my stomach, I abandoned my opening routine to grind some beans into one of the Astra's group handles. I tamped it down with my usual deft push and twist, then slotted the handle into the machine. Coffee poured into the cup in a smooth black stream, crema forming on the top. I waited until I had a full espresso shot before I flicked off the switch and considered the extracted fluid. I sniffed it. Swirled it around the bottom of the cup. Then I tasted it, and found the flavor to be almost exactly the same as the first cup I'd ever drunk at the Bean.

Just to be sure, I made Roderick a cappuccino—his drink of choice—and took it into the kitchen. The warm space smelled good, a mixture of yeast, sugar, and vanilla, wafted around by the heat of the oven.

“I need your opinion on the coffee,” I told him, handing the cup over.

He flipped a towel over his shoulder, then leaned a hip against the stainless-steel counter as he obligingly took a mouthful.

“It’s good. As always,” Roderick said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

“There’s nothing different about it? Nothing stands out?” I asked.

“It tastes like good coffee. Why, what’s up?”

“Our coffee numbers have taken a dip.”

“It happens sometimes. We had to scale back on danishes last month, but this month greedy Vermonters can’t get enough of ’em. Go figure.”

I really wanted to believe him, but the falling coffee sales played on my mind for the rest of my shift. When Audrey came in to take over for the afternoon, I almost brought it up with her before chickening out.

She and Zara must have noticed the numbers, and they hadn’t said anything to me. If they weren’t worried, I shouldn’t be.

That theory went out the window when Zara checked in with me as we tag-teamed the following afternoon.

“Hales, before you go, you haven’t noticed anyone saying anything about our coffee lately, have you? No complaints or comments?”

“No one has said anything to me,” I said, reaching up to tuck my hair behind my ears. Then I took a deep breath, because I’m about to turn twenty-six, and I’m a goddamned grownup. “But I’d noticed our coffee sales are down.”

“It’s so weird,” Zara said. “We’ve had dips before, but never for coffee. Coffee is what keeps this ship afloat.”

I could tell she was worried, and Zara did not strike me as being someone who worried for no reason.

“Maybe I could ask a few regulars if they’re happy, or if they feel like anything has changed?” I asked. “Be proactive about it, get some feedback.”

“Hmmm. I wonder if that would signal we’re worried about something? Leave it with me,” Zara said. “Audrey and I will put our heads together and come up with a plan.”

She spun away then to serve a customer, and I looped the strap of my crossbody bag over my chest and exited into the early afternoon sunshine. The parking lot was busy with cars coming and going, and I waited while a pickup reversed out of a space. I was about to head across the lot when I happened to glance inside a nearby sedan and caught sight of a large

takeout coffee cup in one of the cup holders in the center console. A black logo was visible on the side of the cup, and I leaned close until I could read it.

Colebury Diner. Huh.

The Colebury Diner was our chief competitor in town, a tired old place on Main Street that was mostly frequented by older members of the community who liked their affordable “sandwich and a cup of joe” deals. The diner’s menu was as old-school as their clientele, and, for sure, their coffee wasn’t as good as ours.

Curious, I returned to the Bean’s entrance and leaned against the wall nearby. Five minutes later, a slim woman with curly blond hair exited and headed for the sedan. I immediately recognized her as a regular. I could even take a guess at what was in the bag she was carrying—one of Roderick’s delicious blond brownies. Normally she bought her treat along with a large soymilk latte, but not today.

She pulled her seat belt on before reaching for the coffee cup in her console and taking a big sip. Then she glanced up and caught me watching. *Busted*, her expression read plainly, and I knew I was onto something.

She’d taken her coffee business elsewhere, but hadn’t been able to give up Roderick’s baking genius.

I pretended to check my texts until she’d driven away. Then I started up the hill toward Main Street, determined to do a bit of sleuthing. I honestly couldn’t remember the last time I’d been to the diner. Greg and Dean, the two middle-aged brothers who ran the place, had never seemed that interested in the business. They hadn’t updated the aging decor or altered their food and beverage offerings in years, one of the reasons why the Bean had created such a splash when it first opened. I peered through the window when I arrived and found it hard to believe that some of our customers had abandoned the quirky charm, great food, and ambience of the Bean for this dark, dinky place.

I went inside and placed an order for a latte with Greg. Naturally, he asked after my parents and my sister because Colebury is a small, close-knit town and everyone is always up in everyone else’s business. I told him they were well, then stood against the wall and noted that most of the tables were full, and in the five minutes I waited for my coffee, nine customers came in to order takeout drinks.

In short, the place was jumping.

I found out why when I got my latte. I exited to the street and started walking home before I took the first mouthful, giving it a chance to cool, but the full-bodied coffee goodness that flooded my mouth stopped me in my tracks. I took a second mouthful, but it was just as delicious as the first—smooth and rich, with enticing berry and chocolate notes.

This was why our coffee sales had tanked, without a doubt. I worked at the Bean, and even I would pick this coffee over ours.

Turning on my heel, I walked back to the diner and slipped inside. I waited until Greg had finished serving the customer in front of me before offering him my brightest smile.

“This coffee is so great. Can I ask what brand of beans you’re using?”

His brother Dean glanced up from where he was wrangling the coffee machine, a sour look on his face.

“We know you work at the Bean now, Haley. Did Zara and Audrey send you up here to spy on us?”

I blinked, taken aback by his aggressive question. “No. I was just on my way home.”

“And you thought you’d grab a coffee after working in a coffeeshop all day?” Greg asked, eyebrows raised skeptically. “You’re lucky we even served you at all.”

I could feel myself turning pink. I didn’t like being the center of attention at the best of times, and this definitely was not one of those.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said, because there didn’t seem to be anything else to say. Then I escaped outside.

Okay, that had been the opposite of fun. But at least I knew why our coffee sales had been plummeting.

Remember my compulsive need to solve problems, even when they’re not my own? Well, that was one explanation for what I did next. The other is that I’m pretty stubborn, and Dean and Greg had pissed me off with their rudeness.

I walked briskly down the narrow pedestrian walkway that connected Main Street with a small parking lot behind the diner and a couple other businesses. I shot a furtive look over my shoulder, feeling as though my nefarious intent must be obvious to anyone watching. Clearly, I was not cut out for covert operations.

I rounded the corner and spotted the diner’s bright blue Dumpster. I scooted alongside it, and tested the lid. It lifted easily, so after indulging in

another guilty over-the-shoulder glance, I flipped it back and peered down at a tangle of random garbage. It had all been baking in the summer sun for hours and smelled truly horrific. I swallowed hard and glanced at the back of the diner, conscious of the fact that Greg or Dean might exit at any second.

In other words, this was no time to be squeamish.

I had to tilt all my body weight forward over the Dumpster's edge so I could reach in far enough to sort through the garbage.

Side bar: it really sucks being short sometimes.

The metal edge pressed painfully into my stomach and the smell almost made me gag, but after rummaging for a few seconds I spotted what looked like a commercial coffee bean bag. I pulled it free, sliding back to earth before taking a huge step backward, away from the stench. Sure enough, I was holding the crumpled remains of a coffee bag. I smoothed it out and discovered a simple printed sticker on the otherwise plain bag: Dark Horse Coffee Roasters Black Sheep Blend. An address in Montpelier was printed in smaller font underneath.

Huzzah. Mystery solved. The Colebury Diner could kiss my ass.

I headed for home, speed-walking all the way, desperate to wash my hands. It wasn't until I'd scrubbed them twice that I sat down at my laptop and googled Dark Horse Coffee Roasters. Weirdly, no website popped up. There wasn't even a phone listing.

I sat back in my chair, momentarily stumped. The only explanation I could think of was that the business was so new, the owners hadn't gotten around to building a website yet. I was invested in seeing this fact-finding mission through, so I grabbed my car keys. Montpelier wasn't far, and it wasn't as though I had any better plans for my free time.

That was a pretty sad admission, but I wasn't about to dwell on the pitiful nature of my social life. It had been pitiful for a while, and was likely to remain so, given the current prospects in my small town.

It was midafternoon by the time I found the address on the highway just outside Montpelier. A white-washed barn that looked like it had been converted into some kind of business sat a few hundred feet back from the road, its gravel driveway deeply rutted. The double doors facing the road were open, a white delivery van parked nearby, its rear doors also opened wide.

I was getting out of my car to go ask for a price list for my new bosses when a man emerged from the building. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was hefting a couple of boxes. I got a quick impression of dark-blond hair, beard scruff, and well-muscled arms before he disappeared behind the van doors. He was hidden for a few seconds, then he stepped back into view and recognition hit me like a freight train, momentarily robbing me of breath.

Holy shit, it was Daniel Beck.

I reacted instinctively, hunching down and sliding back into my car, scooching down as low as I could, hoping like hell he hadn't seen me.

A tide of embarrassed heat washed over me. What the hell was I doing? I had no reason to hide from Beck. It had been two years since he and my older sister, Jessica, had broken up, and three years since they'd left Vermont to move down to New York together. He probably wouldn't even recognize me.

And it's not like he'd ever known I'd had a crush on him. I had been very, very careful not to reveal my interest to anyone.

And by interest I meant my raging lady-boner for everything about him, from the top of his dirty-blond head to the toes of his size thirteen feet.

The truth was, he'd barely even registered my existence the few times Jess had brought him home. That hadn't been an unusual dynamic when my gorgeous, professional model sister was around, but it had been especially painful with Beck.

It had been a relief when they'd made the move to New York. For lots of reasons.

But that was all ancient history. There was absolutely no reason for me to be hiding in my car like a crazy person.

Stop being a ding-dong. Get it together.

I straightened, then took a deep breath. I was here on a mission for the Bean and my new bosses; the revelation that Beck was involved with Dark Horse in some way was neither here nor there. I got out of the car and smoothed my hands down the sides of my jeans.

Here goes nothing.

Sweaty of palm and racing of heart, I started up the driveway.

“I won’t be back for a couple of hours,” I called out as I grabbed the last carton. “Make sure you lock up when you leave.”

“Cool,” my brother called from the back room where the coffee roasters live.

I glanced around to make sure I had everything before striding out to the van. We had two deliveries on board, both to new businesses near Waterbury that my brother signed up last month for a discounted trial. As a start-up business, we’d learned the hard way that we had to sharpen our pencils to lure potential customers away from their regular suppliers.

I slammed the van door shut and almost jumped out of my skin when I saw a woman was standing there.

“Fuck me,” I said, and I could almost feel my mother flicking me on the ear for cursing. “Sorry. I didn’t see you there,” I added quickly.

“It’s my fault. I didn’t mean to sneak up on you,” she said.

“Not a problem. How can I help you?”

She was on the short side, with medium-brown hair that just grazed her jaw, and there was something about her heart-shaped face and big brown eyes that made me want to take a step closer.

She cleared her throat. “Is this your place?”

“Me and my brother, Sam. Just heading into our third month of operations.” It was kind of cheesy, but I still got a little explosion of pride in my chest when I talked about what Sam and I had created together.

“Hey, that’s great, Beck. Congratulations,” she said, her eyes lighting up.

I frowned, confused by the fact that she seemed to know me when I didn't have a clue who she was.

"I'm hopeless with names. Do we know each other?" I asked, studying her face.

She was pretty damned cute, and I was confident I would have remembered if we'd met.

"Sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Haley Elliot. You used to go out with my sister, Jessica."

Adrenaline hit me like a bucket of cold water to the face, spiking my heart rate in an unwelcome rush. I clenched my hand around my car keys.

"Jess and I haven't had anything to do with each other for years," I said, turning away from her to check the van doors were secure, letting her know this was not going to be a long conversation.

"Of course. I didn't mean... I'm not here about Jess." She shook her head as though she was annoyed with herself for not being clearer. "I work at a coffeeshop in Colebury, the Busy Bean. I had some of your coffee today, and it's pretty amazing. I was wondering if you had a price list or something I could give to my bosses?" She smiled hopefully.

My response came from my gut, knee-jerk and unequivocal. "Sorry, but we're at capacity right now," I lied. "We won't be taking on any new customers for a while."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. Okay. Do you have a waiting list?"

"Not at the moment. Listen, I really need to hit the road. I've got deliveries to make."

She blinked. "Sure. Sorry. I didn't mean to hold you up."

She took a step back and lifted her hand in an awkward goodbye wave. Then she turned on her heel and walked down the drive, her steps brisk.

Like she couldn't wait to get out of there.

Guilt assailed me as I yanked open the van door and slid behind the wheel. I'd just been pretty fucking cold and rude to someone who'd come on a simple business errand. Whatever Jess's crimes had been, her sister was not responsible for them.

The thing was, it had taken me a long time to get my head straight after Jess had tangled me up in knots. I'd blamed myself for getting sucked in to her chaos. For caring. For not standing my ground and for staying as long as I did.

Fuck, I'd blamed myself for everything and then some.

I was good now, but it had taken time, a lot of rum, and a lot of work, and I wasn't about to let anyone or anything mess with that.

So, yeah, I'd been an asshole, but sometimes you had to be in order to protect yourself.

Jess Elliot had taught me that, along with a bunch of other things I would have preferred not to know.

I started the van and pulled onto the road. There was no sign of Jess's little sister, but the memory of the shock in her big brown eyes stayed with me as I drove toward Waterbury, and it started to bug me that I hadn't quite caught her name when she introduced herself. I searched my memory, trying to dredge it up, but nothing came to me.

She was younger than Jess, I could remember that much. And she was shy. She'd barely said a handful of words the few times I'd had dinner at Jess's parents' place. I could remember being mildly fascinated by how unlike the two sisters were, one confident, tall, blond and slim, the other shy, short, mousey-brown and curvy.

Was it Helen? That didn't feel right. Lacey? Maybe.

Not that it mattered, because we weren't going to cross paths again. Not if I had anything to do with it.

I was still feeling jumpy and off my game by the time I returned to the barn after the delivery run. I let myself in and made my way through the various work spaces to the studio apartment at the rear of the building.

I tossed the car keys and my phone onto the wooden pallet that served as my coffee table as I entered. Larry looked up from where she was spread-eagled on the couch, her skinny tail thumping against the cushions. Her mouth stretched into a yawn, making the spray of hair around her nose bristle, then she leapt off the couch to come nudge at my knee with her head, trawling for ear scratches.

I leaned down to oblige my dog, but even the warmth of her soft black hair beneath my hand wasn't enough to calm me tonight. I really fucking hated that Jess still had enough power to rattle me. It made me feel like a fraud, like I'd been fooling myself thinking I was completely over her and all she'd put me through.

I gave Larry one last stroke down her neck then strode to the fridge to grab a beer. Standing at the kitchen sink, I swallowed cold, malty goodness and waited for the alcohol to take the edge off.

When I'd caught the coffee bug traveling through South America and come home to Montpelier to start up Dark Horse, I'd known there was a chance I'd run into Jess again. She grew up in Colebury and her family still lived locally. It made sense that she'd come home occasionally, even if her Insta feed told me she was still living in New York. At the time, I'd told myself I wasn't going to exile myself from my family and friends because of her. That would be giving her way too much power.

But I'd been back eight months now, and no one had so much as mentioned her name. I'd let my guard down, become complacent.

It wasn't until I was halfway through my second beer that it occurred to me that maybe me being rattled was actually a good thing. Instead of being evidence I was still getting over Jess, maybe it was proof of the opposite—that I'd moved on, and I was only feeling this unsettled because I'd forgotten she even existed.

I liked this new theory a lot, so I decided to go with it. To reward myself, I opened up our current sales spreadsheet on my laptop and studied the steadily growing numbers that indicated Dark Horse had the potential to be the kind of business that my brother and I could build our futures on. As soon as she decided I was settling in, Larry came over and lay down at my feet, her long legs tucked close to her body, her head draped across my boot.

Every single one of our customers had increased their orders week-by-week so far. That meant people were responding to our product and coming back for more. I estimated we were only a couple of months away from reaching capacity with the second roaster, and the moment we got even close we'd order a third unit. Then we could really start to grow.

After shutting the laptop, it hit me that my brother would be mightily pissed if he knew I'd turned down the chance to win the Busy Bean's business. He had literally criss-crossed the state visiting cafés, bars, and restaurants, pimping our beans shamelessly, and I knew how hard he worked for every sale. He'd mentioned the Bean as an aspirational customer a few times, conscious they were the kind of business we wanted to be in partnership with—interested in local food, pushing the envelope, drawing tourists to the area.

I shrugged the guilty thought off. As far as I was concerned, missing out on an opportunity was worth it if it meant keeping my life a Jessica-Elliot-free zone. End of story.

Tossing the beer can in the recycling bin, I reheated last night's pizza and crashed in front of the TV with Larry curled up by my side, anesthetizing myself with a hockey game I'd recorded, saturated animal fats, and my dog's unconditional love. Not a bad way to end the evening.

Thinking about Daniel Beck's rudeness kept me awake half the night.

I'd had more than my fair share of experience with rude assholes working as a waitress. I'd been called names, had my ass slapped *and* pinched. Once I'd even had a woman throw money at me when I didn't tell her what she wanted to hear, one of the many reasons I preferred serving coffee rather than alcohol these days.

No one had ever cut me dead as coldly as my sister's ex had today, though.

It wasn't so much what he'd said, but the way he'd said it. I couldn't stop thinking about the way his eyes had flattened when I'd told him who I was. One minute he'd been smiling and looking embarrassed about dropping the F-bomb in front of a complete stranger, the next he'd been staring at me like he wanted to scrape me off his shoe. The turn-around had been so abrupt, I was still suffering whiplash hours later.

Lying in the dark, I stared at the ceiling and fretted over what his knee-jerk dismissal meant.

Because not for a second did I believe that a brand-new coffee-roasting business was not hungry for new customers.

After several hours of ceiling-staring, I'd whittled the options down to two theories. The first was that his breakup with my sister had been messy. Being intimately familiar with the kind of conflict my sister was capable of creating, I knew there was a high probability that Theory One was on the money.

My second theory was that Jess had told him some horrible made-up thing about me that had caused him to balk at having anything to do with

me. It wouldn't be the first time she'd pulled that trick.

When I was six, she'd warned my new friend from school never to ask me for a sleepover because I was a chronic bedwetter. When I was fourteen, she'd told my best friend I was only cultivating her in order to get to her older brother. Both claims were completely untrue, but that hadn't stopped people from believing her. She'd always been possessive and needy, and she considered me her exclusive property. Anyone who got close had to be scared off so she could retain my undivided attention. It was the way she was wired, and I'd always understood that.

Didn't mean I was happy with the fallout, though.

I finally fell asleep in the small hours, my brain spinning like a hamster wheel going over and over the same territory. I was so sick of being stuck in my head by the time I arrived at work the next morning, I threw myself into the day's duties with so much gusto Roderick wanted to know what I was on and if he could have some.

"It's called lack of sleep," I told him as I prepared to race back out into the dining area to deliver two meals.

"Oh, that. I've got that on tap," he said with a dismissive flick of his hand.

I ferried the meals to table ten, then hustled back to the counter to serve two takeout customers. The next time I had time to look up, it was one o'clock and Audrey was tying on her apron.

"I'm it, Hales," she said, holding out her hand for me to tap out.

I did so with a smile, loving that we were at the stage in our employer/employee relationship where I had a nickname as well as shared in-jokes.

"Any change in our coffee sales?" she asked hopefully as she familiarized herself with what was left of this morning's pastry offerings in the display case.

"I think we might be bottoming out," I said. "Today's pretty much the same as yesterday."

"God, I hope so. Hopefully we'll see a bounce soon and we can get back to being the little coffeeshop that could."

I really, really didn't want to bring up the subject of Dark Horse and Daniel Beck, but I couldn't not tell her what I'd found out yesterday.

"About that. I have some intel," I said.

I explained about spotting the Colebury Diner cup and my fact-finding mission, skirting around the part where I'd gone Dumpster-diving on behalf of the Bean. I figured I was the only one who needed to know about my pathological need to be helpful. Her eyes grew round as I told her about Daniel Beck's claim they weren't taking on new customers.

"Whaaat? How is that possible? How can they not want new business?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to explain about Daniel having dated my sister and my two pet theories on why he'd sent me packing, but the smart part of my brain kicked in before the words could leave my mouth.

Audrey did not need a crash course in Elliot-family dynamics. No one did.

"I guess he must have his reasons," I said.

"Well, hopefully our regulars will come back once the novelty wears off. Our coffee is still pretty damned good," Audrey said, her chin coming up. "We can more than hold our own."

I remembered the mouth-gasm I'd experienced when I'd taken my first sip of Dark Horse coffee yesterday. I was pretty sure people were not going to get sick of having that experience on the regular, but I didn't want to puncture her balloon.

"No one can beat Roderick's muffins," I said supportively. "Everybody raves about them."

Her eyes narrowed infinitesimally, and I remembered too late that she and Zara had done all the baking before Roderick came along.

"I'm sure your muffins were also amazing," I said. "I mean, your chicken salad is to die for. That dressing is so delish."

Audrey burst into laughter. "Poor Haley. You should see your face right now. I promise you, I am more than happy for Roderick to be a better baker than me."

"Well, good," I said.

She gave me an impulsive hug, then pushed me toward the door. "Go make amazing shoes for rich people. And make sure you take lots of pictures so we can see how the other half lives."

No lie, that hug left me feeling distinctly warm and fuzzy as I walked home. I'd always liked the Bean, and when I'd seen their advertisement for a new employee, I'd figured it might be a fun place to work. But I'd never

imagined how quickly Audrey, Zara, and Roderick would come to feel like they were an integral part of my life.

Which was probably why I detoured past the Colebury Diner on the way home to do a little more casual reconnaissance. I was really hoping Audrey's prediction that our regulars would soon come back wasn't too far-fetched, but my stomach sank when I saw there was an *actual line* out the door when I arrived.

Fuck-a-doodle-do. This was not good. At all.

I watched a handful of our regulars patiently waiting to get their hands on a cup of coffee heaven and felt sick because I was one hundred percent certain that Daniel Beck would have been happy to sell his beans to Audrey and Zara if I had been a complete stranger.

But I wasn't, and that meant the Bean was being punished for my sister's sins.

I couldn't let that stand. I just couldn't.

The realization made me swear under my breath. God, I really didn't want to put myself in a position where Daniel Beck could be horrible to me again. But apparently I was going to.

I trudged home and let myself into my apartment. I delayed the inevitable by making myself a peanut butter sandwich, then I went and sat on the back stoop while I ate it, trying to work out my strategy. No matter how I looked at it, I kept coming back to the fact that I was probably just going to have to wade in and point out the obvious—that no matter what my sister had done, he was cutting off his nose to spite his face. And that it wasn't fair to punish Zara and Audrey because of whatever history he had with my sister.

And somehow I was going to have to point all of that out in a way that didn't get his back up. Piece of cake, right?

I sighed as I contemplated the last mouthful of my sandwich. I was not the charming Elliot sister. Everyone knew that. I didn't know how to smile and light up a room or laugh and make people laugh with me. I definitely didn't know how to flirt with the opposite sex—or anyone, really—to get them to do what I wanted. The idea that I might even try was laughable. But I had to give it a shot. I couldn't not try to smooth things over. If I failed, I could always come clean to Audrey and Zara and hand the problem over to them.

But not before I'd done my best to fix the problem I'd inadvertently created.

Stop dicking around.

I shoved the last bite of sandwich into my mouth, then dusted off my hands and pushed to my feet. Time to woman-up and do this.

There was more traffic on the road than last night, but it was still a quick drive to Montpelier. I was relieved to see the white delivery van parked in front of the barn when I arrived. Someone was there, then. It would be super painful to have psyched myself up to come beard Daniel Beck in his den only to discover he was out doing deliveries.

I didn't give myself time to get cold feet, just climbed out of my rusty hatchback and marched up the driveway to the barn. A hand-drawn sign on one of the doors announced that Dark Horse Coffee Roasters was open. I hesitated a second, trying to decide if I should knock or just walk in, the way I would with any other business.

Knock *and* walk in, I decided. That way I was covering both bases. I raised my fist, but the door opened before my knuckles could meet wood, and I found myself in the truly absurd position of knocking on Daniel Beck's impressively hard chest.

"Hi. Sorry." I snatched my hand back, trying not to be disheartened by the wary expression that came over his face at the sight of me. "I was wondering if we could revisit our conversation from yesterday? Not to be a nag or anything, but because I think it might be beneficial to both of us. Well, to you and the Bean, anyway."

"Sorry, the situation hasn't changed."

He didn't sound very sorry. He bent down to pull up the bolt securing the other door and pushed it wide, then glanced at me as if to say, *Why are you still here?*

"The Busy Bean is one of the fastest growing coffeeshops in this part of Vermont," I said. "Why wouldn't you want to do business with them?"

"I really don't have time to get into it. And even if I did, I don't have to explain myself to you."

His eyes were as flat as stones, his voice devoid of warmth. I could feel my courage seeping away as he opened the rear doors of the van, revealing a battle-scarred interior.

It was time to go for broke, so I shoved my hands into the front pockets of my jeans and addressed the gorgeous blond elephant in the room.

“Is this about my sister?”

He didn’t look at me, but his shoulders twitched, almost as though he was trying to shake something off.

“No.” He moved past me, heading inside to where a number of plain packing cartons waited on an old workbench.

“I don’t believe you.”

He hefted a box and met my eyes squarely. “I don’t care. I’m not talking about your sister, so I think we’re done here.”

He carried the box out to the van, throwing it into the back with a notable lack of finesse. Because I couldn’t think of anything else to do, I strode inside and grabbed a box, too, figuring he couldn’t refuse to talk to me when I was performing manual labor on his behalf.

He was frowning when I turned around, but I just walked past him and deposited the box in the van.

“I think you’re making a big mistake,” I said on my return journey to collect another box.

“My business, my mistake,” he said, grabbing two boxes in his burly arms. “And you helping me load the van isn’t going to change anything.”

I hefted another box, not ready to give in yet, and my hip knocked a stack of paperwork on the table, sending pages fluttering to the ground.

“Shit. Sorry.” I dumped the box and bent to collect the papers. My hands slowed when I registered what I was holding—a series of clip-art depictions of horses, some of them more successful than others. Someone had even attempted to place a few images in boxes or circles to create a logo of sorts.

A bad logo, but I could see what the intention was.

Beck took the papers from me as I straightened.

“Thanks. I can take it from here.”

“But I—”

“No buts, Lacey. This isn’t a negotiation. Have a good day.”

For a moment I was so confused by him calling me the wrong name that I just stood there like a dummy.

I’d introduced myself yesterday when it had become clear he didn’t remember me. But apparently he hadn’t bothered to note my name.

Meanwhile, I’d spent half the night staring at the ceiling, reliving our brief interaction over and over.

A tide of embarrassed heat rushed up my chest and into my face as a humiliating realization hit me: even though I'd sold this visit to myself as me advocating for the Bean, it had really been about me seeing Beck again.

I'd wanted to be near him. I'd wanted him to notice me. And he hadn't even remembered my name.

This was the problem with unrequited crushes. Even when they'd reached their half-life they were still strong enough to turn you into an idiot of the highest order.

Without saying another word, I pointed myself at the door and started walking, desperate to be out of there. I pressed my hands to my hot cheeks once I reached my car.

"You are such a dick," I told myself, sliding behind the wheel.

I mean, what had I been thinking? That he'd look into my eyes and realize he'd chosen the wrong Elliot sister all those years ago?

I laughed out loud at the absurdity of the thought, the sound sharp as a gunshot.

Then I started the engine with a twist of the key. As I pulled out onto the road, I promised myself I would not waste another second on Daniel Beck, delicious coffee or no delicious coffee. The Bean would find a way out of its coffee slump some other way, but I was done making a fool of myself with my sister's ex.

“What was that about the Busy Bean?”

I tore my gaze from the tiny hatchback disappearing down the road to glance at my brother. “What?”

“That woman—was she from the Busy Bean?” my brother asked.

He’d obviously overheard our conversation from the packing room. I stared at him, my mind a complete blank.

“It’s a yes or no question, Danny,” Sam prompted, clearly wondering what was going on with me.

“She works there, yeah.”

“And you sent her away?” Sam adjusted his stance, finding his center of gravity.

Awesome. He’d switched into combat mode.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” I said.

“Okay. Explain it to me.”

I registered a crinkling sound and looked down to see I’d fisted my hand around the papers Jess’s sister had bumped off the table.

“She’s Jess Elliot’s sister,” I said.

Sam blinked. “Didn’t know she had a sister.”

“Well, she does. And I don’t want anything to do with that family, so...” I shrugged.

“But she was here to talk coffee, right? That’s what it sounded like, anyway.”

I dumped the paperwork and grabbed the remaining boxes for the delivery.

“It’s easier this way.”

I packed the rest of the boxes into the van, then secured the cargo net so they wouldn't slide around when I was on the road. When I turned around, Sam was still standing there.

"We can't afford to turn away business. Especially not from places like the Busy Bean," he said. "That exclusive deal we had with the Colebury Diner ends this week and the Bean is literally at the top of my list to recruit."

"I'll make some calls, do some more scouting," I promised.

"So you're going to let Jess fuck you over again?"

"That's not what this is," I said, somehow managing not to yell the words. The idea of Jess Elliot having any influence on my life made my gut curdle.

"You throwing away good business is the definition of cutting off your nose to spite your face. And for what? Jess is still in New York. Zara Rossi and Audrey Shipley own the Busy Bean. You wouldn't even need to deal with Jess's sister. I don't see what the issue is."

I couldn't hold his eye. We both knew I didn't have a leg to stand on. The truth was that the decision to shut Jess's sister down had come from my gut. She'd caught me when my guard was down, and I'd reacted instinctively to defend myself and my hard-won peace of mind.

But Sam was right—refusing to do business with the Busy Bean was pretty much the definition of shooting myself in the foot.

"You don't have to have anything to do with it. I'll handle everything. Make the deliveries, all of it," Sam said, his tone easier now that he knew he had me on the ropes.

Which meant I must have been coming across as pretty fucked up over this. Awesome.

"I'll do it. I'll call the Bean tomorrow, take over some samples," I said, because I wasn't about to let anxiety dictate my decisions.

Especially when my brother had just pointed out that that's what I was doing.

"You don't have to do that. Like I said, I'm more than happy to take it on," Sam said again.

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, man." I dredged up a smile. "But you're right, it's not a dealbreaker. I was just... I don't know. Circling the wagons, I guess. But it was an over-reaction."

Sam didn't know all the intricate ins and outs of the eighteen months I'd spent with Jess. He didn't know the many, many ways she'd made me doubt my own judgement, sometimes even the evidence of my own senses. He didn't understand what it was like to be gaslit and manipulated by a pro. He knew enough to want to protect me from having to revisit that time, though, and it made me feel warm with gratitude that he was ready to step up for me.

Maybe he sensed my inner turmoil, because he moved closer and rested a hand on my shoulder.

"The offer is there. Just say the word, okay?"

His green eyes were steady on mine, and I nodded my thanks. Then I took a step backward.

"Gotta hit the road."

"All right. See you tomorrow."

I stepped out into the afternoon sunlight and released a heavy sigh. Sam had been right to call me out, but that didn't mean I was happy about it.

Damn it.

True to my promise to myself, I spent the night not thinking about Beck and the humiliation of my second visit to Dark Horse Coffee Roasters. Instead, I threw myself into finishing the cherry-blossom belt, applying a final protective layer over my artwork to seal it and ensure its longevity.

Every time my mind drifted Beck-ward, I reminded myself that I was handing the problem over to Zara and Audrey tomorrow once I'd finished my shift, and I was feeling pretty pleased with how effective my strategy had been by the time I went to bed.

Which was why I was more than a little ticked off the following morning when I looked up from serving a regular at the Bean to find Beck's broad shoulders filling the doorway.

For a moment I thought he was a product of my perverse subconscious as he stood there outlined by bright sunlight. Then he stepped into the shop, and I understood he was real and almost jammed my fingers in the cash drawer. I fumbled change for my customer, the small act taking twice as long as usual. When I shifted my focus to Beck again, I saw that Audrey had come out from the kitchen to meet him, the welcoming smile on her face cluing me into the fact that she'd been expecting him.

For the next twenty minutes I went about the business of being amazing at my job while trying to simultaneously keep tabs on their meeting without appearing to do so. A complicated juggling act that I'm not one hundred percent certain I pulled off.

I was clearing a table near the front door when Beck stood and shook hands again with Audrey. They were both smiling and Beck looked more

relaxed, the stiffness gone from his shoulders. I kept my gaze on the plates I was stacking as he moved toward the door, not prepared to risk eye contact.

I was burning to know what they'd been meeting about, but I told myself it was none of my business and ferried the plates to the kitchen. When I returned to the counter, Audrey was happily tearing open the seal on a commercial-sized bag of coffee beans.

"Haley, we owe you big time. Guess who can fit us into their crowded client list now?" Audrey emptied our current beans out of the hopper on the grinder.

"That's great news," I said, even though I was burning with questions.

He'd been so rude to me last night, so adamant. But obviously something I'd said must have sunk in.

"I'm going to let you do the honors, since you're the one who made this happen." Audrey waved a hand at the grinder as she passed me the beans.

"I really didn't do anything." It was hard to feel as though I'd earned her praise and gratitude when I'd been the stumbling block in the first place. Or, more accurately, my sister had been.

"Don't be so modest. Daniel said you came to see him yesterday, and he was able to move a few things around to accommodate us. What exactly did you say to him?" Audrey asked, eyebrows raised.

I poured beans into the hopper, giving all my attention to the small task. I hated lying, even by omission. My sister had always been able to do it so easily, so convincingly, yet every time I lied, I felt as though I needed a thousand showers to be clean again.

"I just pointed out that the Bean was one of the fastest growing businesses in this part of Vermont."

I hit the button to grind the beans into the group handle, effectively killing the conversation.

"Mmmm. Smells good." Audrey leaned over my shoulder to catch a waft of freshly ground beans.

"All coffee smells good when it's just been ground," I felt honor-bound to point out.

"True, but I'm prepared to believe this smells extra good," Audrey said. "Especially if it's the trick to turning our coffee slump around."

I tamped the beans, then guided the handle into the Astra. Audrey and I stood side by side and watched thick, syrupy-looking espresso stream into the cup.

“Drink this one as a short black, and I’ll make the next one a latte,” I said, handing her the glass.

She swirled the dark liquid, sniffed it, then took a tentative sip. I watched as her eyebrows popped up, her eyes widening.

“Oh, my,” she said, licking her lips.

“Yeah. It’s pretty good, right?”

“I’d abandon us for coffee this good. Make the latte, I’m dying to know how it tastes with milk.”

I ground out another shot and made her the requested drink. This time she closed her eyes and made a happy noise.

“How can this taste so much better than our coffee?” she asked when she was done swooning over her cup.

“No idea,” I said.

She pulled out her phone. “I need to cancel our regular supplier, stat. What have we got left on hand?”

I did a quick stock-take and worked out we had enough for two days. Audrey made a quick call to Zara, then to their usual supplier. Then I eavesdropped shamelessly as she called Beck to place our first order.

“Daniel Beck speaking, how can I help you?” he answered the phone, his deep voice somehow sounding even deeper on speaker mode.

“Daniel, it’s Audrey Shipley. I just tried your beans. Wow. Don’t know what magic you are working over there in Montpelier, but we are *in*.”

“That’s great to hear,” Beck said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “When would you like your first delivery?”

They talked quantities and dates, then I had to serve some customers and missed the remainder of the call. I’d heard enough to envy the easy friendliness of their conversation, though. Beck had always been super charming and easy to be around.

With everyone except for me, apparently.

I could hear the whiny self-pity sitting behind the thought and made an effort to shake it off. I’d lived without Daniel Beck’s approval in my life for twenty-five years. The world wasn’t going to end if he didn’t want to give me the time of day. That was his prerogative. I’d gotten what I needed out of our brief interactions—he’d agreed to supply the Bean. My work here was done, and we could both go about our separate lives now. Problem solved.

I had another Etsy commission to launch into when I got home after my shift, a pair of slippers made from buttery-soft leather and suede, and I was more than happy to set aside the frustrations of the day and give myself over to the joy of creating. I'd given my client a range of vegetable-tanned leathers to choose from, and she'd selected a rich teal the color of deep ocean water. Just cutting out the pieces for the uppers made me happy. I'd finished stitching the pieces together and was about to stretch them over the lasts when I was interrupted by a phone call from my sister.

"Hale-storm. I feel like we haven't spoken for ages," Jess said.

"Pretty sure we spoke last week," I reminded her, cradling the phone on my shoulder while I worked the leather over the last.

"Sure, but not properly. Tell me what's up with you. I want to know *everything*," she said.

I pictured her on the other end of the call, settling in for a long chat, and intuited that Jonny wasn't home. My sister had never been good at tolerating her own company.

I set the last down, then leaned back in my chair and stretched out my neck. I was happy to take a break but painfully aware that the topic at the top of my mind was one I couldn't raise with her: Beck.

"Not much to tell. The new job is still rocking along. I've got a couple of new commissions. What's happening at your end?" I asked.

"I booked a new job today," Jess said.

"Fantastic. Who is it with?"

"A young designer. She's being cultivated by one of the big fashion houses and everyone thinks she's going to be the next big thing. She loves my 'all-American girl' look. So that's pretty cool. She's even talking about me being part of her branding."

I could hear the excitement thrumming beneath Jess's words.

"Woo-hoo. That's so great," I said. "Are you and Jonny going out to celebrate?"

"That's the plan. Although I'd rather save the money so we can start looking for a bigger place."

I frowned. "I thought you guys loved it where you are?"

"The location, sure. But this apartment is so fucking small, Haley. When Jonny works from home, I almost go out of my mind with how much he's in my face."

"But isn't your place rent-controlled?"

“Now you sound like Jonny,” she said unhappily.

“Hey, you want to get a bigger place, I’m all for it.” I steered away from what was obviously a sensitive topic. “Sounds like you’ll be making good money with this new booking.”

The conversation roamed from my sister’s new booking to a dress she’d scored at a recent photo shoot to the restaurant Jonny was taking her to, with me putting my two cents in whenever I was invited to. At some point I picked up a pencil and started doodling absentmindedly.

“Before I forget to mention it,” Jess said, “I sent you a care package yesterday. Some makeup samples and hair products, stuff like that. You and Mom can sort out who gets what.”

“I’ll tell Mom tonight, I’m going over there for dinner. She loves those makeup samples.”

Jess had always been generous about sharing her freebies with us. Over the last few years she’d sent home cashmere scarves, jewelry, skincare products, makeup. The perks of having a model for a sister.

“She’s still talking about the lipstick she scored last time. I swear she wore it every day for a month,” I said.

“That’s hilarious. Find out what shade it was, and I’ll see if I can get her more.”

I could hear a noise in the background and guessed that Jonny had arrived home from work.

“Gotta go, Hales, my man is here,” Jess confirmed. “I need to make myself fancy for our big night out.”

“Have a good one,” I said.

“Give Mom and Dad a hug from me, okay?”

“Will do.”

I ended the call and put my phone aside. My gaze fell on my notepad, and I blinked at the image I’d drawn in big, bold strokes—the head and shoulders of a horse, his mane flowing in the wind, a certain cocky attitude in the way he was holding his head and ears. There was something missing, and I tilted my head for a few seconds, considering. Then I picked up my pencil and added a superhero eye-mask to the horse’s face. The result made me laugh out loud. There was something both hilarious and defiant about my superhero horse. Maybe it was the idea that a tiny eye-mask could hide his identity. Or maybe it was the attitude in his perked-up ears. Whatever it was, it was good and—

What the hell are you doing?

It was an excellent question—because I’d just sketched a logo for Daniel Beck’s business while talking to my sister on the phone. My sister, who happened to be Daniel’s ex.

It was a good logo, too—a million times better than the crappy vector art images he’d been considering—but that didn’t make it any less batshit crazy that I’d designed something for someone who could barely tolerate five seconds in my presence.

I could never show this to him. The thought alone was enough to make me want to squirm in my seat. I mean, the man hadn’t even bothered to remember my name. Shaking my head at my subconscious, I turned back to the slippers, determined to cleanse myself of Beck thoughts with the purity of hard labor.

I set my tools aside half an hour before I needed to leave and spent the remaining time cleaning up my workspace, a habit I’d learned from Mr. Zametti. When everything was ship-shape, I headed for my parents’ place, stopping along the way to buy a bottle of wine. Their white ranch-style house was set off by the greenest lawn in the neighborhood—my father’s pride and joy—and I made a point of mentioning how good it looked as I let myself in the front door and greeted my father.

“I’m not happy with my fertilizer regime,” my father said, glancing out the window with an assessing frown.

“Okay, I’m going to back away from this topic,” I said with a laugh.

My mom came forward to hug me, her cheek warm against mine.

“Your hair looks so cute like this,” she said, reaching out to touch the blunt ends of my jaw-length bob. “I thought you were going to grow it?”

“Meh. I got bored,” I said.

We settled around the old oak table in the kitchen and helped ourselves to the cheese and crackers my father had arranged on a decorative board. I’d chosen a good cabernet sauvignon from the Napa Valley, and we all chatted and snacked happily for the next twenty minutes.

“So, have you spoken to Jess this week?” my mom asked when my father stood to start serving up the meal.

This was a regular query during any meal or conversation with my parents, part of the unofficial monitoring system we’d developed in the years since my sister swallowed a bottle of my father’s painkillers when she was seventeen. Generally speaking, one of us tried to touch base with my

sister at least once a week, and if we heard anything from her that rang alarm bells, we'd pool information to try to head trouble off at the pass.

It wasn't a perfect system, but so far we'd managed to keep my sister from bottoming out again in the ten years since her suicide attempt. That didn't mean there weren't plenty of minor explosions and crises along the way, of course, and they have caused my parents multiple headaches and lost night's sleep, but mostly we'd been able to work together to keep my sister stable and safe.

"She called me this afternoon, actually. She's really happy about a shoot she's just landed, and we talked a little about her and Jonny maybe trying to find a bigger apartment." I shrugged. "I think she's doing okay."

"She still wants to find a new place?" Mom asked. "She's been talking about that ever since she went to that party in Gramercy Park a few weeks ago."

"We all know what she's like when she gets an idea in her head," I said. "I guess that's between her and Jonny, though, right?"

Sometimes I worry that my folks spend too much time fretting about things they can't do anything about when it comes to my sister, parsing all the little details, looking for clues that aren't there. Then I remind myself that I wasn't the one who came home to find my sister passed out and unresponsive in a pool of vomit. My father has never talked about how he had to give my sister CPR until the ambulance arrived, but I knew it had left an indelible mark on both him and my mother.

"True. I just worry she's putting pressure on Jonny, but I guess what will happen will happen, won't it?" Mom echoed my shrug.

"He's good with her," Dad said as he brought our plates to the table. "I think he's in it for the long haul."

"We thought that about Beck, too, remember?" Mom asked.

Hearing his name gave me a jolt. I'd never heard the details about why Jess and Beck broke up and curiosity got the better of me.

"I guess things must have gotten pretty bad between them toward the end, huh?" I asked, feeling as though my interest was like a beacon shining on the horizon.

"I assume so, but I really don't know the details. Your sister was so distraught by the time I arrived in New York, it was hard to work out what was real and what wasn't. You know how she gets."

I nodded. I was intimately familiar with my sister in crisis mode. When she got worked up, it was impossible to discern the truth. She catastrophized things, making leaps of logic that defied reason, and sometimes slipped into paranoia. She wasn't above lying to cover something shitty she'd done, or lashing out destructively in an attempt to punish whoever she felt had done her wrong.

That was her at her worst. When she was at her best, she was the most fun, the most exciting, the most charismatic person to be around in the world. All she had to do was walk into a room and people would smile and gravitate toward her.

When we were both kids, my parents had called her Hurricane Jess because of the extreme highs and lows of her personality. It had been a joke then, but after the incident with the pills, it hadn't been funny anymore.

"Anyway, enough of all that. How are things going with your Etsy store?" my mother asked brightly, clearly ready to move on.

"It's steady," I said. "I've got a couple of commissions for shoes, but mostly it's belts and bags at the moment."

"You'll get there," my father said. "I get compliments every day on my briefcase, and I always direct them to your site."

I'd made my dad a gorgeous forest-green satchel for Christmas a few years ago. I'd kept the design simple and classic for him, but indulged myself with a few little details, like the delicate autumn leaves I'd engraved on the brass closures and the rich, wine-colored paisley fabric I'd used for the lining.

"Thanks, Dad."

My father's fresh pesto pasta followed by strawberry rhubarb pie was amazing, as always, and I left their house with a full stomach and tomorrow night's dinner tucked into Tupperware containers in my bag.

My thoughts shifted to Beck again as I drove home. Having seen the way Jess could act out when she felt insecure or unhappy, I could take an educated guess at what it must have been like between her and Beck at the end.

Taking a deep breath and then releasing it, I consciously let go of the sense of grievance I'd been carrying around for the past few days because of the way he'd cold-shouldered me.

Beck was entitled to protect himself if that was what he needed to do. I couldn't begrudge him that.

I really couldn't.

“Come on girl, up you go.”

Larry leapt up onto the van’s passenger seat, already vibrating with excitement at the prospect of a trip, and I gave her head a gentle caress before shutting the door. I was rounding the van to get to the driver’s side when Sam appeared, eyebrows knit in a frown.

“Where are you going? I’m doing the morning run.” He held his hand out for the keys.

“I got it.”

“But I’m happy to do it. I told you I’d handle all the Bean runs,” he insisted. “That was the deal.”

“I got it,” I repeated.

“But—”

“Sam. Read my lips—it’s fine. It’s not a problem, okay? It’s just a delivery run like any other delivery run.”

I could see Sam trying to decide if he should push again, and I saved him the trouble by climbing behind the wheel. It might have taken my brother calling me out over my irrational rejection of the Busy Bean’s business to slap some sense into me, but I was over being freaked out about Jess Elliot’s little sister.

I was more than a little embarrassed about the way I’d handled the whole situation last week. I’d let the past bleed into the present and acted like an idiot. Who cared if Haley Elliott worked at the Bean? She was nothing to me. This was business—my business—and I was going to handle it like a grown adult. So. I was going to be the one to make the first delivery to the Busy Bean this morning.

“All right,” Sam said. “Bring me back something for lunch, then. Whatever looks good.”

I pulled the door shut and started the engine. A tap sounded on the side window and I wound it down.

“Grab something for dessert, too. Like a cookie, or a piece of cake,” Sam added.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“Something to drink? I’ll call if I think of anything else.” He grinned at me then slapped the side of the van and stepped out of the way.

I snorted out an almost-laugh and put my foot on the gas. Larry gave me a pointed look as I turned onto the highway, and I hit the button to lower her window to half-mast.

“There you go.”

Larry stuck her head out the window, her tongue already lolling from her mouth.

At least I’d brought joy into someone’s life today.

The first half of the run went smoothly enough, although an accident on 89 meant I was running twenty minutes behind my self-imposed schedule by the time I pulled into the parking lot at the Busy Bean. Assuring Larry I wouldn’t be long, I loaded up the hand-truck and headed for the staff entrance.

No one wants the delivery guy blocking the front door. We’d learned that one the hard way early on.

The door was wide open to allow fresh air to flow through the screen door, and I paused before barging inside.

“Knock-knock,” I called out. “I’ve got a delivery here.” It was dim inside compared to the brightness of the midmorning sun, and I could only see vague shapes through the screen.

“Two secs,” someone said, then a moment later a dark-haired guy appeared at the door wiping his hands on a dishtowel. “Coffee beans, right?”

“That’s the one,” I said.

He waved me inside and led me behind the counter and through a wide doorway into the kitchen. My stomach gave an embarrassingly audible growl as I inhaled the scent of delicious food.

“Whoa. What smells so amazing?” I asked.

The tall guy pointed at a bakery rack filled with freshly baked bagels.

“Could be those. Or might be those.” He indicated two trays loaded down with monster muffins. “Coffee, chocolate, and walnut.”

A little pool of saliva formed in my mouth. “Or it’s a heady combination of both.”

“Most likely. Here.” He passed me a wonky-looking muffin. “This one’s too ugly for public consumption. I’m Roderick, by the way.”

“Beck,” I said, offering him my hand. “I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

We shook and he narrowed his eyes as though he was trying to work out if he knew me.

“You go to Colebury High?”

“I did,” I said. “Graduated in 2011.”

“Couple of years below me, then.” He glanced at the cartons stacked on the hand-truck. “Audrey and Zara are pretty excited about your beans.”

“Good to hear. Any idea where I should put them?” The muffin was still warm from the oven, and I was desperate to stuff it in my face so I could find out if it tasted as good as it smelled.

“Over here.”

He showed me where the storeroom was off the main kitchen. I set my muffin down and was just hefting the first box onto the shelf Roderick indicated, when Haley bustled into the kitchen. I glanced at her pretty face in profile before looking away.

“Roddy, people are going crazy for the bagels today. When are these bad boys going to be ready to go?” she asked as she ferried a stack of dishes to the sink.

“I’ll start putting them out now if there’s room,” Roderick said.

“Oh, there’s room.”

She swung away from the sink and her gaze shifted to where I was now sliding a second box beside the first in the storeroom. I could tell from the way she blinked twice that she hadn’t registered I was there until that moment.

“The coffee has arrived,” Roderick said. “I repeat, the coffee has arrived.”

“Good to see,” Haley said, but there was wariness in her big brown eyes.

Which made sense, because I hadn’t exactly rolled out the welcome mat during our previous interactions. I’d even gotten her name wrong,

something I'd worked out pretty quickly when I met Audrey Shipley to talk about supplying the Bean.

"We've discovered that this batch prefers a slightly finer grind," I said, eager to smooth things over. "So don't be afraid to go there."

"Okay, thanks. Good tip," she said.

Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed to me that she relaxed a notch. Which was good. The sooner we got past the weirdness I'd created, the better. I wracked my brain for something else to say.

"What temp are you running the Astra at?" I asked.

"I think it's one ninety-five, but don't quote me on that," she said.

"There's some new research that indicates lower temperatures for extraction can lead to different flavor profiles. Not sure if you saw any of the recent trade articles."

Her eyebrows knit together briefly, as though she was trying to understand what language I was speaking. "Ah, no. Don't think I did."

"Good reads," I said, nodding. "Especially the stuff about yield percentages and total dissolved solids. Nobody wants to go higher than twenty-two percent, obviously, but that doesn't mean we can't aim for more than eighteen. Definitely worth checking it out."

"Sounds fascinating." She pointed toward the doorway to the dining area. "Better get back to it."

She exited the kitchen and I finishing unloading the remaining cartons, patting myself on the back for making such a good stab at normalizing things between us.

Roderick was busy filling a display tray with bagels when I exited the kitchen, and I raised my hand in farewell as I pivoted the hand-truck toward the door.

"Good to meet you. Thanks for the muffin." I lifted it to let him know I hadn't forgotten it.

"No problem. Enjoy." Roderick flashed me an easy smile.

I was feeling pretty pleased with myself as I loaded the hand-truck back into the van. Couple more visits and Haley Elliot would just be one face among many on my delivery route, same as everyone else, and I could forget my minor freak-out and let it fade into the mists of time. Sam could stop looking at me like I had *Handle With Care* stamped on my forehead, and I could go back to concentrating on making Dark Horse all it could be.

"Amen to that," I muttered.

I was busy filling a large takeout coffee order when Roderick brought out a tray of bagels to replace the empty one in the display cabinet.

“New coffee guy seems like he knows his stuff,” Roddy said once he was done.

“He does, indeed,” I said, pouring freshly-steamed milk into two takeout cups.

Roddy went back into the kitchen, and I reflected that it was probably just as well that he hadn’t noticed anything weird about Beck’s sudden transformation into Professor Coffee. That made sense, though. He didn’t know Beck. I did, and I knew exactly how hard Beck had been working to fake some kind of normal interaction with me.

I guess the upside was that he’d actually exchanged civil words with me and even made eye contact for a couple of seconds. He was making an effort to be polite, and that was a good thing. For the sake of world peace, I was more than happy to meet him halfway. Maybe in a few months’ time we’d even be laughing about all of this.

That little dream crashed and burned three days later when Beck made his second delivery to the Bean. The word had somehow gotten out that we had secured a supply of the magic beans everyone had fallen in love with, and the shop was jumping from the moment we opened the doors. I’d lost track of the sheepish smiles I’d received from regulars who’d come back into the fold, but I just treated them all to my brightest smile and offered samples of Roderick’s blond brownies to remind them they’d been fools to leave us in the first place.

I'd just caught up on our coffee orders, cranking out drink after drink while Audrey manned the register, when we finally hit a lull and had a chance to play catch-up.

"Let's clear those tables, Hales," Audrey said, and together we whizzed around the indoor and outdoor dining areas, collecting dirty dishes and silverware with brisk efficiency. Along the way, I took two new coffee orders, repeating them to myself as I made my way around the counter and into the kitchen.

As luck would have it, Beck was leaning an elbow on his empty hand-truck as I entered, his back to me as he chatted happily with Roddy. My gaze went straight to his ass before I could catch myself.

As always, it was perfect, a gift to jean manufacturers everywhere.

I dragged my gaze away and dumped my dishes in the sink. There was no point torturing myself.

"Brazil was the best," Beck was saying. "Amazing beaches, and the Brazilians really know how to party."

"I never got to Brazil, but I had some crazy times in Argentina with my ex," Roderick said.

"Did you try torta rogel while you were there? Man, I still have dreams about how good it was," Beck said.

I scraped the dishes clean and stacked them in the dishwasher while Roderick and Beck enthused about South American desserts. Then I took a deep breath, preparing to do my part to normalize relations between myself and Beck. "One of the waitresses at my last job was from Chile, and she used to bring in alfajores for us. They were pretty amazing."

"Oh, yeah, I ate my body weight in those when I was in Argentina," Roderick said.

I waited for Beck to keep the conversational ball rolling, and after a slightly-too-long silence, he cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders.

"I've brought a sample for you guys today," he said, indicating a lone bag of beans sitting alongside the boxes in the storeroom. "We've been experimenting with three of our favorite single-origin varieties, seeing if we can find the sweet spot where we get the best of all worlds in one blend. We're going for a very light roast so the beans can speak for themselves, and we're pretty happy with the floral and spice notes we're getting."

Oh shit. Professor Coffee was back.

“That sounds cool,” I said. “I’ll let Audrey and Zara know.”

There was another slightly-too-long pause and I could feel him ransacking the corners of his brain, trying to find something else to say to me.

“Something else I’ve been meaning to mention to you guys—have you ever thought about adding a cold brew to the lineup? It can take a lot of pressure off the barista if it’s done well.”

“Doesn’t that require a lot of specialized equipment?” I asked, resigned to following him down the coffee rabbit hole again.

He was trying, right? I had to give him points for that.

“You can get fancy if you want to, but all you really need is a good strainer to get started,” Beck said earnestly, every line in his body attesting to how hard he was working on this conversation.

“Interesting. I’ll run the idea past the powers that be.” I moved toward the doorway, ready to put us both out of our misery.

“I’ll bring you the guide my brother came up with next time I’m in,” Beck said.

The poor guy was practically sweating as I gave him a thumbs up and ducked back into the dining room.

Audrey was talking to a customer at the register, and I got to work on the two coffee orders I’d memorized, utterly bemused by what had just happened in the kitchen. So much for Beck getting over his issues with me. Was this what it was going to be like between us now? Because Professor Coffee was *a lot*.

After a brief pause, I could hear Roddy and Beck laughing and talking again in the kitchen behind us, their conversation resuming its easy-breezy rhythms now that I was no longer present. I tamped coffee into the group handle, telling myself not to take it personally. This had always been about Jess, not me. And at least Beck wasn’t giving me the cold shoulder anymore.

Nope. He’s giving you the coffee shoulder. Whole different thing.

Roderick and Beck suddenly laughed so loudly I glanced over my shoulder to make sure a clown wasn’t doing laps of the kitchen in a miniature car. I caught Beck mid-guffaw, head thrown back, his eyes bright with amusement.

It was a little shocking how handsome he looked in that unguarded moment. I’d gotten so used to him being grim and tense around me, I’d

forgotten how attractive he was, but suddenly I was potently conscious of the fact that he was a big, blond guy with gorgeous blue-green eyes and a very hot body I'd once had more than my fair share of illicit fantasies about.

"Yow," I hissed, snatching my hand away from the boiling-hot group head.

"You okay?" Audrey asked, glancing up from where she was wiping down the counter.

"All good," I assured her, annoyed at myself for making such a rookie mistake.

I glanced down at the red mark on my hand.

Let that be a warning to you.

Because there was zero point in noticing Beck's hotness when the man couldn't even hold a normal conversation with me without turning into a human Wikipedia entry on coffee.

Giving my injured hand one last shake, I reapplied myself to the task at hand, and this time I very deliberately ignored what was going on in the kitchen.

“When are we going to see you again?” Roderick asked as I wheeled the hand-truck toward the door.

“Monday,” I said.

“Perfect. I’m trying out a ricotta cheese cake recipe, and I’m looking for a guinea pig.”

“I am definitely your man,” I said, because, like my brother, I was always looking for an opportunity to fill my stomach.

“See you next week. Bring your appetite,” Roderick said, turning away to check the oven.

“Will do.”

I wheeled the hand-truck out the door and rounded the side of the building to where I’d left the van. I had one more delivery until I could head home, but just as I was about to start up the van, Haley exited the shop, carrying two plates for one of the outside tables. She was wearing black skinny jeans, and I couldn’t help noticing her plush hips and backside as she wove her way through the tables, smiling to regulars along the way, the curve of her mouth sweet and sincere. She delivered meals to two elderly women and stood chatting with them, her face bright with interest.

She looked nothing like her sister. Different eye color, different facial features, different figure. She carried herself differently, too. Jess’s stride was long and confident, daring the world to keep up with her. Haley’s gait was more careful, as though she was less confident of her welcome. Where Jess was the master of the flirtatious hair toss, when Haley lifted her hand to tuck her brown hair behind her ear, it was a deeply practical gesture, performed with absolutely no coyness or finesse.

They couldn't be less alike—and yet she was still Jess Elliott's sister, and I was still supremely conscious of that fact whenever our paths crossed.

When she'd entered the kitchen five minutes ago, all the little hairs had stood up on the back of my neck and my brain had gone blank, even though I'd been enjoying a perfectly normal conversation with Roderick just seconds earlier.

I don't know what it was—some weird flight-or-fight instinct that had kicked in a couple of years too late, maybe—but it was fucking unpleasant, and I could do without it in my life right now. The obvious solution was to take up my brother's offer to handle the Bean's delivery runs, but I wasn't going to do that. It smacked too much of retreat. Or, worse, defeat.

I was just going to have to keep powering along. Whatever it was that made me go on the alert whenever she was around would wear off. It had to eventually, right?

My phone rang, the loud ringtone startling in the van's quiet interior. It was my brother, and I tapped the screen to take the call.

"Hey. You think you'll be much longer?" he asked.

"Another forty minutes. What's up?"

"We just got a special request from that restaurant in Tuxbury. They've got a wedding this weekend and just ran out of beans."

I opened my mouth to ask what stock we had on hand, because as a rule we tried to send out our beans within a four-day window after roasting, part of the secret to our coffee's flavor profile.

"I'm doing an extra roast and juggling some things around to make it work," Sam said, answering the question for me. "But I'm going to need your help."

"I'll get back as fast as I can," I said, already reaching for the ignition key.

I watched as Haley took a step away from the table, clearly trying to disengage from the conversation without offending her customers. One of the older women was still talking a mile a minute, however, and Haley hovered patiently, an attentive expression on her face as she tucked her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. The move drew my gaze to the generous curves of her breasts in her snug black T-Shirt.

I was so distracted I didn't register I had my foot on the gas and the van roared to life with an angry rev. Haley glanced up from the patio, her gaze clashing with mine briefly before I looked away.

Great. Now she was going to think I'd been sitting there staring at her. And she'd be right.

"Okay, cool. And we got another quote for the sign for the barn." My brother's voice turned tinny as the van's hands-free system picked up the call.

"Better than the last one?" I threw the van into reverse and checked the mirrors.

"In our target range. So all we have to do now is choose a logo and we're good to go."

"Great. The easy part," I said sarcastically.

Sam had been trawling stock-art sites for vector images for weeks and had identified dozens of images that would be perfectly acceptable as our logo, yet neither of us had gotten even remotely excited about them. This was after we'd paid a graphic designer a chunk of change to come up with something for us and been equally unenthused by the results.

If someone held a gun to my head, I wouldn't be able to articulate why the designs hadn't worked for me, I simply knew in my gut that they didn't capture the essence of our brand.

But we desperately needed a sign for the barn, as well as branding for our coffee bags. Business cards and a website would also go a long way toward making us look like we had our shit together, too.

In short, we needed to stop dicking around and make a decision.

"Maybe we should toss a coin?" Sam suggested.

"Yeah, maybe."

Call me crazy, but it didn't seem the best way to decide on the imagery that would embody our brand as we grew our business.

There were two cars waiting to exit the parking lot and I joined the line, my gaze gravitating to the rearview mirror where I could see Haley heading back inside the Bean, her arms laden with dirty dishes. Just as she was about to make it through the door she was stopped by another customer who wanted to chat, and once again she ducked her head to listen attentively, the same sweet, sincere look on her face.

Then I realized I was staring at her *again*. What the fuck was up with that? I wanted less of her in my life, not more.

I wrenched my gaze away and saw it was my turn to exit. I checked the road before pulling out.

"I'll see you in forty, okay?" I told my brother.

“Copy that.”

My brother ended the call and I punched the radio on. Larry abandoned her post at the open window and arranged herself so that she could bridge the gap between the two seats and put her head on my lap.

I glanced down at her and felt the familiar swell of love and pride she always inspired in me. What a good, good girl. I was so damned lucky to have her, in more ways than one.

If I hadn't gone to the park that day... If I hadn't registered the familiarity of her bark...

As if she sensed the direction of my thoughts, Larry shifted, and when I glanced down, she was staring up at me, her whiskey-brown eyes full of devotion.

“We got lucky, little buddy,” I told her. “We got so lucky.”

Resting a hand on her shoulder, I focused on the road ahead. I couldn't do anything about the past and all the mistakes and misjudgments I'd made. I could only be smarter about the future.

Or try to be, anyway.

HALEY

You know that thing where the rational part of your brain decides on a sensible course of action and commits to it, but then the murky, primal, unsupportive part of your brain refuses to get on board? The Germans probably have a name for it, something hard to pronounce with lots of umlauts. All I had was a feeling, and it hit me on a regular basis over the next couple of weeks whenever Beck set foot in the Busy Bean.

Every time I saw him propped in the kitchen doorway sharing a laugh with Zara, I felt it. When I discovered Roddy had started using Beck as a taste tester for recipes he was developing, even though they barely knew each other, I got a big, hard dose of it. And the day I left the Bean to find Beck and his dog playing with Audrey and her kid down by the river bank, I was awash with it.

If I had to parse this feeling into its component parts, it would be made up of nine-tenths envy and one-tenth wistfulness. With a sprinkle of sexual jealousy thrown in, just for kicks and giggles.

Because I wanted Beck to laugh with me the way he laughed with Zara. I wanted us to have the kind of relationship where I could run ideas past him, the kind of friendship where I'd see him and his dog down by the river and feel free to hang out with them.

I was fully aware that this stupid, stubborn longing was at complete odds with my decision to respect his obvious desire to have as little to do with me as possible, but no matter how many times I told myself I didn't care, the lump of concrete in the pit of my stomach said otherwise.

The problem was that Beck was just one of those people other people wanted to be around. He'd always been that way, and that was the reason

my sister had wanted him, and the reason for why I'd developed my ridiculous, hopeless-cause crush on him.

He had a natural ease and charm that made people smile, even if they were having a shitty day. He gave good banter, and he knew how to tease people in a gentle, utterly harmless way that made them feel they were special because he'd noticed them. And he was curious about people, asking lots of questions and genuinely listening to their answers.

It probably didn't hurt that he was extensively easy on the eyes, either.

All of this worked together to make him a warm, real presence that people wanted to get closer to, like campers gathering around a fire at night.

I witnessed the power of his charisma over and over, in the way Audrey stood a half-foot closer to him than she did to other people, even though she was madly in love with her husband Griff. And in the way Roderick launched into an amusing anecdote whenever Beck arrived with his delivery, as though he'd been waiting to share the story with him. Even snarky, cynical Zara wasn't immune, spending extra minutes chatting to him on the phone when she called in our biweekly order, her laughter ringing through the shop.

Everybody loved Beck, and Beck loved everybody—with the notable exception of me.

Every time I was in his vicinity, he turned into Professor Coffee, bombarding me with factoids about everybody's favorite beverage. I could practically feel the tension thrumming through him as he worked against his natural inclination to have nothing to do with me. Even if it killed him, he was going to be civil.

Way to make a girl feel great about herself.

I could tell the others were starting to sense that something was up between us, and even though I kept telling myself to just ignore it and get on with my life, being excluded from the Beck campfire was seriously starting to get me down. No one wants to be the stinky kid who didn't get invited to the birthday party. Especially when the party is happening right in front of you, and the person holding it makes your heart go pitter-patter every time they walk into the room.

The whole weird, uncomfortable situation came to a head at the end of a truly epic couple of days at the Bean. Audrey had come down with a stomach bug, and I'd picked up all her afternoon shifts, which meant I had to work on my commissions in the evening. I'm usually pretty careful with

planning out my schedule and setting expectations for delivery times, but I'd already been moving a little slowly on a purse for a woman in Toronto, and I wound up pulling an all-nighter on Thursday in order to mail the finished bag first thing Friday morning.

As is always the way, my Friday shift at the Bean then conspired to be one of the busiest I'd ever had. Running around all day on no sleep meant my ass was dragging by the time I waved goodbye to the last customer and swung the sign on the door from open to closed.

"Oh my God," I said as I engaged the latch and rested my forehead briefly against the glass. "What a day."

"Crazy," Zara agreed as she sailed past with an armful of dirty dishes. "And not quite over yet."

I took the hint, beginning to stack the chairs on the tables so we could mop the floors, a closing-time ritual that never failed to remind me of my first day on the job.

I was just tipping the dirty water down the utility sink when Zara's apron sailed past me to land in the pile of dirty laundry she'd be taking home tonight.

"And we're done, Haley. It's official."

I held up a finger to dispute her call, then I rinsed the mop bucket and turned it upside down in the sink to drain overnight.

"Now we're done," I said, and Zara laughed.

"My God. I don't think I've ever been so happy for a week to end," Zara said. "I think we need to decompress, Haley."

I raised my eyebrows as Zara pulled out her phone.

"I'm texting Roddy and Audrey and telling them to meet us at the Gin Mill. Drinks on me," Zara said, tapping away on her phone.

When Zara got an idea in her head, she was pretty much unstoppable. I was tired, footsore, and dreaming of my bed, but somehow I found myself crossing the parking lot to the Gin Mill and winding my way through the happy-hour crowd to find a booth. Zara and I had barely touched our backsides to our seats before Roddy and Kieran joined us, crowding into the booth.

"Make room, ladies, make room," Roddy said, his shoulder brushing mine.

I slid farther along the seat, breathing in the scent of woody deodorant and clean cotton.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that gay men almost always smell amazing, and Roddy and Kieran were not exceptions to the rule.

"What are you drinking, Hales?" Zara asked, eyebrows raised. "Kieran's about to go order at the bar for us."

"Am I?" Kieran asked, looking amused.

"Did I mention I'm paying?" Zara said.

Kieran straightened with comic alacrity. "Then by all means, what's everyone having?"

Zara laughed. "Thought that might change your mind."

I ran my eye down the drinks menu. There were so many good things to choose from—local craft beers and ciders, boutique gins and vodkas. It was all a little overwhelming after a tough couple of days, and I frowned at the page.

"The house chardonnay is good," Zara said. "If you're looking for some guidance."

"That sounds great," I said, grateful for her intervention.

Kieran made note of everyone's order then took off for the bar. Roddy grabbed a handful of pretzels from the bowl on the table and settled against the booth cushions.

"How'd the afternoon go?" he asked. "Did we run out of anything?"

"Ha. We ran out of everything," Zara said.

"It was one of those days," I agreed. "Everyone wanted everything, all at once."

"That's why you two are looking so beat," Roddy said.

Zara threw a pretzel at him. "Thanks a lot. Congratulations on offending everyone at this table."

"I'm not offended, and I'm at this table," Roddy said.

I laughed and Zara shot me a look.

"Do not encourage him."

Audrey arrived at our table then, looking pale but determined.

"Okay, I made it," she said. "I will not be drinking alcohol, but I will be participating in team-building conversation and laughter."

"Come sit by me, partner." Zara lifted an arm to encourage Audrey into her side of the booth.

I watched as Audrey slid in beside Zara, leaning into the one-armed embrace Zara offered her. That they were firm friends as well as business partners was no secret, but it was nice to see the friend side of their

dynamic in action, especially considering the historical elements at play. Like everyone in Colebury, I was aware that Griff Shipley and Zara had had a thing going on that had ended not long before Audrey came on the scene, but these two awesome women hadn't allowed that history to stand in the way of their friendship.

Kieran returned with an armful of drinks that he somehow delivered to the table without spilling a drop, a feat we rewarded with cheers and a round of applause.

"Before we start, I need to make a toast." Audrey lifted her glass, making eye contact with me. "To Haley, for putting her own life on hold to save mine this week. You've been a team player from day one, and we hope you aren't too behind with your Etsy work because of us."

"What Etsy work?" Kieran asked before taking a big swallow of his cider.

A Shipley cider, no doubt. He wouldn't dare drink anything else in front of Audrey.

"Haley makes shoes," Zara explained. "And wallets and bags and belts. Beautiful, amazing things."

Kieran's eyes sparked with interest as he focused on me. "That's pretty cool. What's your store called?"

He reached for his phone, ready to look up my Etsy address.

Heat crept into my face. I have never been good at being the center of attention.

"It's called Haley Made," I said, watching as Kieran's fingers whizzed over the keyboard on his phone screen.

Seconds later, everyone was oohing and ahing as they scrolled through the past projects gallery on my website.

"Haley. These are really something," Kieran said. "You do all this painting yourself?"

"I do."

"I love your style," Kieran said, studying the screen. "It's really unique. Part folk, part naive, part something else I don't have a name for yet."

"Show him your boots," Zara insisted.

I objected, but no one would be satisfied until I stood and lifted my foot to the bench seat, not exactly a graceful maneuver in the confined space.

"How come I've never noticed these before. They are epic," Roddy said, and I could feel my face heating even more.

“Every time I see them I want to rip them off your feet,” Zara confessed.

“Thank you. Can I sit down now?”

They all laughed, and I sank onto the seat and took a big, soothing mouthful of wine.

“Poor Haley,” Audrey said. “You’re the opposite of a showoff, aren’t you?”

“Feel free to mention my site to all your friends. Just don’t do it in front of me,” I joked.

They all laughed again, and we settled into a discussion about the new bottle labels Kieran was designing for the Shipleys. The conversation flowed all over the place after that, and even though I was tired, I was glad I’d decided to give in to Zara’s cajoling to join the gang for drinks. The wine was good, the bar snacks salty and crunchy in exactly the right ratio, and the people I worked with were smart, funny, and witty.

In summary, I was having a fun time.

Until I glanced across the bar and realized Beck had just arrived.

HALEY

He was wearing a deep-blue Henley and a pair of dark denim jeans with a worn spot on one knee that I was willing to bet was the result of genuine wear and tear and not strategic aging by the manufacturer.

He looked very, very good, and I couldn't stop myself from shamelessly drinking him in as he stood there, scanning the crowd for someone. I wasn't the only person who noticed him, either. A few heads turned his way, male and female.

When he'd been going out with my sister, people had openly gawked when they walked into a room together, two perfectly matched, beautiful people gracing the world with their presence.

"Hey, there's Beck," Zara said, lifting her arm to wave him over.

I shrank back against the booth and busied myself with draining the last of my wine. It didn't stop me from knowing the exact moment Beck arrived at our table, since every cell in my body seemed to go on the alert whenever he was nearby.

"Friday night drinks. A proud tradition," Beck said.

Roddy leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table, his bulky shoulders screening me from view.

"You should try the new craft beer they're trialing," Roddy said. "It's a porter with a hint of coffee in it."

"Come on now, man, this is my down time," Beck said. "No office talk. Give me a break."

Roddy's shoulder vibrated with appreciative laughter.

"Join us," Audrey invited. "We can squish in. Drinks are on me and Zara."

Beck smiled and opened his mouth to answer, but Roddy chose that exact moment to sit back against the booth again, and, suddenly, I was in plain sight. Beck's gaze flicked to me, and even though his mouth was still curved into a smile, I knew he'd instantly changed his mind.

"Thanks, but I'm meeting my brother," he said, confirming my intuition.

"He can join us, too. Especially if he looks like you," Roddy said with a shameless grin.

Kieran elbowed him in the ribs. "Sitting right here, humpy dog."

"We've got a bunch of work stuff to go over. But thanks for the offer. Maybe next time." Beck was polite enough that his excuse sounded plausible, but I knew it was exactly that—an excuse.

If I hadn't been there, he'd have joined the Bean crew in a heartbeat.

Beck made a couple more jokes before heading to a table occupied by a lone guy who looked like a younger, leaner version of him.

Talk turned to the folk band that was playing at Speakeasy next month, but all I could think about was the moment when Beck had bailed on joining us after seeing me. Even though we would have been separated by several people, even though there would have been more than enough conversational cover for us to avoid having to directly engage with each other, his instinctive, gut-level reaction had been to escape my presence. Again.

I told myself it was a him-problem, not a me-problem, but that didn't stop my stomach from tying itself in knots as I sat there listening to my friends talk and laugh. I tried to ease it by downing a third glass of wine, but it only seemed to enlarge the problem in my mind.

Like I said, it's really hard being the stinky kid. Really hard.

The final straw was when Zara went to buy a fourth round of drinks and stopped by Beck's table to chat with him and his brother. I heard Beck's laugh ring out and saw the appreciation in his face as he looked up at Zara.

He was never going to look at me like that. He was never going to see me as a person in my own right and not an extension of my sister and whatever she'd put him through.

A hot pressure formed behind my eyes, and I knew I was in serious danger of crying in front of my work colleagues.

Wouldn't that be awesome?

I tried gulping down the last of my wine, but the hot feeling was still there. I gave Roddy's shoulder a push.

"Sorry, but I need the ladies' room," I told him, glad that my voice came out sounding normal.

Roddy and Kieran obligingly slid out of the booth, and I made a beeline for the bathrooms, blinking rapidly to prevent the rising tide of tears from falling.

"Don't be such a pussy," I muttered to myself as I pushed through the swing door into the ladies' room.

There was a woman checking her makeup at the sinks, so I ducked into a cubicle and shut the door. Then I leaned against the door and tilted my face toward the ceiling, willing the tears to subside.

What the hell was wrong with me? Usually, I am a master at sucking it up. In fact, if sucking it up was an Olympic event, I would be both the world-record holder and the gold-medal winner because my whole childhood had been a training exercise in the gentle art of acceptance and compromise. As a result, I have mad skills in the area of reconciling myself to unpleasant realities—mad, battle-hardened skills—but try as I might, I could not find a way to reconcile myself to the Beck situation.

It was shitty, pure and simple, and I couldn't seem to find a way to stop myself from caring.

It took a couple of minutes for the about-to-cry feeling to subside. I figured I might as well use the facilities, so I took care of business then washed my hands at the sink, studying my reflection critically to make sure I didn't look as though I'd been on the verge of losing it. Mostly I just looked tired. Also, I needed a haircut. At least I could do something about both of those things.

I'd already made the decision to call it a night as I exited the bathroom. I was rehearsing what I'd say when I got back to the table as I made my way down the corridor. Ahead of me, the door to the men's room opened and Beck stepped out. There was the slightest of hesitations as he registered me, then he gave me a wordless nod and hung back to let me pass, even though the corridor was easily wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

I walked past him, my neck and shoulders tense, all the embarrassment-anger-hurt-confusion I'd felt earlier crashing back over me again. I *burned* with all the emotions churning through me, probably not surprising since

I'd had three wines, not a lot of food, a grueling day, and no sleep. All those things, combined with weeks of being treated like a pariah, brought me to an abrupt halt, and I pivoted to face Beck.

He looked startled, pulling up sharply to avoid plowing into me.

"I don't know what happened between you and my sister," I said, "but I'm a separate person. You could look me in the eye occasionally, and, you know, treat me like a human being and not some kind of fungus you found growing in your shower. I'm actually a nice person and a good friend, if you were prepared to give me a chance."

My voice quavered at the end, and I knew I was going to shed all the tears I'd just sucked back in the bathroom if I didn't get out of there. I spun away from him and started walking, my gaze fixed on the front entrance. I dodged a couple who were heading for the bar, circled a table, excused my way through a group who'd just arrived, and then I was outside. All the bewilderment and anxiety of the last few weeks hit me like a freight train, and I burst into tears.

BECK

I stood outside the restrooms watching Haley Elliott rush for the door, paralyzed by the truth bomb she'd just dropped.

You could look me in the eye occasionally and, you know, treat me like a human being.

Her voice had gotten tight, and her chin had wobbled. She'd spun away, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind that she was on the verge of tears as she wove her way toward the exit.

I'd done that to her. I'd made her feel so bad, so demoralized, she'd been reduced to tears. All this time I'd thought I'd been doing a decent job trying to cover my unease around her, and apparently I'd failed. Dismally.

And now I was standing like a big dumb-dumb watching her run off into the night because of something I'd done.

"Jesus." Shaking my head at myself, I took off after her, ducking past tables, easing past people.

I had to wait for the group blocking the door to move away before I had a clear run at the exit, then I was outside in the warm twilight, the smell of the river sharp and fresh in the air. I scanned the parking lot, but all I could see were empty cars. Surely she couldn't have left already?

Then movement caught my peripheral vision, and I saw she'd gone down to the riverbank. She had her back to the Mill, and my heart sank as I watched her lift her hand to dash away tears.

I was *such* an asshole.

I strode toward her, unsure what to say or do to make things better. She must have heard me approach because her head whipped around. Something tightened in my chest at the sight of her wet cheeks.

“Haley...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t even know why I’m crying. I’m just tired. Or something. Either way, I shouldn’t have said any of that to you. Ignore me and go back to your brother.”

Making her declaration even less convincing, a couple of fat tears rolled down her cheek, and her chin dimpled as she worked hard to hold back a sob.

She looked so sad and vulnerable, I didn’t know what to say, so I simply obeyed my instincts and wrapped her in my arms. She was so short her face landed between my pecs, and I ran my hand down her back, feeling the emotion vibrating through her small body, trying to find the right words to fix the hurt I’d caused.

“Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to blow you off. You were right. I have some issues with your sister. But that’s not on you.”

“I know what she can be like,” Haley said, her voice muffled by my shirt. “And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for whatever happened between you.”

“You don’t need to apologize for your sister.”

“But I know her. I know what she can do. How she can be.”

She shifted against me, and suddenly I was aware of several things all at once—the warm, heavy weight of her breasts pressed against my chest; the way her hands were splayed across my back; the scent of her perfume; the softness of her body beneath my hands.

It hit me that we’d been hugging for a very long time now. Which begged the question: when did a hug become an embrace?

She went very still, and I knew she’d felt the shift, too. And yet neither of us moved, suspended in the moment of potential.

What the fuck is going on?

I forced myself to loosen my arms and step backward. She did the same, and I found myself staring down into her soulful brown eyes, her lashes still spiky from her tears. She looked surprised and confused. I guessed I probably looked the same. Because *WTF?*

I don’t know who moved first. Maybe she stood on her toes and lifted her face. Maybe I leaned down and reached for her.

The logistics didn’t matter. The only thing that did was the soft press of her mouth against mine, the smooth warmth of the nape of her neck beneath

my hand, the thud of pure recognition that ran through my body as she opened her mouth and I tasted her for the first time.

Because this woman felt *right* in my arms. She tasted like everything I had ever craved, and when I stroked her tongue with mine, she made a small, inarticulate needy sound that went straight to my cock. Her hands fisted in my shirt as I deepened the kiss, desperate for more. She made the needy sound again, and I abandoned the delicate smoothness of her nape to grab her ass and pull her closer.

It was my turn to make an animal sound then, because she was soft yet firm and fucking *perfect* in my hands, and all I could think about was touching more of her. Breasts, belly, thighs. All of it. I wanted her naked. I wanted to be inside her. I wanted to make her pant and scream my name with pleasure while I fucked her until we were both mindless and useless for anything else.

She loosened her grip on my shirt, and a full-body shudder rolled through me as she slid her hands under my shirt and onto my bare skin. Holy fuck, when had a woman's touch ever felt this good? She dug her fingers into my pecs before smoothing a hand down my belly and over my jeans, gripping me through the denim.

My thoughts became both fragmented and frenzied. My van was just steps away. It wasn't the Hilton, but at least we wouldn't get arrested for public indecency, a state we were approaching at warp speed.

Then a car started up and headlights washed over us, bright and relentless. The glare was the visual equivalent of being hit with a bucket of cold water, and we broke apart, both of us taking a few steps backward. The car drove away, and for a moment I was blind. Then I blinked a few times and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I could see how flushed and flustered Haley was. Her hair was disheveled, her mouth swollen and wet, and her chest rose and fell rapidly as though she'd just sprinted a mile. I was no better—my heart was pounding, and I was so hard it was a wonder my dick hadn't exploded off my body like an over-filled zeppelin.

My brain was foggy with lust, but I could still think well enough to understand that something crazy and completely unexpected had just happened between us.

"I have to go," she said.

I nodded. "Me, too."

Then she turned on her heel and walked rapidly toward the Mill.

HALEY

My heart thrummed as I re-entered the bar. My friends must have thought I'd been abducted by aliens, I'd been gone so long, yet I still took the time to make a pitstop in the bathroom before returning to our table. As I suspected, I looked like I'd just had the single most intense sexual encounter of my life, and I fanned my flushed face with my hand before finger-combing my hair back into place. My lipstick was smeared, and I cleaned it up with a tissue before reapplying it neatly.

The woman in the mirror still looked like she'd been having a good time, but at least her hair was neat. But what else could I do? The Bean crew were going to send out a search party if I didn't get back soon.

I very carefully didn't allow my brain to review what had just happened between me and Beck as I headed back into the fray, weaving my way through the crowded bar.

It had been too big, too wild, too fucking freaky.

I mean, the man could barely look at me, and I'd been seconds away from tearing his jeans off in a parking lot. And he'd been just as out of control.

It was nuts, and I didn't know what to do with it, so I decided to ignore it until I had the luxury of time and privacy to fully appreciate the craziness of the last fifteen minutes of my life.

Our booth had gained another occupant during my absence. Griff Shipley was talking animatedly with his cousin, Kieran, the two of them studying something on Kieran's phone. Audrey and Zara both looked relieved to see me and waved me into their side of the booth.

“There you are. Come sit with us, so we can talk about something other than packaging and branding,” Audrey encouraged.

“Actually, I think I’m going to bail,” I said. “I’m pretty beat, and my bed is calling to me.”

Zara pouted. “But we were having fun.”

“Sorry. I’m going to do a face-plant into a bowl of pretzels if I don’t go soon.”

“All right, gorgeous girl,” Audrey said. “We’ll see you next week. Thank you again for covering for me this week.”

“I was happy to help out. Thanks for the drinks.”

They both blew air kisses at me, and I waved goodbye to the men before making my escape.

The night air was a relief after the warmth and noise of the bar, and I headed out of the lot and up the hill, trying to get my head around the fact that Daniel Beck had just kissed me as though his life depended on it.

Not just kissed me—he’d grabbed my ass in both hands and held me close and shuddered when I touched him. The five minutes we’d spent lip-locked had been the very definition of intense.

My brain was so scrambled, it wasn’t until I was unlocking my front door that I remembered the things he’d said to me before the kiss. He’d apologized for freezing me out, and admitted he had issues with Jess. Then he’d told me I didn’t need to apologize for my sister.

Then he’d kissed me. Or I’d kissed him. We’d kissed each other, I guess.

And it had been so good. It had been...*everything*.

I tossed my bag into the corner of my bedroom and flopped back onto my mattress to stare at the ceiling. I still felt hot all over from being in Beck’s arms. In one particular place, I was both hot *and* wet.

I couldn’t help wondering what might have happened if that car hadn’t come along and brought us to our senses. I flexed my hand, remembering the hardness of Beck’s erection beneath my greedy fingers. He’d wanted me as much as I’d wanted him. It had been mutual lust, mutual craziness.

But it was over. The car had come along, and I had retreated in a panic, overwhelmed and confused by what had just happened. And now I was lying on my bed enjoying the empty ache of unfulfilled desire.

I wondered where Beck was, and if he was feeling as horny and frustrated and confused as me. I hoped so, because it would be deeply

unfair if I was the only one freaking out like this.

I spent another twenty minutes parsing every moment of our encounter, examining it from all angles, but no amazing insights came to me. It was inexplicable. Unexplainable.

Undeniable.

My rumbling stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten real food since lunch time and I went to rummage in the fridge for something quick and easy. I wound up making a grilled cheese, eating it standing at the kitchen sink. Then I went to bed, because somewhere between the first bite of my sandwich and the second, my adrenaline high deserted me, and suddenly I was more tired than I could remember being in a long time.

I stopped by the bathroom to brush my teeth and kicked my clothes off when I reached the bedroom. Then I crawled beneath the covers and let my head sink into my soft, lavender-scented pillow.

The last thought I had before I fell asleep was, *Please let it still be real in the morning.*

BECK

I drove home with my head full of white noise after ditching my brother at the bar. Sam barely glanced at me when I told him I was heading home, too busy talking to a leggy redhead to care that I was abandoning him. Which was just fine with me, because I was too busy freaking out to be capable of extended rational conversation.

I parked the van and let myself into my apartment, waiting for the familiar click-click of Larry's feet as she roused herself from wherever she was sleeping to come greet me. When she didn't appear, the bottom dropped out of my stomach, even though I knew she was probably just too comfortable drooling on my pillow to get up.

Nothing was wrong. She was *fine*.

"Larry girl? You all good?" I called out, just to prove it to myself.

I heard the thud of her leaping off my bed, and she padded into view, her eyes sleepy but curious. I felt like an idiot for the small moment of panic—of course she was fine, what could possibly happen to her in my apartment—but it was damned hard to reprogram my brain when it had learned lessons the hard way.

Larry moved closer, resting her head against my thigh, and I scratched behind her silky ears. I looked down into her trusting brown eyes and felt the same bittersweet mix of gratitude and guilt that had haunted me ever since I broke up with Jess.

It just made tonight's near-miss with Haley even more inexplicable.

What had I been thinking, getting up close and personal with Jess Elliot's little sister?

I shouldn't have given in to the urge to hug her. She'd looked so forlorn, so pretty and sad, and I'd felt so guilty—but I shouldn't have let instinct override hard-won caution, because that was where the trouble had started.

Then, when she'd shifted closer to me and things had heated up, I'd had another chance to keep from diving off a cliff. I should have let her go immediately.

But I hadn't. I'd lingered in the moment, relishing the feel of her in my arms, savoring the rightness of it.

Jesus Christ. The rightness of it? Are you on crack right now?

In my bedroom, I sat on the end of the bed to pull my boots off. Then I stripped my jeans and reached for my running shorts. Two minutes later, Larry and I slipped out into the backyard. It was too dark to run through the fields, so we circled the building and jogged down the driveway to the main road. Then I lengthened my stride and waited for the repetitive thump of my feet on the road to clear my mind.

It wasn't long before we hit downtown Montpelier. Larry loped alongside me, her black coat gleaming in the streetlights, then fading in the occasional shadows of trees and buildings.

The whirling dervish of my thoughts settled as I ran, all the unimportant stuff sloughing off until I was left with nothing but my personal truth.

Which was this: I had been drawn to Haley Elliott from the moment she reappeared in my life.

The realization felt like a bolt from the blue, but it also felt inevitable, because she'd been a nagging, undeniable presence in my thoughts from the moment she startled the crap out of me nearly a month ago.

The image of her from that afternoon was very clear in my mind, from the clothes she was wearing to the way her mouth had curved into a tentative smile as she apologized for startling me. In that moment, I'd noted her pretty brown eyes and heart-shaped face and felt an urge to step closer.

I hadn't known who she was then—or, more accurately, whose sister she was—but I'd wanted to be closer to her.

That had been my first, primal instinct, and apparently the feeling hadn't gone away.

Maybe it had even gotten more intense, based on the way I'd acted tonight, because despite the fact that I had every reason in the world to want as little to do with Haley as possible, I'd been unable to control myself when we were standing in the darkness just a few feet apart.

And once she was actually in my arms, it had been game over.

It was a pretty unsettling realization, and it made me rethink every single one of our interactions. Was it possible that all those times I'd thought I was rejecting all things related to Jess Elliot I was actually subconsciously freaking out over the fact that I found her little sister scorchingly hot?

I stopped in the middle of the Main Street bridge, staggered by the very real possibility that the answer to that question might be yes.

Holy. Shitballs.

Larry looked up at me with an inquisitive expression, sensing my inner turmoil. My chest was heaving, and sweat trickled down my spine as I lay a hand on her back, searching once again for my equilibrium.

I wasn't Einstein, but I considered myself reasonably smart and savvy, and while once upon a time I might not have had the life experience to know when to protect myself, I now considered myself an expert.

So why did I have a thing for Haley Elliott, of all people? It just didn't make sense, not when her sister had been responsible for the most emotionally fraught, fucked-up year of my life. I didn't want anything to do with her, ever again.

And yet here I was, hot for her sister.

I pushed my hair off my forehead, then used the hem of my T-shirt to wipe the sweat off my face. Then I turned toward home and started jogging, slower now that we were headed back.

By the time I got home, my thighs were burning, and Larry was giving me reproachful looks, a sure sign I'd pushed her too far.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I told her as we made our way up the driveway.

She went straight to her water bowl when we entered the apartment, slurping up every drop before fixing me with an intent gaze that demanded a refill. I obliged, then stripped off my clothes and stepped into the shower.

I didn't know what to do about my unwanted attraction to Haley Elliot, but at least I had a little more insight into what had happened between us tonight. For my part, anyway. What had been going on in her head I had no idea—except that she'd been as into it as I'd been.

That I was sure about. The little sound she'd made when I grabbed her ass and hauled her closer... Yeah, she'd been into it.

I could feel myself getting hard again, and I made a disgusted sound. Seriously? My dick was on that much of a hair trigger?

I gave my cock a disparaging look, but it was standing at full attention now, roused by the mere thought of Haley. I eyed the cold-water setting on the faucet, but instead of reaching for it I wrapped my hand around my shaft. I felt weak as fuck for doing it, but that didn't stop me from closing my eyes and letting my head fall back against the shower wall as I relived those heated minutes outside the Gin Mill.

The softness of her skin. The taste of her... God, the taste of her. The curve of her backside. The press of her breasts against my chest. The way she'd touched me. The noises she'd made.

I came hard, my body wracked with pleasure, my head full of Haley.

Then I washed the evidence away and turned the water off. I stepped out of the shower feeling like a guilty teenager.

Stupid to have indulged myself like that.

It wasn't going to happen again.

HALEY

I spent nearly an hour getting ready for work Monday morning, fussing with my hair, changing my outfit no less than three times. All because I knew I was going to see Beck again.

I'd told myself all weekend that Friday night had meant nothing. When that hadn't worked, I'd reminded myself that he'd confessed he had issues with my sister. And when I'd reached for a sexy red lipstick, I'd very deliberately pictured the stunned look on his face when we'd broken our epic kiss.

Not a stunned happy look.

And yet I still painted my mouth Vixen Red.

What can I say? It had been a great kiss. The hottest few minutes of my life—and we'd both been fully clothed.

Roddy did a double take when I arrived at the Bean, then let out a low whistle.

“Hello, sailor. Someone’s looking smokin’ today,” he said. “What’s his name, and when can I meet him?”

I laughed a little too loudly. Was it that obvious I'd dressed to impress?

“I’ve got a thing I need to go to after work,” I fibbed.

“Sure you do. When you’re ready to spill, I’ll be boiling bagels in the kitchen,” Roddy said with a cheeky wink.

I rolled my eyes and got my opening routine underway. I was ready to go early, so when the first car pulled into the lot five minutes ahead of opening, I unlocked the door and waved the customer inside rather than make her wait in her car. The day took off from there, but the closer it got to midday, the more nervous I became. Beck usually came in just before the

lunchtime rush, or just after it, and I spent every second between customers looking out for his van.

I spotted a flash of white driving by just as the lunch rush was dying down and automatically checked my reflection in the coffee machine's shiny stainless-steel side. My features were blurry, but my red lipstick stood out so boldly it reminded me of those baboons whose butts swell and turn red when they're in heat.

Since that wasn't the look I was going for, I reached for a napkin and wiped my lipstick off, hoping I hadn't simply smeared it all over the place. Then I went to clear the tables on the far side of the dining room, so I wouldn't look as though I was standing around waiting for Beck when he came through the staff entry. By the time I returned, I could hear Beck's voice behind me in the kitchen as he chatted with Roddy.

Hand on my heart, a little shiver ran down my spine as his deep voice registered in my brain. The good kind of shiver, not the bad kind.

All of a sudden, I was back in the parking lot, his mouth on mine, his hands gripping my ass. Heat rushed north and south all at once, a wave of remembered lust that made my heart skip a beat.

Take a chill pill, *desperado*.

But it was too late. My cheeks and underwear were both on fire, and Beck and I weren't even standing in the same room. In other words, I had it *bad*.

Feeling more than a little flustered, I ducked out the door and did a tour of the tables on the patio, collecting two more coffee orders and clearing plates galore. I was turning to go back inside when Beck appeared around the side of the building pushing an empty hand-truck. His chin came up minutely when he saw me, and maybe I imagined it, but it seemed like there was a hitch in his gait. Then he lifted his hand and waved. I lifted mine and waved back, then I sped toward the entrance in the vain hope that he wouldn't think my flushed face was all about him. My heart was beating a million miles an hour by the time I was safely inside.

Was I a smooth operator, or what? Clearly the man didn't stand a chance.

Jess would know how to wrap him around her finger.

The insidious little thought burrowed its way into my mind like a worm into an apple. I really didn't want to remember that Jess and Beck had once been together. And I really, really didn't want to compare myself to her,

because that opened the door to wondering if *Beck* had ever compared me to her, and that was not a door I wanted to walk through.

A large group arrived, saving me from my torturous thoughts, and I worked my butt off for the next hour until Audrey arrived for her shift.

“How’s your tummy?” I asked after I’d finished updating her on the morning’s business.

“So much better. I swear, kids are walking Petri dishes. I know picking up bugs is supposed to challenge their immune systems and all that, but it would be nice if we could leave mine out of the discussion.”

“Have you considered hazmat suits?” I suggested.

“That’s a very helpful, practical solution, Haley,” Audrey said. Then she flicked me playfully on the leg with a dishtowel. “Go home and make beautiful things, you dufus.”

I dutifully gathered my things and headed for home, but I knew already that I was going to be useless for work this afternoon. My head was too full of Beck.

The way he’d looked with the sun glinting in his dark-blond hair. The shadow of stubble on his handsome jaw. The breadth of his shoulders. The size of his hands.

I wanted those hands on my skin. On my breasts. In my pants.

God, I wanted those hands in my pants.

You know that probably isn’t going to happen, don’t you?

The voice in my head was right. Friday night had probably been just an accident of alcohol and hormones.

Still, that wasn’t going to stop me from buying fresh batteries on the way home.

I was only human, after all, and all this pent-up energy had to go somewhere.

BECK

Not since I was fourteen years old had I spent so much time with my hand wrapped around my cock thinking about a girl. It was seriously starting to get embarrassing, but in the week following our clinch outside the Gin Mill I couldn't seem to stop thinking about Haley.

She was in my dreams every night, a sighing, moaning siren with soft skin and big doe eyes and a wet, hot mouth. Every morning I woke with a painfully hard erection, and every morning I gave in to the urge for release, images of Haley dancing behind my closed eyes.

Afterward, I would remind myself why it was a stupid indulgence. It was much easier to remember why she was off limits when I wasn't hard for her. She might have a luscious mouth and an even more luscious body, but she was still Jess Elliott's sister. That was the dealbreaker to end all dealbreakers, a complete and utter, *Hell No*.

Problem was, every time I saw her at the Bean I was too busy noticing how good she looked to remember why I shouldn't be noticing how good she looked. On Monday she'd been wearing skinny jeans that made her ass look so fine my fingers had twitched, remembering how beautifully she'd filled my hands. She'd looked flustered at the sight of me, which was pretty much how I'd felt about seeing her, too.

On Thursday she'd worn a knee-length jean skirt and a tight tank top, and the whole time I'd been in the Bean, I'd had to fight not to stare at her shapely calves and ankles.

That was how bad I had it for her.

I kept waiting for the memory of our kiss to fade, but I was still dreaming about her at the beginning of the following week.

Waking from yet another R-rated wish-fulfillment session on Monday morning, I knew that something had to give. Instead of closing my eyes and taking myself in hand, I did what I probably should have done right from the start: I marched into the bathroom and subjected myself to a brutally cold shower, the chilly deluge shrinking my junk to snack size in no time. I was covered in gooseflesh by the time I stepped out, but my mind was clear.

So far, so good.

We were due for a run to the Bean that morning, and even though it made me feel like I was giving in, I decided it was time to play it smart.

“Hey, you mind doing the deliveries this morning?” I asked my brother as we fired up the roasters.

There was a small pause before he responded.

“Sure, not a problem. I can take Larry if you want, so she doesn’t miss out on her road time.”

“Thanks, man.”

My brother shrugged off my thanks with the lift of a shoulder, and I got to work shifting bags of beans and filling up the roasters. The floor was covered with burlap fibers by the time I was done, so I grabbed the broom and tidied up. Sam let me know he was heading out twenty minutes later. My dog gave me a mournful look to let me know it pained her to the core that she was heading out on an adventure without me. Then she bounded up into the van and scrambled to stick her nose out the window the moment Sam started the engine, her tail wagging eagerly.

I waved them off, then went back to work.

I fielded a couple of enquiries from businesses Sam had left sample packs with, then started reconciling the accounts, my most hated chore.

I heard the familiar note of the van’s engine just after lunch, and minutes later Sam joined me in the office.

“You eaten yet?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said, eyeing the paper bag he was carrying with interest.

He pulled out a bagel sandwich and passed the bag to me.

“You were going to eat both of these if I’d had lunch already, weren’t you?” I guessed.

“In a heartbeat.”

I recognized the bagels as Roddy’s handiwork and took a big mouthful of what turned out to be a peppery, lemony chicken salad.

“Wow. That’s good,” I said.

“Really regretting sharing now,” Sam said around a mouthful, and I could tell he was only half joking.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, testament to how good our bagels were. When I was done, I dusted sesame seeds off my hands and eyed the coffee machine, wondering if it would be wrong to have a third cup for the day.

“So which one is Jess Elliott’s sister? The cute little one with the awesome ass or the sassy tall one with the long hair?”

I frowned. “The tall one is Zara. One of the co-owners.”

“So the cute one is the sister. Interesting.”

My brother had a speculative look on his face that I didn’t much like.

“What’s interesting?”

“She’s pretty cute,” he said.

“You already said that.” Twice.

He shrugged. “As a man, I find her cuteness interesting.”

“Believe me, you don’t want to mess with that family.”

“Unwad your panties. I’m not going to marry her.”

The implication that he’d like to do other, non-married things with her was not lost on me.

“What happened to the redhead?”

My brother frowned, obviously trying to work out which redhead I was referring to.

“The Gin Mill. Last Friday,” I said, helpfully narrowing the field of contenders for him.

“Oh, yeah. That redhead.” He got a stupid smile on his face that told me all I needed to know about how that night had ended.

“Steer clear of Haley. She’s more trouble than she’s worth.” Even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew they were motivated more by jealousy than concern for my brother’s happiness.

Which was an awesome development. So much for me being smart from now on.

“Sometimes a little trouble is worth it,” Sam said with a cocky smile.

I turned away from him and grabbed the pages I’d printed earlier.

“We landed a new customer. That diner in Randolph you spoke to last week.”

“Yeah? Hey, that’s cool,” Sam said. “We’re having a pretty good month between these guys and landing the Busy Bean.”

I nodded, pleased to have successfully diverted him from talking about Haley.

We discussed the new customer for a few minutes, then Sam headed off to check on our packaging stock. He got halfway out the door before he paused and looked back over his shoulder.

“Happy to do the delivery runs on Mondays and Thursdays from now on,” he said, his tone carefully casual.

“I’m good. Just had a few things I wanted to sort out in the office today,” I replied, my tone even more casual than his.

He hovered for a beat, and I knew he was trying to come up with a legitimate business reason to insist on taking over the delivery runs. I started typing out an email, and after a few seconds he continued on his way.

I deleted the paragraph of hogwash I’d just written and frowned at the computer screen, disturbed by how much I’d bristled at my brother’s interest in Haley. I’d just gotten pretty possessive over a woman I was determined to keep at arm’s length.

“You are so fucked,” I whispered to myself.

Problem was, I didn’t know what to do about it.

HALEY

It's not him. Stop being so pathetic.

I tore my gaze from the tall, blond man sorting through the canvases at the art supply store in Montpelier and kept making my way up the aisle toward the leather paints.

Of course it wasn't Beck. For starters, Beck was much more muscular, his shoulders wider, his ass a million times more delicious. About the only thing Canvas Guy and Beck had in common was their hair color and the fact they were men, but apparently that was more than enough for my over-active, Beck-starved imagination.

Beck-starved because he hadn't been into the Bean since last Thursday, which meant a whole week had passed since I'd laid eyes on him. Seven whole days in which my imagination had turned every tall, blond man I saw into a possible Beck, because that was what my desperate, horny little self wanted to see.

I kind of hated myself for being sexually obsessed with him when he was avoiding me, sending his brother to do the Bean delivery on Monday so he didn't have to run the risk of being near me. The whole situation had me so confused, because I knew I hadn't imagined the intensity of our kiss. I hadn't imagined the way he held me, how hard he'd been.

But now he was doing his damndest to not be in the same room with me again. It was beyond baffling, and more than a little wearing on my self-esteem.

I was so damned sick of thinking about it, I made a disgusted noise in the back of my throat, earning me a side glance from the older woman shopping the paintbrushes nearby. I gave her a reassuring smile and pulled

out my shopping list, determined to stay on task. I'd just added three bottles of Bluestone leather paint to my basket when a voice sounded behind me.

"Haley Elliot. I haven't seen you in ages."

I turned to find an attractive blonde woman bearing down on me, her high-heeled sandals click-clacking on the concrete floor. I recognized her as one of my sister's high school entourage but couldn't for the life of me remember her name. Caitlin? Catherine? Something with a C, I was pretty sure.

Whatever her name was, she was impeccably, elegantly dressed, her makeup flawless, not a hair out of place.

"Hi. How are you?" I asked, acutely conscious of the fact that I'd left the house to make my supply run wearing a paint-splattered T-shirt, a pair of old jeans cut-off at the knees, and my grungiest pair of Chuck Taylors.

"I'm so good. Crazy busy with my two girls, but loving every minute of it."

"Oh, you've got kids now?" I asked dutifully.

"Cara and Hannah. Four and two." She flicked her long hair over her shoulder, her smile wide and bright, and suddenly my memory kicked into gear.

Her name was Charlotte, and she'd been on the cheerleading squad with my sister.

"What are you up to these days?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm working at the Busy Bean in Colebury," I said.

"Oh, I'll have to pop in and see you. I love that place. This is such a coincidence—I was just having a group chat with some of the other girls from school and Jess last week," Charlotte said. "Such exciting news about her *Vogue* cover, don't you think? I'm going to buy ten copies if she lands it."

I frowned, confused, and Charlotte clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Damn it, I am such a big mouth. I think that was supposed to be a secret." Her laugh was high and nervous. "Please don't tell her I blabbed, she'll be so mad with me."

There was a strained look around her eyes, and I knew she was genuinely worried about how my sister might react if she learned Charlotte had betrayed a confidence. I understood why—Jess could be ruthless when she felt let down by anyone.

"My lips are sealed, don't worry," I said.

I was pretty sure Jess would have told us if she'd landed a *Vogue* cover, but she sometimes had a very loose relationship with the truth. While there was a possibility she was withholding information from my parents for reasons of her own, it was also possible she was embellishing her career to impress her old high school friends. My money was on option B, but, honestly, there might even be an option C in play that I didn't have a clue about. You never could tell with Jess.

"Thank you," Charlotte said. "I'd better keep moving. I promised the girls I'd grab some glitter paint for them for a school project. If I can ever find it."

"Aisle five," I said, because this place was like my church.

"Hey, thank you. Great to see you, Haley." Charlotte gave me a bright smile before click-clacking down the aisle, her sundress flowing around her slim body.

I went back to my shopping list, but the conversation with Charlotte kept pulling my focus. If Jess really was up for a *Vogue* cover, it could slingshot her career into the big time. All her dreams of becoming a top-tier model might be on the verge of coming true. Which also meant that if the cover didn't happen, she would be fragile and prone to falling apart. A hand grenade with the pin pulled out.

Just thinking about it made me nervous and worried for her. For my parents, too. They always bore the brunt when Jess imploded.

I reached into my bag for my phone so I could call my mother and give her a heads up, only to find my fingers scrabbling over pocket lint and loose coins. I peered into my bag, checking all the pockets, but my phone was nowhere to be found. I frowned, trying to remember when I'd last used it, hoping against hope that I hadn't lost it somewhere. Then I groaned as it came back to me—my battery had been running low, so I'd borrowed Roddy's charger and plugged my phone into the outlet in the Bean's storeroom.

At least it was safe. That was something, because I really didn't want to have to go to the trouble of replacing a phone when I was pumping every spare cent into my fledgling business.

I threw the last colors on my list into my shopping basket and headed for the cashier. Two minutes later, I was in my car, headed back to Colebury. I had a new commission to dive into, but that wasn't going to stop me from dropping by the Bean to find my forgotten phone. I wasn't as

obsessed with it the way some of my friends were, but the idea of waiting until tomorrow to get it made me feel twitchy.

It was nearly three when I parked under a shady tree in the far corner of the Bean's parking lot. I left my bag on the front seat and just grabbed my keys—this was going to be an in-and-out job, after all. The patio was well-populated as I made my way to the front door, meaning they'd had a good afternoon. I walked through the door and, sure enough, the place was still jumping. Stress flattened Zara's mouth when she glanced up from making coffees and spotted me.

"Haley. We knew you'd be back—Roddy's got your phone." She flashed me a quick smile before focusing on the machine again.

I glanced at the people standing in line and rounded the counter, bumping her out of the way with my hip.

"You handle the orders, I've got this," I said, scanning the tickets on the counter.

"No, Hales, you finished hours ago," Zara protested.

"I'm giving you ten minutes to get on top of things. You can pay me back in baked goods," I said, already reaching for the soymilk.

I could tell Zara wanted to object, but there was no arguing with the growing line, and she spun away and got to work whittling it down.

Meanwhile, I cranked out the coffees one after the other, working at my efficient best until both Zara and I could breathe again.

"Man, what an afternoon. Why are we so busy all of a sudden?" Zara took a moment to tighten the elastic holding her ponytail at the base of her neck.

"Great food, great coffee, great location. Build it and they will come. Plus, it's an awesome day out there. Who doesn't want to sit on the patio at their favorite coffeeshop and guzzle coffee and cake on a day like today?"

"When you put it like that..." Zara reached out and plucked the milk jug from my hand. "Go and be free, little bird. Fly high."

She waved her hands at me as though she was shooing a bird into flight.

"Not sure that going home to cut out shoe leather is the equivalent of flying, but okay," I said.

I ducked into the kitchen to grab my phone and endured Roddy's ribbing as he pretended to have cracked the code and scrolled through all my private pics.

“The way I know you absolutely didn’t get into my phone is precisely because you think I have naughty pics stored there. These curves are too 3D for 2D, baby,” I said, snapping a Z in the air.

Then I turned to go and almost walked into Beck.

Startled, I laughed nervously. Beck looked startled to see me, too, maybe even alarmed, and his biceps bulged briefly as he tightened his grip on the box of coffee he was carrying.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No, that was on me,” Beck said. He slid the box onto a nearby counter. “Sorry for the mix-up earlier,” he told Roddy.

“I told you, tomorrow would have been fine,” Roddy said.

Beck lifted a big shoulder. “Incomplete orders bug me.”

I shifted my weight, willing him to step aside so I could exit the kitchen. Beck’s eyebrows shot up comically as he registered he was blocking the doorway.

“Sorry,” he said, shuffling to one side.

Maybe it was my imagination, but he seemed off balance. Maybe even a little flustered, which was not a word I would normally associate with Beck.

“I’ll see you guys later.” I lifted a hand in farewell.

Then I eased past him, close enough to feel the heat radiating off his powerful body and catch a whiff of his clean, sunshine-y deodorant.

All the dirty fantasies I’d been having for the past week were suddenly filling my head with flashes of well-honed body parts. Heat rose up my chest and I raced past Zara, flinging a goodbye over my shoulder, hoping to make it outside before my face became fully incandescent with embarrassment.

“See you tomorrow,” Zara called as I ducked out the staff entrance and into the warm afternoon sunlight.

“Oh my God, you are out of control, girl,” I whispered under my breath, fanning my T-shirt to try to disperse some of the Beck-generated heat from the surface of my skin.

“Sorry?”

I spun around to find Beck standing there. He must have followed me out the door, and I hadn’t even noticed. That’s how desperate I’d been to escape.

“I was just... It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head.

His gaze dropped to where I was still fanning the neckline of my T-shirt before continuing down my body, taking in my tattered, paint splattered cutoffs and scruffy old sneakers.

I was never leaving the house looking less than perfect again.

“How are you?” I said, because one of us had to say something to break the too-long silence that had opened up between us.

“Kind of fucked up.”

I blinked in shock at the rawness of his response. “Oh. What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” he said, and I could tell by the surprised look on his face that he hadn’t planned to admit as much to me.

“Oh,” I said again, because my brain was too busy freaking out to come up with anything better.

Beck was staring at me, hands loose by his sides as he waited for more, tension radiating off his big frame. Then his fingers curled ever so slightly and I knew—don’t ask me how—that he was thinking about the way he’d grabbed my ass and hauled me up against him the other night. Heat flooded my body, and I could feel myself turn liquid where I needed him the most.

He hadn’t asked out loud, but we both knew there was a question hanging in the air.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “My place is just up the road,” I said, pointing blindly up the hill.

I’d never propositioned a man so boldly in my life before, but I wanted to be with Beck so badly, my whole body throbbed with the need to be close to him. To have him inside me, over me, pressing me into the bed.

His eyes flared with hunger, his gaze flicking briefly over my shoulder in the direction I’d indicated, as though he was trying to gauge exactly how far away my place was and therefore how long he had to keep a grip on his need for me.

“I’ll follow you,” he said.

“Okay.”

There was nothing more to say, so I turned away from him, marveling that my legs were still holding me up when they felt like jelly, and all I could think about was the hot, wet place between them where I was aching for Beck.

The parking lot seemed a mile wide as I walked to my car, the crunch-crunch of gravel beneath my feet unnaturally loud as I grappled with the craziness of what had just happened between us.

Beck was about to follow me home. He couldn't stop thinking about me.

We were going to fuck.

HALEY

What had just happened—what I’d just done—was so huge I couldn’t get my head around it, so I concentrated on the mechanics of driving instead: open door, get behind wheel, start engine, check mirrors, put car in reverse...

When I pulled out of my parking spot and drove toward the exit, Beck’s van followed suit, pulling in behind me. When I stopped to make sure it was safe to turn out of the lot I kept my eyes on the road, too scared to check the rearview mirror in case Beck was having second or third thoughts.

Because I wanted this so badly. More than I’d ever wanted anything or anyone. This was my most private fantasy come to life—Beck, wanting me. Beck, in my bed.

Please don’t be a dream. Please don’t be a dream. Please don’t be a dream.

I repeated the desperate mantra over and over in my head as I led our two-car convoy up the hill into town. When I signaled a right turn, Beck signaled a right turn, and together we threaded our way around the town green until we reached my street. By the time we stopped in front of my house my heart was beating so hard and fast I could feel it in my throat.

I got out of the car, automatically grabbing the bag with my art supplies, as if this was just any old day and I was just returning from any old errand. When Beck joined me, I cleared my throat nervously.

“This is me,” I said, jerking my head toward the house.

He nodded, and I led the way up the path toward my front door. The lock could be stubborn sometimes, but today it turned smoothly beneath my

hand and I pushed the door wide, conscious of Beck following me up the hallway, his footsteps heavy behind me.

Please don't be a dream. Please don't be a dream. Please don't be a dream.

We passed my half-closed bedroom door, then entered the small living space. I tossed the bag containing my art supplies onto the couch.

Confession time: earlier, when I said I'd never propositioned a man so boldly before? I'd never propositioned a man full stop, boldly or otherwise. So this was all new territory for me and I wasn't sure about the etiquette. Should I have shoved him through the doorway into my bedroom the moment we entered the house and torn his clothes off, or was it considered bad form to jump on your prospective lover without offering him refreshments first?

I had no idea.

"Would you like a drink? Something to eat?" I asked, opting for politeness over untrammelled lust.

My mother would be so proud.

"Sure. If you're hungry," Beck said.

I was not hungry—at least, not for food—but I was totally out of my depth now that I had Beck where I wanted him. Or at least close to where I wanted him, since my bedroom was about ten steps in the opposite direction.

He followed me into the kitchen, and I collected two glasses from the open shelf above the sink. I poured two glasses of water, proud of the steadiness in my hands, when my whole body felt as though it was vibrating with anticipation.

Daniel Beck was in my house. DANIEL BECK.

I handed him a glass and took a big gulp of water from my own, not quite meeting his eye.

"I think I've got some leftover chicken salad..." I said, turning toward the fridge.

Cold air rushed out at me as I stared in at all the usual culprits—cheese, butter, milk, condiments.

What are you doing? Daniel Beck has followed you home to have sex with you, and you're offering him chicken salad?

The voice in my head was right. This was nuts. I was wasting valuable time. And, importantly, giving Beck the chance to regret accepting my

impulsive invitation.

I needed to find the bold, brazen vixen from ten minutes ago. I needed to let her take the wheel.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the fridge door shut and turned to face Beck.

“Actually, I’m not very hungry,” I said.

“Me, either,” Beck said.

He set his water glass down on the counter.

“Do you want to—” My eyes widened as he took my glass from my hand and set it down, too.

“Yeah, I do.” He smiled, the corners of his green eyes crinkling attractively, and I came up onto tip-toes because I knew he was going to kiss me.

He did, his head lowering toward mine, his arms coming around me, and it was *everything*.

His lips were soft as they moved over mine, and when his tongue came into my mouth I lost the power to form complex thoughts because *this man knew how to kiss*. Boy, did he know. His arms tightened, hauling me closer, and I made an approving sound, reveling in the feel of his big body against mine.

He was so hot. And he felt so good.

I felt the brush of his hand against my hip as he found the hem of my T-shirt, then the touch of his warm fingers against my ribcage. His hand flattened against my skin, smoothing upwards, and I felt as though every nerve-ending in my body was holding its breath. Then his hand was cupping my breast, testing the weight of me before his thumb swept across the satin of my bra to find my nipple.

I moaned as electric sensation shot through my body, arching my back to demand more. Beck made a strangled sound of his own, lifting his head to break our kiss.

“Bedroom?” he asked, his voice low and desperate, two slashes of color high on his cheekbones.

“Front room.”

He nodded, then slid his hands onto my ass and issued a curt instruction. “Up.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice, wrapping my legs around his hips as he boosted me up. The moment my face was on the same level as his, he

kissed me again, and for long seconds we got lost in the wonder of it, our tongues caressing as we deepened our connection. I wriggled closer and Beck got back on track, heading for the front of the house with long strides. He nudged my bedroom door open with his toe then the two of us were tumbling onto my bed, his heavy weight pinning me to the mattress.

It was so close to what I'd dreamed about for so many nights, I went a little crazy, pawing at him beneath his T-shirt, even as I used my legs to pull him closer. He must have sensed my inner turmoil because he pulled back a little so he could look into my face.

"We can go fast if you like. But I prefer it slow."

I swear I almost came on the spot. "Okay," I breathed.

He smiled, lifting a hand to smooth my hair back from my forehead. Up close his eyes were a dazzling kaleidoscope of blues and greens. "How would you feel about me taking off your T-shirt?" he asked.

"I would be strongly pro that idea."

He rolled to the side to free my body, his hand finding the hem of my top and tugging it upwards. I arched my back, then lifted my shoulders so he could pull it over my head. His gaze swept over my breasts and I thanked the universe I'd chosen one of my prettier bras this morning, a mixture of black satin and lace.

Beck met my eyes again, his expression a little awestruck.

"Wow," he said. "Very nice."

"Thank you. I grew them myself."

He laughed, the sound low and husky and knowing. Then he leaned close and pressed a kiss to the inside slope of my breast. I went very still as he opened his mouth and drew a little circle against my flesh with his tongue.

Everything he did, everywhere he touched, felt so good. Almost too good. Was it possible to be too turned on? I was afraid I was about to find out.

Beck nuzzled closer, using his nose to push inside my bra cup. I held my breath as he licked and kissed his way toward my nipple. Then he sucked me into his mouth and I was powerless to stop myself gasping with delight.

"Oh, God. Yes. Please."

I could feel him smiling against my skin, my nipple still trapped in the wet heat of his mouth. He trilled his tongue against me and I almost

levitated off the bed, hands clawing at his shoulders.

Beck lifted his head to look down at me again. “Sweetheart, you’re killing me here.”

“I’m the one who’s dying,” I panted.

“Pace yourself, we’ve got a long way to go yet.”

He lowered his head again, and for the next ten minutes I nearly lost my mind as he kissed around and through and under my bra before finally—finally!—easing the straps down my shoulders and reaching behind me to release the hooks.

He paused to take in my pale breasts and tight, pink nipples as my bra fell away. “So fucking pretty.”

I wove my fingers into his hair, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer as he continued to torture me with his mouth. By the time he slid a hand down my belly and dipped inside the waistband of my cutoffs, I was a quivering, panting mess. Desperate for his touch, I lifted my hips, urging him to get to the good stuff. He murmured his appreciation as he discovered how wet I was, his strong fingers stroking along the seam of my sex.

“You feel so good,” he said in between kisses.

When his questing fingers found my clitoris, all it took was a couple of strokes to make me come in a long, rolling wave that had me clutching at him and gasping his name and generally losing it.

When I came back down to earth, Beck was wearing the smug smile of a man who knew he’d done good. Seeing him looking so self-satisfied lit a fire in me, and I pushed his chest, encouraging him onto his back.

“My turn,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “Fair’s fair.”

“Oh, this isn’t going to be fair,” I promised.

I dragged his T-shirt off, and for the next little while, I feasted on his amazing body, pressing kisses to his pecs, tonguing his nipples, tracing his muscles with questing fingers, biting, teasing, and generally torturing him with every move in my arsenal. By the time I was done, I was sprawled on top of him, his erection a burning brand between our bodies. Holding his eye, I popped the button on his jeans then found his zipper tab. I dragged it down tooth by tooth, working it over the hard ridge of his erection with deliberate slowness, splitting my attention between his face and the bulging masterpiece I was unveiling.

He'd made me suffer, after all.

He was wearing bright blue boxer briefs, the soft fabric outlining his very respectable erection. I made a little humming sound in the back of my throat, liking what I was seeing, then wrapped my hand around him through his underwear. His body went tense beneath me, so I stroked him again, and then again.

"Okay, that's enough of that," Beck muttered.

He sat up, tumbling me off his lap and onto my back. I was still laughing in shock when I felt his hands at my waistband.

"All right. Now we're talking." I lifted my hips as he pulled my cutoffs down my legs, taking my panties with them.

Efficient. I liked that in a man. I liked it a lot.

Mr. I-Prefer-It-Slow pushed his own jeans and underwear down next, kicking off his shoes before tossing the whole tangled mess impatiently into the corner. I was too busy glorying in the sight of his thick, hard cock to register the foil packet in his hand. Then he lifted it to his mouth and tore it open with a ridiculously sexy flash of teeth, and I was suddenly all about the latex circle in his hand.

Because oh my God *this was really happening*.

He was aware of my avid interest and his mouth kicked up into a cocky, knowing smile as he stroked the condom down his shaft. He crawled onto me then, six foot two of brawny man, his legs hairy and strong against mine, and I spread my thighs wide, lifting my hips to welcome his first thrust.

"Oh God," I whispered as he filled me, stretching me exquisitely.

"Hell, yeah," he groaned.

His biceps bulged as he planted his elbows on either side of me and ducked his head to kiss me. I lost track of time after that, overwhelmed by all the ways Beck was making me feel good.

The thrust of his hips, the sweep of his tongue in my mouth, the roughness of his thumbs on my nipples... It was all glorious and utterly delicious and I let him know how much I was enjoying myself, telling him what I liked, encouraging his best moves, and, finally, clinging to him as I came a second time, pleasure wracking my overheated body. Beck wasn't far behind as he buried himself deep inside me and came with a shudder, his fingers digging into my hips and thighs.

He turned into dead weight afterward, his face pressed into the mattress beside me as his breath sawed in and out hectically. My lady parts were still pulsing with aftershocks, while the rest of my body was as limp as overcooked spaghetti.

In other words, being with Beck had lived up to every fantasy I'd ever had and then some.

After a moment or two he stirred, levering himself up on one elbow. His eyes were heavy-lidded with satisfaction as he ran his gaze over my breasts and belly, all the way down to where we were still joined. I could feel his cock surge with interest at the sight, even though he'd literally just come.

"How are you doing?" he asked when his gaze finally returned to my face.

"Um, pretty good," I said.

Understatement of the year. The man had just wrecked me.

"That was pretty wild."

"Yeah. It was."

"Want to do it again?" he asked, nudging his hips forward a fraction.

Which was when I realized he was hard again.

"Already?"

"I'm a little pent up. Been dreaming about you."

I blinked up at him. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Dirty dreams?" I asked, more than a little thrilled to think that all the time I'd been going crazy over him he'd been going crazy over me.

"Filthy. Depraved."

He swept a hand across my breasts, plucking at first one nipple then the other.

"I dreamt about you, too," I confessed.

He went still. "Really?"

I nodded.

He withdrew an inch or two, and I shifted beneath him, biting my lip in anticipation.

"Tell me about your dreams, Haley. Did I do anything like this in them?"

He slid back inside me, angling his hips so that I got every possible benefit from the delicious friction he'd created.

I dug my fingers into his perfect, muscular butt and let out a ragged sigh.

“Yes.”

“What else did I do?”

I’d never shared a dirty fantasy with a guy before but if ever there was a go-for-broke situation, this was it.

“You kissed me, you know, down there,” I said.

His eyes got bright with interest. “You like that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What else?” he asked, thrusting inside me again.

“You let me be on top,” I gasped.

“Yeah?”

Before I could react, Beck rolled to the side and onto his back, his strong arms taking me with him so that I wound up straddling him, my palms planted on his chest, a shocked laugh on my lips.

“Show me how you like it, Haley,” he said, his warm hands sliding over my breasts.

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I had a living god beneath me, and he was beautiful and hard and mine for the next little while. Only a fool would let that opportunity go to waste.

Lifting my hips, I worked myself on his cock, shifting and circling, searching for the sweet spot. When I found it, I made a happy little sound, and I could feel Beck’s cock twitch inside me. That was when I understood how much he got off on me getting off, so I proceeded to let him know how much he did it for me as I rode him, my tits bouncing, my ass slapping his thighs with each downward slide.

At some point Beck dragged me down so he could tongue my nipples, the new angle creating a whole new world of erotic friction. Then he bit me lightly on my left nipple, and it tripped me into a climax that had me digging my fingers into his pecs and throwing my head back with utter abandon.

“Fuck. Me,” I groaned, every atom of my being focused on the pulsing pleasure at my core.

Beck muttered something under his breath, and I opened my eyes in time to see his neck muscles cord and his face tense as he shuddered into his own orgasm.

I flopped onto his chest, every muscle heavy as lead. He rested a hand on my back, his palm warm and large, and I found myself smiling into his chest.

Wow. I mean... Wow. I'd had good sex before, but Beck and I were *awesome* at this. I was pretty sure he'd found erogenous zones I hadn't even known I possessed.

I was still floating on a hazy post-coital cloud when his hand fell away from my back, and it occurred to me that maybe he was done with me draping myself across him like a human blanket. Pushing myself up on one arm, I dismounted awkwardly, shifting onto the bed alongside him. Beck had his forearm flung across his eyes, his body lax, still in recovery mode, and I lay beside him becoming more and more self-conscious as my skin cooled.

For starters, I hadn't shaved my legs for nearly a week. And even though he hadn't seemed to register it in the heat of the moment, I couldn't help wondering what Beck would make of my soft belly and rounded hips now that he'd satisfied his curiosity about me. At five-foot-one, it was damned hard to keep the pounds off and after years of trying to be skinny like my sister, I'd finally accepted we had very different physiques and given up both ab crunches and my gym membership.

Generally speaking, I liked my curves, but I was lying naked next to a bona fide hottie who was also my sister's ex-lover.

My sister, the beautiful, glamorous runway model.

A little shiver ran down my spine as the full impact of what had just happened between me and Beck sunk in. Needing space, I reached out and snagged my T-shirt before rolling to the edge of the bed. I stood and whipped the T-shirt over my head in one move, then moved quickly toward the door. I was aware of Beck's arm dropping away from his face, but I pretended I hadn't noticed and slipped into the hallway. The white paint on the bathroom door was cool beneath my fingertips as I pushed it closed. I turned on the faucet to make it sound like I was doing something in the bathroom other than freaking out, then I sat on the edge of the tub and put my head in my hands.

I'd just fucked my sister's ex.

My sister, the fragile, volatile, super-super-super possessive diva.

Once, I'd borrowed Jess's denim jacket with the embroidered panel on the back without asking permission, and she'd barely talked to me for a

month. I could only imagine what she'd do if she found out I'd slept with Beck.

There's no reason for her to ever find out.

The thought calmed my spiraling panic. Because of course, there was no reason for my sister to ever know that I'd just ridden her ex like a pony at the fair. I wasn't going to tell her. I already knew that Beck was not in contact with her. This could be our dirty, perfect little secret. An illicit, sexy little miracle that I could hug to myself for the rest of my days.

Feeling calmer, I turned off the faucet and exited the bathroom. Then, taking a deep breath, I stepped back into my bedroom. I half expected Beck to be dressed and ready to leave but he was still stretched on my bed, arms folded behind his head now, feet crossed at the ankles.

My mouth got a little dry as I took in the sight of him, all golden-hued skin and muscle and sinew. This man was a triumph of genetics, there was no denying it. A walking, talking Norse god come to life.

"Hey," Beck said, and I could hear the question in his voice.

Apparently the old run-water-in-the-sink routine had fooled no one.

"Hey yourself," I said.

"You okay?"

I opened my mouth to assure him I was fine but couldn't quite get the words out. For a second I stood there gasping like a landed fish, then I closed my eyes and blurted the words that were burning in my gut.

"I need you to promise you won't tell anyone about this."

When I opened my eyes again Beck was looking about as insulted and confused as you'd expect a person to look under the circumstances.

"I don't usually release a post-coital bulletin," he said stiffly.

"Sorry." Damn it, I was messing this up. "It's just if Jess found out, it would get really messy, fast."

Beck didn't move a muscle, but I could see something shift behind his eyes.

"She won't hear anything from me." He swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood.

I bit my lip as he strode to where his jeans were tangled in the corner, wanting to kick myself for taking something awesome and wild and turning it into a festival of awkwardness.

"She still has friends in town. I ran into one of them today at the art supply store. She's so sensitive..." I babbled, trying to make him

understand where I was coming from.

“I got it, Haley. It’s in the cone of silence. Scout’s honor,” Beck said as he pulled on his jeans.

He didn’t look at me as he finished dressing, pulling on his shirt and then sitting on the end of the bed to tie his boots. When he stood, I mustered a smile and forced myself to meet his eyes.

“I had a really nice time. Thank you.”

“Same,” he said.

He hovered as though he was contemplating saying something more, then he shrugged a shoulder, his gaze going to the door.

“I should probably leave you to it,” he said.

“Okay. Sure.”

He walked out of the room, his boots loud on the old wooden floor. I stood at the end of my bed and listened for the sound of the front door opening and closing. Only when I heard his boots on the front porch did I let myself flop back onto my mattress, both hands pressed to my face.

Why had I brought up Jess? Why? We’d had such a nice time and I’d had to get all wiggy afterward and ruin everything like a stupid idiot.

So much for this afternoon being a dream come true.

BECK

Walking out of Haley's house felt like waking from a dream. From the moment I'd run into her at the Bean this afternoon, I'd been lost in some kind of lust-induced fugue, my whole being focused on one thing and one thing only—getting closer to the woman who had dominated my thoughts for the past week.

And boy had we gotten closer. Turned out all those X-rated dreams I'd had were just a shabby, pale imitation of what it had been like to sink into her soft body. Everything about what had just happened between us had been extra—the silk of her skin, the taste of her, the tight embrace of her body, her wild abandon, her playful willingness to go wherever I took her...

Now that I was standing on the other side of the encounter, however, I marveled at how completely I'd abandoned my plans for the afternoon the second Haley had issued her invitation.

She'd crooked her finger, and I'd just dumped everything to go with her, following her up the hill like a puppy.

What the hell had I been thinking?

You really need to ask that?

Okay, there hadn't been a lot of thinking going on. But that needed to change. I needed to stop these knee-jerk reactions when it came to Haley. It felt like every step I took was a misstep when it came to her. Nothing had brought that into sharper focus than her plea as I lay basking in the afterglow, wondering if she had more condoms stashed somewhere in her cozy little apartment.

I need you to promise you won't tell anyone about this.

Her words had been such a slap in the face. While I'd been idly planning Round Three, she'd been swimming in regret. Or something close to it, judging by how anxious she'd been when she returned to the bedroom.

If Jess found out, it would get really messy, fast.

I jerked the van door open and climbed behind the wheel. I'd put my phone on silent during the short journey to Haley's house but now I checked the screen and saw that my brother had called, then followed up with an email. It was nothing urgent, just a query from our shipping agent, but I took the time to tap out an answering email before starting the engine and heading for home, needing the small moment of distraction to settle my circling thoughts.

As fun and surprising and hot as this afternoon had been, maybe it had been a good thing Haley had brought me back to earth so abruptly. It wasn't as though we had a future. Haley had made that pretty clear when she'd returned from the bathroom, and, obviously, I was not about to invite Jess back into my life, even tangentially.

The reality was that we were always going to be one and done, never to be repeated. It was the only way it could ever be between us.

A car pulled out of a side road ahead of me, forcing me to brake to avoid a close encounter with his rear fender. I punched the horn, holding it down to get my message across, hot anger spiking through me. Finally the driver lifted a sheepish hand, apologizing for his dickishness.

"Asshole."

It wasn't until the car had turned off and the red haze had faded from my vision that I felt stupid for my over-reaction. Sure, the driver had misjudged his timing, but I'd had plenty of room to brake. I drove a few more miles before I grudgingly admitted to myself that there was a decent chance my outrage had been triggered by something other than bad driving.

I liked Haley. I liked her a lot. Obviously, the fact we had highly combustible sexual chemistry was part of that, but I'd seen enough of her during our brief encounters at the Bean to know she was also sweet and smart. I wanted to know more about her. Under any other circumstances, I would be doing my utmost to make sure this afternoon was not a one-off.

But the circumstances were what they were. Her sister was always going to be my toxic ex, and that was always going to be a dealbreaker for me.

There was nowhere else to go in the debate in my head, so I reached across to turn on the radio, cranking the volume high as an old AC/DC song came on. Then I let the raucous rock fill my head, pushing everything else out.

There was no point angsting over what couldn't be changed. Life had taught me that in spades, and it was time to start acting like I knew it.

HALEY

My mother's most frequently used piece of advice had always been to sleep on it, her theory being that everything seemed better in the morning. I banked hard on her being right when I finally fell asleep Thursday night, but when I woke Friday morning, the memory of the previous day descended on me like a ton of bricks.

Sleep hadn't given me perspective, it had simply tripled my regrets about bringing up my sister. It had been super gauche and weird and wrong, and it had killed the good vibes utterly. No wonder Beck had been in such a hurry to go—I'd practically pushed him out the door with my bleating about not telling anyone and name-checking my sister.

I squirmed against the sheets, mortified by the memory. But regret was not going to get me ready for work, so I threw back the covers and rolled out of bed. I showered and dressed and ran a comb through my wet hair, glaring at myself in the bathroom mirror as I did so.

I was such a loser dork. Who gets the hottie of their dreams in their bed and then brings up their gorgeous sister? Who does that?

After grabbing my bag, I headed out the door and trudged down the hill to the Bean. The only silver lining I could find in the day ahead was that it was a Friday, and I wouldn't have to deal with a Beck delivery until Monday. Which meant I had three days to find a way to smooth over what had happened between us.

Plenty of time, right?

As luck would have it, the Bean was unusually quiet all morning, offering me plenty of opportunity to dwell on my poor post-sex game. My thoughts kept bouncing from flush-inducing erotic flashbacks to the cringe-

inducing memory of my anxious blurt, and by the time I clocked off, I was no closer to finding a genius way to make things right with Beck.

Roddy must have sensed my low mood because he handed me a take-home bag on the way out the door.

“Here you go, Hales. You look like you need some carbs to cheer you up.”

“Is it that obvious?” I asked.

“Only to everyone.”

I must have look stricken because he patted my arm reassuringly.

“That was a joke. You just seemed a bit flat, that’s all.”

“I’m suffering from a self-inflicted wound,” I semi-confessed.

“Ah. The worst kind.” He patted my arm again before going to check something on the stove.

I peeked inside the bag and spied a brownie, a blueberry bagel, and a giant chocolate chip cookie. I’ve mentioned how much I love my job, right?

I nibbled on the cookie during the walk home then changed into an old tank and reached for my cutoffs. I was looking forward to losing myself in some work and silencing all the chatter in my head, but as I stepped into my paint-splattered cutoffs, I remembered the way Beck had pulled them off me yesterday, all haste and no finesse.

If someone had told me I’d manage to seduce my long-time crush while wearing the shabbiest piece of clothing I owned, I would have laughed in their face. But Beck hadn’t cared about my work clothes, or my unshaved legs or my non-flat belly. He’d wanted me. Just me.

And you messed it up, dumb-dumb.

I turned away from the thought and headed for my workshop. As I entered the space, my gaze fell on my sketch pad. Not stopping to think, I snatched it up, flicking through the pages until I found what I was looking for.

The masked horse I’d drawn for Beck stared up at me, bold and charming and attention-grabbing. I studied it intently for a moment, my brain racing furiously. Then I tore it free from the book and propped it against my work lamp. For the next few minutes, I concentrated on recreating the horse with a crisp black marker, perfecting the lines and shadows.

When I was done, the horse was even better than before, his lines bold and strong. Perfect for a logo.

Or a peace offering.

I grabbed a couple of pieces of white posterboard and secured the sketch within them, taping the sides to keep it safe. Then I raced to my bedroom and flung open the closet door. I'm not a huge shopper, so there wasn't a lot to choose from. I opted for a blue and white gingham sundress, tossing it on the bed before whipping off my tank top and cutoffs. Five minutes later, I was pulling the front door closed behind me, my mouth freshly lipsticked, my body spritzed with perfume, my dress swishing around my legs.

This is probably a really stupid idea, you know that, right?

The thing was, I was beyond caring. This whole situation with Beck had been so intense and messy from day one, and even though that had mostly been his fault—and maybe my sister's—this recent bout of messiness was on me, and I couldn't just leave things the way they were.

I just couldn't.

So I white-knuckled it all the way to Montpelier and parked in what was becoming my usual spot in front of the Dark Horse barn. Then I grabbed my peace offering, took a deep breath, and went to see a man about a horse logo.

BECK

“We actually developed our Black Stallion Blend especially for cold drip. We can drop off a sample bag with your next order if you’d like to experiment a little.” I swiveled my chair so I could reach the block of sticky notes next to my laptop.

“That sounds great, thanks Daniel. Gotta say, we’ve been patting ourselves on the back for saying yes to you boys and your wonder beans. Our customers can’t rave enough.”

I smiled to myself, because this particular customer had been a very hard nut to crack. Sam had worked him like a pro before he’d agreed to a trial run with our beans—and now he was considering adding a cold drip to his lineup.

“Great to hear. We’ll see you next week with the sample beans,” I said.

We said our goodbyes and I ended the call, grabbing a pen to scribble out a note to myself. I’d add it to the app we used to organize our orders later, and it would pop up as a reminder when we put together the next delivery for this customer.

I stuck the note next to a couple of earlier ones, both of which still needed to be dealt with. I was just picking up my phone to tackle another when my brother cleared his throat behind me.

“Danny. Someone to see you,” he said.

I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see a customer or a friend. Instead I saw Haley, a nervous smile on her lips, her eyes uncertain.

“Hi.”

I jerked my feet off the corner of my desk, my boots hitting the floor with a loud thump as I sprang to my feet. “Hi.”

“Have you got a minute?” she asked.

She was wearing a sundress, the old-fashioned type like you’d see on a *Happy Days* rerun, and her lips were shaded a pretty pink. She was also carrying a large piece of white posterboard.

Interesting.

“Sure. Come in.”

“I’m not interrupting? I don’t want to hold you up if you’ve got delivery runs or something.”

“Sam’s handling the afternoon runs,” I said.

My brother raised his eyebrows but didn’t contradict me. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind, however, that he’d claim his pound of flesh for covering for me later.

“Oh. Good,” Haley said, stepping forward.

I shifted a pile of paperwork off the spare chair, gesturing for her to sit.

“This won’t take long,” she assured me, remaining standing.

I registered my brother was still hovering in the doorway, unashamed interest on his face. I frowned at him, and he rolled his eyes before turning away.

“I wanted to apologize,” Haley blurted the moment he was out of sight. “I meant it when I said I had a really good time yesterday, but then I made it weird by bringing up my sister, and you left, and it felt all wrong. I know things are too complicated for you and me to, you know, have anything more, but I didn’t want to leave it like that.”

It was quite a speech, and by the time she was finished, her cheeks were a pretty pink. It made me remember how flushed she’d been after I’d made her come the first time. And all the times after that.

“I could have handled it better.” It seemed only fair to own my part. “It’s not like Jess being your sister was a big surprise to me.”

“I know, but it was kind of a buzz kill. Not the best timing in the world.”

She wrinkled her nose, somehow managing to look both cute and sexy at the same time, and all of a sudden I couldn’t remember why pursuing something more with her was a bad idea.

“Anyway, I made you something. I noticed you were deciding on logos the other week, and you’ve probably chosen something already, so don’t feel obligated to use this or anything. It was just an idea I had, so I sketched

it out...” She offered me the posterboard, and I saw that it was actually two pieces that had been taped together, presumably to protect something.

“You made a logo for me?” I repeated stupidly, because this conversation was not going the way I had expected it to.

“Sometimes the only way to get an idea out of my head is to sketch it out.”

I took the offering and severed the tape with my thumbnail to reveal a bold, quirky sketch of a horse’s head and shoulders drawn in black marker. The horse’s mane was blowing in the wind like a model’s hair, and he was wearing a black superhero mask. There was something about the way he’d been drawn, the energy of the piece, that made me laugh. I looked at Haley, blown away by the charm and originality of her work.

“This is awesome. Sam and I have been banging our heads against the wall, trying to find something that feels right for Dark Horse, and this is... Man, you’ve really nailed it.”

“I’m glad you like it.” She moved closer so she could study the sketch with me. “I tried to keep the lines simple so you could use it in lots of different ways. A good graphic designer would know what to do with it. Kieran Shipley would be a great person to talk to.”

“Kieran. Right. I always forget he’s into graphic design.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Haley’s sketch. Sam and I had spent *hours* combing various stock-art sites looking at horse images, and we hadn’t found a single one that jumped out the way Haley’s did. It was fun, it had attitude, and it was memorable. Tick, tick, tick.

“Sam’s going to flip his lid when he sees this.” I tore my focus from the sketch to look at her. “What do we owe you?”

She frowned, then shook her head. “Oh, no. It’s just a sketch. I can’t charge you for it.”

It was my turn to frown. “That doesn’t feel right.”

“Buy me a coffee sometime.” Haley took a step toward the door. “Thanks for letting me clear the air.”

It hit me that she was about to leave. Or that she was prepared to leave if I didn’t do anything to stop her.

“How about now? You free for that coffee now?”

“Um...sure.”

“We have choices. Come into the packing room.”

I set her sketch down carefully on my desk then led her down the short corridor to the next room.

“This is where we pack the coffee for shipping.”

She blinked at the bagging machine that filled most of one corner, its footprint taking up the space of a couple of filing cabinets.

“This is probably pretty stupid in hindsight, but I had this picture in my head of you and your brother filling the bags by hand.”

“That’s a nice idea, but there’s no way we could fulfill all our orders by hand. Plus the machine is more hygienic and accurate.”

I turned toward the trestle table that held the coffee machines along the opposite wall.

“Wow. That’s a lot of grinders,” Haley said, taking in the five Mazzer Minis we had lined up on the table alongside our Rocket Giotto espresso machine.

“We taste test every batch of beans. There’s a grinder for every variety, so we can minimize cross-contamination.”

Haley nodded, then inhaled deeply. “It smells so good in here.”

“To be honest, I only notice it these days when I’ve been out on delivery and come back in.”

“That’s kind of sad. Fresh coffee is one of the best smells in the world.”

“Pick your poison,” I said, waving toward the grinders. “Costa Rica single origin, Organic Papua New Guinea, the Black Sheep blend—that’s the one you serve at the Bean—our new Black Stallion blend for cold brew or our Swiss-water decaf.”

Haley blinked a few times. “Okay. That’s a lot of choices. Which is your favorite?”

“I like them all. That’s why we sell them.” I smiled at her.

“Thanks for the help,” she said, giving me a mock-disapproving look.

“What are you in the mood for? Mellow and easy? Intense and smoky?”

Her eyebrows knit in a brief frown, and I knew she was trying to work out if I’d meant for my words to come out sounding a little dirty.

I totally had, because now that she was here and within reach, all I could think about was making her scream my name again.

“Intense and smoky sounds good,” she said, and I watched the color bloom in her cheeks.

It was pretty fascinating, the contrast between Haley-in-bed and Haley-not-in-bed. The former took what she wanted, no holds barred, while the

latter was more hesitant, less certain.

I liked them both, for different reasons.

“Costa Rica, here we come,” I said.

I busied myself pouring beans into the grinder while Haley wandered over to inspect the bagging machine.

“Where’d you learn to draw like that?” I asked once the whirr of the grinder had faded to silence.

“Nowhere really. I’m self-taught.”

“So it’s natural talent, then.”

She shrugged a shoulder and I could tell she was uncomfortable with the praise.

“How many bags can this thing do a minute?” she asked, resting a hand on the feed hopper.

“Thirty. What sort of milk do you prefer?”

“Whole milk is great, thank you.”

I poured milk into a jug and got busy steaming it. Then I locked the group handle into the machine and flicked the switch to extract the coffee. I was aware of Haley checking out an open box of packaging and guessed she was looking for distractions to try to ease her nervousness.

Which was pretty adorable. Everything about her was adorable, really. And sexy as hell.

I divided the steamed milk between both mugs, pulling out all the stops to create my best latte art on hers. Haley had probably served more coffees than me in her time, and no doubt knew every trick in the book, but I figured there was no harm putting my best foot forward and painstakingly created a stylized nautilus shell in her foam.

“Here you go,” I said, and Haley abandoned the safety of the corner to come get her drink, her skirt swishing around her knees.

“Hey, look at that. Fancy,” she said when she saw my shell.

“This is where you tell me you have a Barista of the Year award on the wall at home,” I joked.

“God, no. I never conquered fancy coffee art. The best I can do is a simple fan pattern.”

I sucked the foam off my coffee and watched her do the same, my gaze zeroing in on the pink tip of her tongue as she made sure she hadn’t left any foam lingering on her lips.

I could feel myself starting to get hard as I focused on her mouth, remembering how good it had been to kiss her.

“This is really nice,” she said, darting me a quick look from beneath her lashes.

“We source it directly from a Fair Trade plantation in Costa Rica. They’re our first supplier. The plantation that started it all.”

She nodded, then gulped down a mouthful of coffee, followed by another. I watched her over the rim of my cup, guessing what her next move would be and trying not to smile.

Sure enough, a second later she set her cup down on the table and gave a little sigh that was intended to convey satisfaction.

“That was perfect, thank you. But I’d better get going, I’ve taken up enough of your day.”

I took a mouthful of my own coffee, then set it down next to hers.

“Do you have anywhere you need to be?” I asked.

Her gaze locked with mine, and I saw the flare of desire as she understood my intent.

“I should really go,” she said, but I knew her heart wasn’t in it.

“So you just came here to apologize and drop off your sketch?” I asked.

“To clear the air.”

“Liar,” I said, softening my words with a smile.

I stepped closer and reached for her shoulder. Her bare skin was soft and warm beneath my hand. She watched me with slightly open lips as I caressed the slope of her shoulder before sliding my hand around to palm her nape. She was already lifting her face for my kiss as I lowered mine. I let out an involuntary grunt of appreciation when she opened her mouth to me, lust hitting me like a sledgehammer as I tasted her again.

What was it about this woman that did it for me so bad?

Whatever it was, I wanted more of it, pulling her closer. Her ample breasts pressed against me, her hands sliding onto my butt as she urged my hips against her own. I could feel my self-control slipping away, and I broke the kiss and took a step backward. She blinked at me like a sleepwalker who’d been startled awake, and I caught her hand in mine.

“Office,” I said, and she came with me willingly as we made the short trip.

I kicked the door shut behind us, engaging the lock. Then I turned to face her. Her breasts rose and fell erratically, her pulse fluttering at her

neck.

“How wet are you right now?” I asked.

She swallowed, then lifted her chin, accepting my challenge. “Very.”

“Show me.” I indicated my desk with a jerk of my chin.

She glanced over her shoulder toward it, then back at me. Then she turned and walked to my desk. She pushed my laptop to one side before slipping her hand under her skirt. My cock jerked to attention as she slid her panties down her legs, stepping out of them gracefully. I moved closer as she parked her butt on my desk and lifted a foot to rest it on my chair. Holding my gaze, she pleated the fabric of her skirt in increments, slowly drawing up the curtain on our two-person peepshow.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until she was on full display, and then my breath gusted out an appreciative sigh. Her hair was slightly darker down there, her position offering me a perfect view of her pretty pinkness.

“Good girl,” I said.

Then I sank to my knees and put my hands on her thighs.

HALEY

My whole body trembled with anticipation and excitement as Beck's head lowered toward me. I felt the warmth of his breath, then the press of his lips on my inner thigh. I gripped the edge of the desk as he lifted a hand to stroke me open with his fingers. And then he was kissing me in earnest, and my eyes almost rolled back in my head because HOLY SHIT HE WAS GOOD AT THIS.

He seemed to know exactly what I wanted—pressure here, a quick flick of the tongue there. When he slid a finger inside me I let my head fall back, and when he sucked on my clit, I moaned my approval.

His hand clenched around my thigh, and I remembered how much he'd enjoyed it when I let him know how good he made me feel last time. So even though I was panting and increasingly desperate, I told him what he was doing to me, how good it felt, how much I wanted him to fuck me.

He responded by redoubling his efforts, and I gave up my grip on the desk to drive my fingers into his hair, holding him where I needed him as my climax roared toward me like a tsunami. I was panting and limp and barely able to hold myself up when he was done with me. He sat back on his heels and grinned up at me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and my pussy tightened in response to the pure, appreciative lust in his eyes.

“You were right. You're very wet,” he said.

I barked out a shocked laugh. “You've only got yourself to blame,” I said as he pushed himself to his feet, his hands going to his belt buckle.

Which was when I understood this wasn't over yet. Hallelujah.

“Oh, I know,” he said, clearly proud of how much I wanted him. How much he turned me on.

I watched as he lowered his fly and reached into his boxer briefs to free his cock. I’d forgotten how fucking *nice* it was, thick and hard, rising from a thatch of dark-blond hair.

“Please tell me you have a condom,” I said.

Full of confidence, he patted his rear pocket only to come up empty. A flash of panic tightened his face. Then he yanked open the desk drawer, his shoulders dropping with relief when he spotted his wallet.

“Lucky,” I said. Then I reached into the bodice of my dress and pulled out the foil pack I’d hidden there before I left home.

He laughed. “Such a liar,” he said, reminding me of my earlier claim that I’d only come to clear the air.

But honestly, until he’d kissed me, I’d been on the fence about staying or going, torn by how much I wanted to be with him again and how impossible our situation was. It was nuts to start something that couldn’t go anywhere.

Wasn’t it?

My brain was incapable of grappling with complex subjects while Beck rolled a condom down his thick shaft, and I reached eagerly for his shoulders as he stepped between my spread-wide thighs. He kissed me as he used his hand to guide himself to my entrance, teasing my swollen flesh with the head of his cock a few times before sliding inside me.

After that, I was lost in the waves of pleasure we created together, my body clinging to his, his body stroking into mine. Everything seemed to pulse when I came the second time, my legs wrapped around his hips, my mouth glued to his. I felt his body tense as his own climax hit, his fingers digging into my hips as he drove himself deep.

Beck pressed my face into his neck afterward, his hand on the back of my neck, his body warm and slightly damp against mine.

I wondered if he was marveling, like me, that of all the people in all the world, he was the one who could do this to me.

Because, seriously, our chemistry was *nuts*. Totally off the planet.

And our situation was *complicated*. To say the least.

After a moment, he eased back from me, being careful to hold the base of the condom to prevent any accidents. He turned away to dispose of it, and I used the small moment to shake my head, hoping to knock a bit of

sense into myself. I pushed my skirt down and slipped off the edge of the desk. My panties were in a scrunched up bunch behind me and I stepped into them briskly. I smoothed my skirt and looked up to find Beck watching me, his phone in hand.

“I don’t have your number,” he said, his voice a deep, sexy rumble.

I was powerless to stop the smile that curved my lips. “I guess that’s because I never gave it to you.”

He tilted his head, a question in his eyes, and I rattled my number off—because of course I wanted him to call. Only a mad woman wouldn’t want more of what he’d just given me.

He finished tapping in my number, then he stepped closer and smoothed my hair, his expression very focused.

“You looked like someone just fucked you on a desk. But I’ve destroyed the evidence now so you’re fit to go out in public.”

I laughed. “Thank you. Very gallant of you.”

“I try.”

We were smiling at each other, a million questions hanging in the air. I wasn’t game to ask any of them, which meant it was time to go. I took a breath, but he beat me to it.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about how easily he could read me. Most of the time he was an enigma to me.

He touched the sketch, which we’d somehow managed to not destroy while he made me see stars on his desk.

“This is really good, Haley. Thank you. We were about to go with a mediocre design neither of us liked, and you just saved our asses.”

His gratitude—his approval—made my chest feel a size too small, so I waved my hand dismissively.

“It’s just a sketch.”

“It’s more than that. It’s amazing, and it’s going to be on the sign above the door.”

It gave me a thrill to hear him say that. To know that he’d connected so fully and completely with my art.

“Well... I’m glad.”

He laughed and hooked an arm around my neck, pulling me close for an unexpected hug.

“I won’t make you squirm any more. But be warned, I’ll be looking for a way to repay you.”

“I’m quaking in my boots.”

We walked through the workrooms and out the front entrance. It was surreal to step out into a sunny Vermont afternoon after everything that had transpired in the last hour.

It had just been sex, but it also felt as though the world had changed somehow. How much and by what degree, I wasn’t quite sure yet.

“What are you up to tomorrow night?” Beck asked as we neared my car.

I had to think for a minute. “Nothing at the moment.”

“Come over for dinner and a movie. Do you like classic horror?”

“Define classic for me. Are we talking swamp monsters or chainsaws?”

“Swamp monsters. B-movies, if you want to get technical. I just scored a copy of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.”

“Here’s the thing,” I said, because I have learned over the years that it’s best to be honest in situations like this. “I don’t like being scared. So is it scary, or schlocky? I am very up for schlocky. Scary not so much.”

“I haven’t seen it in years, but I’m pretty sure it’s more at the schlocky end of the spectrum,” Beck said.

“Then I’m in.” I was proud of how casual I sounded, when inside I was punching the sky and doing back flips.

Beck was going to cook me dinner. We were going to sit on his couch and watch a movie together.

“Here is my promise to you,” Beck said as we reached my car. “If you get scared, we’ll watch something else.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

“You can hold me to anything you like,” he said. He planted a hand on the roof of my car and leaned in to kiss me.

I sank back against the door and let myself get swept away by how good he made me feel. The sweep of his tongue against mine. The weight of his big body pinning mine to the warm metal of my car. The growing evidence of his arousal pressing against my belly.

The obnoxious toot of a horn made us a break apart, and Beck frowned as his brother turned into the driveway, a knowing grin on his face.

“Smartass,” Beck muttered.

“Probably just as well. I don’t trust myself around you,” I admitted.

Beck’s eyes were bright with desire. “Same.”

It was tempting to simply stand there and bask in our mutual lust, but a little voice chose that moment to pipe up in the back of my mind. *Don't get too carried away*, it warned me.

That would be so easy to do with Beck. Let's face it, I was well and truly primed to fall hard for this man before he'd even laid a finger or a single smoldering glance on me, and two bouts of smoking-hot sex weren't exactly a deterrent.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, fumbling my car door open. Then a thought hit me. "I don't know where you live."

"Yeah, you do. There's an apartment behind the workspace." He gestured over his shoulder toward the barn. "Just big enough for me and Larry."

"You share with someone?" I asked, mentally recalibrating my expectations for the evening.

"Larry doesn't so much share as mooch. She expects two meals a day, lots of road trips, and at least an hour of tummy scratches in any twenty-four hour period."

"Larry is your dog," I guessed, belatedly remembering the time I'd seen him hanging out by the river with a long-legged black dog.

"Correct."

"I look forward to meeting her." I climbed into my car, even though I wanted to keep talking to him. It seemed wise to start exercising some self-control where he was concerned.

Even if it was just a little.

"See you tomorrow," Beck said, leaning down so he could see in the window.

"You will."

I started the car and waited till Beck had moved out of the way before signaling and pulling onto the road. He waited until I was well on my way before turning and heading back toward the barn, and I would be lying if I pretended I wasn't touched by the way he'd escorted me to my car and hung around to see me off.

He liked me. He'd asked me over for dinner. We'd moved beyond crazy-good spontaneous sex to...something else. Just exactly what that was, I had no idea. But I really, really wanted to find out.

BECK

My brother was waiting when I let myself back into the barn. The smirk on his face told me he was about to give me a hard time and that he was planning on enjoying every second of it.

“So... Haley Elliot.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“How did the deliveries go?” I asked, hoping to divert him.

“You’re a sneaky mo-fo, warning me off when you were interested in her yourself.” To his credit, Sam looked more amused than annoyed.

“I wasn’t being sneaky.”

“But you are interested in her.”

I sighed. “Since when did you give a shit about my private life?”

“Dude, you’re the one who was freaking out about Haley turning up here a couple of weeks ago. You’re the one who warned me to stay away from ‘that family.’ And you’re the one who was just playing tonsil hockey with her.”

I was uncomfortably aware that he was right on all scores, and I turned away with a frown. “This is a bullshit conversation.”

I headed for my office, but Sam fell in behind me, unwilling to let it go.

“You should have seen your face when you realized she’d come to visit. Like someone gave you a puppy for Christmas.”

“Shut up.”

“You stood up so fast I thought you were gonna take off.”

We’d reached my office and I attempted to shut the door in his face, but he ducked under my arm and into the room.

“I don’t get why you’re being so cagey about this,” Sam said.

I spotted Haley's drawing on the desk and made a beeline for it, knowing it was a bulletproof way to distract him.

"What do you think of this for our logo?" I asked, passing him the sketch.

He laughed, instantly engaged by Haley's lively drawing, confirming my gut instinct that her sketch was perfect for our business.

"This is awesome. Where did you find it?" my brother asked.

"Haley drew it."

"No shit." He studied the horse again. "It's perfect. She totally nailed it. What does she want for it?"

"Nothing. It's a gift."

Sam frowned. "You're serious?"

I nodded.

"Okay." He shrugged. "I'm not dumb enough to look a gift horse logo in the mouth. I don't know what you did to earn this, but this is gonna look great on our bags."

"Try to keep your mind out of the gutter."

"You're the one prostituting himself for graphic-design work."

I took the sketch from his hands. "You can go now. Dickhead."

Sam laughed. "Give it back and I'll scan it in and start playing around with some ideas."

I handed Haley's sketch over, and he headed off to the front room where we had a workstation set up with a scanner and printer. I congratulated myself on successfully diverting him then dropped into my chair and spun to face my computer.

Calling up a search engine, I typed in the words "easy meals for two" and watched as my screen filled with results. After reading through a couple recipes, sanity returned. There was no way I was mastering a new dish by tomorrow night. A smart guy would stick to something he knew how to do blindfolded, which meant we were having spaghetti carbonara, the one meal I knew I could nail.

Jess had hated it, claiming I was trying to sabotage her with fats and carbs whenever I made it.

I blinked slowly, then very carefully, very deliberately pushed the thought from my mind. I was not going to start the 'compare Jess with Haley' game, because it would be never-ending and it would fuck me up, big time.

I'd already proven I couldn't stay away from Haley. There was no point torturing myself with worries about the future or memories from the past. I liked her. At some point I'd have to deal with the reality of who her sister was, but not yet. Not right now. Right now I was going to let myself be nervous-excited-pleased that she was coming for dinner tomorrow night. Everything else could go hang.

I wrote a shopping list for myself, then stuck the note on my wallet. Later, after work, I stripped my bed and changed the sheets, then gave the bathroom a thorough going-over. Once I had it looking as good as it was going to get, I turned and surveyed the rest of my apartment. There was dog hair on the couch, dust bunnies under the TV console, and a bunch of junk littered all around the place—discarded sneakers, old magazines, paperwork from the business, dirty dishes.

No way could I let Haley walk into this hellhole. I spent the next hour cleaning, much to Larry's bemusement, then spent another hour doing paperwork before getting ready for bed. There was a pleasant little buzz of anticipation in the pit of my belly as I turned off the light.

I was seeing Haley again tomorrow. The odds were good we were going to get naked again, but even though I was very on board with that idea, mostly I was just looking forward to spending more time with her.

It was quite the turn-around from the way I'd felt after leaving her place yesterday afternoon, but I was sick of questioning every move and motive when it came to her. When she laughed, the end of her nose wobbled a little. And she smelled good, like sunshine and lemons and something I couldn't quite put my finger on. She was smart, too, and talented and generous. And very, very sweet.

And, yeah, she was Jess Elliot's little sister, but I was starting to feel like I would be missing out on something really special if I let that come between us.

Not that there was an "us" yet.

But there was definitely potential. Good potential.

It was my last thought before I fell asleep.

The next morning I spent extra minutes actually making my bed, further confusing Larry. Between the vacuuming last night and the bed-making this morning, she was giving me some serious side-eye.

"I don't want you jumping up there the moment I walk out the door," I told her. "We have a guest coming over. She probably has feelings about

dogs who sleep on pillows.”

Larry gave this announcement the respect it deserved, hunching over to lick her belly.

“Fine. Just don’t mess it up too much, okay? And no butt sniffing when Haley comes. No one with two legs is into that.”

The I’m-just-checking-you-out butt sniff was a firm part of Larry’s getting-to-know-you repertoire, but I could do without her undermining me this evening. Based on the deeply innocent look she gave me after my warning, I figured I was going to have to be on the alert rather than rely on her discretion.

We usually only worked a half-day on Saturdays, so once Sam and I had dealt with maintenance on the roasters and packing machine and completed a bunch of other chores, we were free to live our lives. He headed off to meet some friends for a trail ride, I headed for the supermarket where I spent a small fortune on the best local bacon I could find, along with a wedge of crumbly parmesan and a carton of organic cream. In the wine section, I added a bottle of Australian Pinot Grigio to my supplies. My last destination was the local ice cream parlor, where I grabbed a pint each of burnt fig and honeycomb and salted caramel peanut butter.

It wasn’t until I was putting all my groceries away at home that it hit me that I hadn’t been this amped about a date in a long time. In fact, the last time I’d felt this much anticipation about spending time with a woman, she had been Jess Elliot.

Don’t go there, man.

I listened to the voice in my head and went to change into my running gear. Maybe if I burned off some of my nervous energy, I wouldn’t make too much of a fool of myself tonight.

A guy can hope, right?

HALEY

I was so eager to get to Beck's place I arrived ten minutes early and had to do a slow drive around the streets of Montpelier to kill time. I engaged in a mental pep talk as I drove, encouraging myself to play it cool and enjoy the moment for what it was without getting too caught up in what might happen next.

I had, of course, already spent a large portion of my day fretting about that, because when the worry hamster in my brain started running on its wheel, it liked to go for it.

I really, really, really liked Beck. A lot. All signs seemed to indicate he felt the same way about me—although, to be fair, he might just be very engaged by the hot sex we kept having.

If my gut was right, if he was as taken with me as I was with him, then at some point we were going to run headfirst into the problem of my sister. I'd already very cleverly established that bringing up her name was a complete vibe killer, but just because I wasn't game to talk about her, didn't mean the problem of Jess was going to disappear. She was my sister. She would always be a part of my life; there was no avoiding that.

Beck clearly had baggage with her. The size of the baggage was a mystery to me, and I wasn't sure how to address it or my sister in general because of how weird I'd made it last time.

There were so many unknowns, I felt like I was playing blind-man's bluff, fumbling around with no idea of what obstacles might lie in my way.

My gaze caught on the clock on city hall, and I realized I'd gotten so lost in the maze of my thoughts that I was now running late. Muttering under my breath, I headed for Beck's place. I parked beside his van in the

driveway and made my way to the front entrance, a bottle of wine cold in my hand.

I knocked and ten seconds later Beck opened the door. He looked so good standing there in the frame of the doorway, all big and burly and blond, I lost the power of speech for a moment.

“Hey. Come in,” he said, gesturing for me to step over the threshold.

I followed him inside, still drinking in the sight of him. He was wearing a blue and black plaid shirt and soft-looking, worn jeans with a pair of very dark brown boots. His cheeks were a little stubbly, as though he’d forgotten to shave that morning, and his hair was still wet from the shower.

In short, he looked utterly, overwhelmingly hot and the vocabulary center of my brain was so discombobulated I still couldn’t find any words. I settled for thrusting the bottle of wine at him like a complete rube.

“Thanks,” he said, shooting me a surprised look.

“It’s wine,” I said.

“It is.” His mouth twitched a little, and I knew he was trying not to laugh at me.

Doing so well here, Haley. Really knocking it out of the park.

It was crazy I was this nervous around him when he’d already done so many deeply intimate things to my body. There was a very solid chance he was going to do more intimate things to me tonight, too, so it wasn’t as though there was much uncertainty about how our evening would end.

I was too worked up, that was the problem. So much for my self-administered pep talk.

“Come on in to the apartment and meet Larry,” Beck said.

“Sounds good,” I said, wincing at how bright and chirpy I sounded.

Beck’s mouth twitched again, and he led me down a short corridor. After passing his office and the packing room, we walked through a doorway into a large space that ran the full width of the building. Two big metal machines were spaced along the far wall, while pallets piled high with burlap coffee sacks filled a corner.

“Are these the roasters?” I asked, forgetting to be nervous for a second as I went to examine the large circular tray attached to the front of one of the machines.

“Yep, these are our babies,” Beck said. “That’s the cooling tray. Beans go in there, and once we get past first crack, and we’re happy with the roast,

we pour them out here to cool.” He pointed to a large hopper on top of the machine, then to the tray.

“First crack is when the beans open up in the heat, right?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Bang on the money.”

“I did some googling,” I admitted. “But Google didn’t tell me how you know when you’ve got first crack?”

“You can hear it. Like popcorn. And smell it, too. When you first start to roast, it smells more like baking bread, a sort of cereal smell. Then the beans start to caramelize and you can smell the sweetness. That usually means you’re about to hit first crack.”

The space was scrupulously clean, and the delicious smell I’d noted the other day in the packing room was stronger here, a mixture of the baked bread scent and caramelized sweetness he’d just described.

“So this is where the magic happens,” I said.

Beck pointed to a door in the far wall. “That’s where the magic happens.”

“What’s through there?” I asked, eager to learn more.

“My apartment,” Beck said, his face poker-straight.

I rolled my eyes but rewarded him with a laugh. “Okay. I walked into that one.”

“You sure did.”

He crossed to the door and I followed him into his apartment, twitching with curiosity to see where he lived.

We entered into a large, high-ceilinged space with wooden floors. To the right was a big sectional couch made from some kind of textured, natural-looking fabric. In front of it was a TV on a low wooden console that had been made from a couple of transformed pallets. A coffee table sat in front of the couch, also made from pallets. The kitchen ran along the rear wall beneath a couple of windows, a compact galley-style setup, with white tiled counter tops and cabinets that looked as though they dated back to the forties.

I turned to check out the left side of the space in time to see a long-legged black dog emerge from behind a carved timber room divider.

“This is Larry,” Beck said. “Come say hi to Haley.”

I couldn’t help smiling as Larry trotted obediently toward me, her brown eyes curious. She was entirely black except for her feet and a white

blaze on her chest, with a longish snout with a spray of hair around her nose and perky, velvety-looking ears.

“Hello there, you good girl,” I said, offering her the back of my hand to smell.

Larry leaned forward a little to sniff me, then wagged her tail and gave me a little lick, which I took to be a sign of acceptance.

“She’s a sweetie,” I said.

“She has her moments,” Beck said, but the glance he gave his dog was full of affection.

I set my bag down on the couch and looked around again.

“This is really nice,” I said, envying the sense of space created by the high ceilings.

“It’s convenient, and it means I can keep my overhead low, keep plowing everything into the business.”

I was about to respond when I felt a firm nudge near my backside and glanced over my shoulder to find Larry’s nose in my butt.

“Hello again,” I said, torn between embarrassment and amusement.

“Holy crap, Larry. Couldn’t you even wait five minutes?” Beck snapped his fingers to call his dog off.

He looked so chagrined I couldn’t help laughing.

“I’m sorry. We had a conversation about this particular piece of anti-social behavior this morning and she knows it’s not cool.”

Larry stood between us, her gaze going from me to Beck and back again, her tongue lolling, tail lashing the air happily.

“Seems like she really took that to heart,” I said.

“On the couch. Now.” Beck pointed toward the sectional.

Larry trotted off, leaping up to sprawl across the cushions.

“So where do you sit?” I asked, amused by how much room a medium-sized dog could take up when she put her mind to it.

“Sometimes Larry lets me have a corner. If I’m nice to her.”

“I’ll try to stay on her good side, then.”

Beck glanced down at the wine I’d brought and a brief frown creased his forehead.

“I wasn’t sure what we were having and the guy in the store said this was good with almost anything,” I said.

“Where’d you go? Hunger Mountain Co-op?”

“How did you know?” I asked, surprised.

Beck stepped over to the fridge and retrieved a familiar bottle.

“We bought the same wine,” I said, getting the joke.

“From the same manager, I’m thinking, since I got the same spiel.”

We both laughed and any residual tension I’d been holding melted away.

“If it sucks, we can go back and complain together,” I said.

“Let’s give it a shot.”

He opened the wine and poured two glasses, handing mine over. We both took an experimental sip.

“I’m tasting wine. I think there’s a top note of wine in there, too. And maybe a little wine on the palate afterwards?” I said.

“Definitely,” Beck said, taking another mouthful and swirling it around his mouth ostentatiously, sucking his cheeks in and out and generally looking ridiculous. “Pretty sure the grapes were picked on a Friday by a redheaded man with big feet and a bad gambling habit.”

“Insightful,” I said.

“It’s what I do,” Beck said with a casual shrug.

We both smiled at each other.

“Come sit,” Beck said, directing me toward a table for two tucked against the wall in the kitchen.

I sank into a seat and took a mouthful of wine as Beck opened the fridge and started pulling out ingredients.

“Dinner won’t be long. Hope you like pasta.”

“I love pasta.”

Maybe it was my imagination, but he looked relieved. “Good to hear. We’re having carbonara.”

I made a happy sound. “Yum. Even better. My favorite.”

“Mine, too.”

We did the goofy-smiling-at-each-other thing again, then he grabbed a frypan from the open shelf above the stovetop. I saw he already had a pot of water boiling and I watched as he dropped in a package of spaghetti.

“Okay, dinner is ten minutes away.” He glanced at me. “How was your day? Did you work?”

“I don’t do weekends, just weekdays.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Audrey and Zara like to handle the weekend shifts together.”

“They make a pretty good team. You like working there?”

“I love it.”

We talked about the Bean for a few minutes, then I asked about his business, and by the time he was sliding two bowls of pasta onto the table we’d moved on to travel. The next half hour passed easily, punctuated by lots of laughter. The pasta was delicious, the wine crisp and fresh, and every time I looked across the table, Beck was watching me with his beautiful blue-green eyes and I knew he was enjoying himself as much as I was.

Dessert was two types of ice cream, both of which left me wanting to lick my bowl. Afterward, I insisted on helping Beck clean up.

“For that, you get an extra glass of wine,” he said.

“I probably shouldn’t, I’m driving,” I said automatically.

Beck paused. “Or you could stay the night. Up to you.”

My heart gave a little leap at his casual invitation. Which was probably good grounds for not staying the night, given I was trying to keep my cool.

“Oh. Okay, then. In that case, I’ll have another wine.”

Beck poured us both another glass, and we moved to the couch, rousting Larry from her king-of-the-hill position and claiming a corner for ourselves. Beck started the movie, then rested his arm along the back of the couch behind my shoulders.

I tried to concentrate on the screen as the opening credits gave way to the first scenes, but I was far too aware of how close he was and how good he smelled to really focus on anything else. His big body radiated heat, and I kept remembering how amazing he looked without his shirt. And how talented he was with his hands. And mouth.

“Fuck it,” Beck said suddenly, reaching for the remote and switching off the TV.

Then he pulled me onto his lap and kissed me. I opened my mouth to him eagerly, squirming around until I was straddling him, his erection a welcome pressure between my thighs.

Beck’s hands slid under my top, framing my ribcage briefly before reaching around to undo my bra. I felt it go loose and lifted my arms so he could pull it and my top off all at once. His gaze swept over my breasts, a small smile curving his lips.

“Have I mentioned how pretty these are?” he asked, cupping me with both hands before leaning forward to tongue first one nipple, then the other.

“I believe you did, but feel free to elaborate further,” I said, unashamedly breathless.

It got pretty crazy after that. After teasing my nipples mercilessly, Beck nudged my panties aside and gave me my first climax with his clever fingers. Then he carried me over to the bed and proceeded to prove that yesterday's excellent oral-sex technique had not been a fluke. I was boneless afterward, but that didn't stop me from treating him to a good tongue-lashing, too.

I was all about equality.

By the time we got to the main event, we were both warm and damp and ready and the feel of his lovely cock sliding inside me was nearly enough to set me off again all on its own. His arms braced on either side of me, Beck moved slowly, stretching each withdrawal out, taking his time to fill me again. I curled my fingers into the taut muscles of his ass and spread my thighs as wide as I could, desperate to have all of him inside me. I was just starting to spiral out of control when he lifted my left leg to his shoulder, and the increased friction pushed me over the top.

Beck watched me lose it, his gaze avid as he absorbed every detail of me at my most mindless and vulnerable. As always, watching me get off got him off and it wasn't long before he came, his body taut and shuddering against mine, his breath a hot rush against my neck.

He rolled to his side afterward, and we both stared at the ceiling, utterly spent. After a couple of minutes he stirred and disappeared through a doorway to what I assumed was the bathroom.

That was when I had a strong sense of being watched, and I propped myself up on my elbows to find Larry sitting next to the room divider, her brown eyes glued to me with a disturbing intensity.

"Hey, Larry," I said uncertainly, reaching for the sheet and dragging it over my breasts.

I had the distinct feeling Larry did not approve of all the moaning, panting, and vocalizing that had been going on for the last little while.

Beck appeared in the doorway and immediately noted his dog's urgent stare.

"No. You go sleep on your own bed. I paid a fortune for it." He pointed to a fancy dog bed in the corner.

It had clearly never seen an occupant, which helped me understand what the staring was all about.

"I'm sleeping on her side, aren't I?"

Beck looked sheepish. “I swear she used to sleep in her own bed, but ever since I moved in here, she’s claimed the other side. I’ve tried kicking her out but she always sneaks back up while I’m sleeping.”

“Is she going to do that all night?” I asked.

Even though I wasn’t looking at her, I could feel Larry boring a hole into the side of my head with her laser-like focus.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had anyone stay over since we’ve lived here.”

Not gonna lie, I kind of loved hearing that.

“Have you got a T-shirt I can sleep in?” I asked.

Beck looked a little bemused. “Sure. There’s a spare toothbrush in the bathroom if you want it, too.”

“Perfect,” I said, climbing out of bed.

In the bathroom, I took care of business and then spotted the toothbrush Beck had thoughtfully left for me on the sink. I brushed my teeth and used my finger to fix my smudged eye makeup, then I returned to the bedroom.

“Gray or white?” Beck asked, a T-shirt in each hand.

“Gray,” I said, and he handed me a well-worn shirt that felt buttery-soft in my hands. It was so large when I put it on that we both laughed.

“Okay, that’s enough of that, or I’ll get a complex,” I said.

We got back into bed, and I scooted over so Beck and I were predominantly on his side.

“Okay, Larry, have at it,” I said.

I didn’t have to ask twice. Beck’s dog leapt onto the bed as though she’d been propelled by a cannon and proceeded to spin in a circle, pawing at the duvet fussily. After a second or two she reversed directions before plopping down, her back pressing against my leg.

“Isn’t this cozy?” I said wryly.

“She likes to lean,” Beck apologized. “We can switch sides if you’re not a dog person.”

He started to throw back the covers but I caught his arm.

“Relax. We had a dog when I was a kid and he used to sleep with me all the time.”

“Oh. Cool. But still, let me know if she annoys you.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” I promised.

He leaned close and pressed a kiss to my lips. “Thanks for indulging her. And me.”

“It’s not an indulgence. She’s lovely.”

He reached out to turn off the light, and we shifted around so that he was spooning me from behind, a thoroughly delightful situation that made me feel pleasantly overwhelmed and ridiculously safe. What woman wouldn't want a man-mountain cradling her to sleep?

"Your hair smells nice," Beck said.

His hand slid possessively over one of my breasts and he pressed a kiss to the nape of my neck.

I blinked in the darkness, a dozen thoughts and feelings bouncing around inside my head and chest.

Chief among them was the realization that if ever there had been a time for me to play it safe, I'd blown past it a long time ago. I was up to my eyeballs in whatever was happening between me and Beck, about as invested as it was possible for a person to be.

He was a lovely, kind, smart, hard-working guy. He was also wildly sexy and incredibly good-looking, and pretty much a love god. Was it any wonder I'd fallen so hard and fast?

I could feel the worry hamster starting to rev up his wheel, and I made an effort to focus on the here and now.

The feel of Beck's chest against my back. The warmth of his breath against my shoulder. The smell of clean sheets.

A loud, shuddering snore destroyed my quest for mindfulness. There was a short pause, then I felt Beck draw breath to speak.

"Did I mention Larry snores like a buzzsaw?"

I started to laugh, because this was really not how I'd imagined the evening going. After a moment or two, Beck caught the bug and soon we were both wriggling with laughter. Every time I started to sober up, Beck would set me off again and vice versa, and it wasn't long before my belly was aching and my face was wet with tears.

"Stop. Oh, God, my stomach," I gasped.

Beck solved our dilemma by kissing me, the sensuous slide of his tongue against mine the perfect antidote to our hysteria. After a moment he pulled back and rested his forehead against mine.

"Regretting staying the night?" he asked quietly.

"Nope."

His arms tightened around me. "Correct answer."

We shifted into a new position with my head resting on his shoulder, his arms wrapped warmly around me. And that was how I fell asleep.

Talk about a perfect date.

HALEY

If someone had asked me a month ago if I was happy with my life, I would have given them an emphatic yes. I had a good job with great people, and I was growing my own business doing something I loved. My parents were alive and well, my sister doing well in her chosen career. In other words, everything was rocking along just fine.

Now that Beck was a part of my life, though, it felt as though I was more than happy. I was happy plus, if that's even a thing. Everything just seemed better because he was part of my world.

For example, the morning after I spent the night at his place, he made me pancakes and we took Larry for a walk. They were just ordinary pancakes, and the trail we chose wasn't particularly scenic, but Beck made me laugh and held my hand and generally made me feel like there was no place in the world he would rather be as we made our way along the trail.

The feeling was completely mutual.

The following day was a Monday and the first time we were going to interact in public after sleeping together. I was nervous about what he might do to reveal our new status—whatever that was. I hadn't dared bring up the subject of my sister again, but my concern was still bubbling away in the back of my brain. If Jess found out that I was seeing her ex, she would not handle it well. But I'd already fucked things up once with Beck by raising the topic of my sister, so I'd swallowed my concerns and told myself to just go with the flow. If Jess found out about me and Beck via one of her Colebury friends, I'd simply deal with the consequences. Uncomfortable as they might potentially be.

I needn't have worried. When Beck arrived on his delivery run he greeted everyone in his usual friendly way. Was there a dirty glint in his eye when he smiled at me? Definitely, but it was subtle enough that I was confident I was the only one to register it. On the way out the door, he stopped by the espresso machine where I was working to tell me they'd found the current blend to work best with a slightly coarser grind. Then he'd dropped his voice to ask what I was doing the following night. With one eye on Zara, who was serving a customer, I told him I didn't have any plans, and he informed me that I did now. When Zara moved within earshot, he went back to coffee talk before making an easy-breezy exit.

That was when I understood that even though we hadn't talked about my anxieties regarding my sister since that afternoon, Beck had taken them on board and was respecting them anyway. The fact that he was prepared to do that for me, that he'd taken the initiative without me having to raise the issue again... Well, it meant a lot.

When he showed up at my place the following night, he brought me a loaf of sourdough bread his mom had baked for him and a pot of freshly churned butter from a local farm. I'd had a whole meal planned, but we wound up naked in my bed before I had a chance to get the salmon steaks I'd bought out of the fridge, and we wound up feasting on fresh bread and butter at ten o'clock.

One of my all-time favorite meals ever.

Being with him was both effortless and energizing. He made me feel smarter and funnier and sexier than I'd ever felt before, and it was pretty damned addictive. Which was why I was seriously torn when my mother rang to invite me to their place Friday night to celebrate my birthday.

I wasn't huge on birthdays, but dinner with my parents sounded like a very nice, low-key way to celebrate. But I was torn over whether I should invite Beck along. On one hand, I knew my night would be extra special if he was there, but there were so many cons it wasn't funny. For starters, my parents knew him as Jess's boyfriend. I wasn't sure I was up to explaining all the ins and outs of how Beck and I were now seeing each other. Not yet, anyway.

Then there was the fact that it was early to be inviting him to meet my parents, even if he'd already met them before. I didn't want to be *that* girl. And, finally, there was the fact that I didn't want him to feel obliged to buy me a gift when we'd only just started seeing each other.

So when my mom asked if I wanted to invite anyone else to dinner, I said no, and when Beck invited me to his place Friday night, I simply told him I was catching up with my parents and asked if we could make it Saturday night instead.

He was fine with switching nights, but I was left feeling a little wistful. We had so much fun when we were together—both in and out of bed—but there were some landmines we needed to negotiate at some point down the road.

If we made it that far.

My birthday got off to a great start when I arrived at work that morning to find Dave Beringer waiting for me in a pair of fancy running shorts and a Brooklyn Bruisers T-shirt. My first thought was that something had happened with Zara, but he quickly reassured me.

“No, no, everything’s great. This was just the only time I could sneak out to come talk to you. She thinks I’m out for a run.”

“Okay,” I said, still completely baffled as to why he was there.

“It’s Zara’s birthday next month, and I wanted to get her something special. She’s mentioned you make bespoke boots a few times. Raved about them, to be honest. So I wanted to ask if you could make a pair for her for me?”

He was adorably earnest for such a big, powerful guy.

“Of course. I would love to make something for Zara.”

“And a month is enough time for you to do your thing?” Dave checked, looking relieved.

“Absolutely. But I’m going to need a few things from you if you want to keep this on the down low. And you should probably know the price tag before we go any further.”

I told him what I charge for a pair of handmade boots and he didn’t even flinch, simply nodding as though he’d expected to be paying that kind of money for a bespoke product. As a retired professional hockey player, I figured money was not a huge issue for him, but it was nice to have that part of the discussion out of the way. Next, I asked him to bring me a pair of Zara’s most comfortable shoes so I could use them for sizing and choose a last to suit her foot. Then I told him to come up with a list of her favorite things—places she loved, significant landmarks in her life, favorite colors, fond childhood memories, anything he could think of. Dave nodded along like a kid taking notes for an exam.

“Got it.”

I scribbled down my address and phone number and handed it to him. “I’m there most afternoons, but maybe text first to make sure I’m home.”

“I’ll try to get you something in the next couple of days, but I’m going to have to be sneaky about stealing her favorite shoes. Zara notices things.”

I smiled. “She definitely does.”

Dave ducked his head into the kitchen to say hi to Roddy before he left, snagging a couple of warm-from-the-oven baby brioches to take with him. I finished my opening routine with a big smile on my face, my head full of ideas for Zara’s boots.

I’d had the opportunity to make shoes for a couple of friends over the years, as well as family members, and they were always my favorite commissions. There was a different energy that comes from making something for someone you know.

My good mood carried me through the morning and into the afternoon. I was in between commissions at the moment, so I spent a few hours tweaking the images on my Etsy site and doing some painful but necessary online marketing before getting dressed for dinner at my folks’ place. Normally I wouldn’t bother, but I knew my mom would have made an effort, and it seemed rude not to dress up a little myself.

“Happy birthday!” my father sang the moment I arrived, pulling me in for a big dad hug, the kind that makes you feel eight years old with a scraped knee all over again.

My mom was next in line, and she threw her arms around me and pressed a perfumed kiss to my cheek.

“Happy birthday, darling. We’ve made all your favorites. Mac and cheese, roast chicken, and pineapple upside-down cake for dessert.”

“Sounds great, Mom,” I said.

My father had mixed up a pitcher of Aperol spritzes, and I sat through half a dozen silly toasts from my parents before opening their gift, a lovely necklace with a Swarovski crystal pendant shaped like an apple.

“I don’t know what it was, but it just called out to me for you,” my mother said.

“I love it. Thank you,” I said sincerely, immediately lifting my hands to secure the necklace around my neck. The apple settled just above my cleavage, winking in the light.

“That will give all the men an excuse to look at your rack,” my mom said approvingly.

My dad howled with laughter as I rolled my eyes.

“That’s beautiful, mom. Maybe I should just go topless, cut out the middle man.”

“Don’t be crass, Haley,” my mother said, very dry. “Subtlety is the name of the game.”

My father leaned across to kiss my mother’s cheek. “Never change, my darling,” he said affectionately.

My parents served up the meal and I told them about my commission from Dave Beringer. I’d just finished describing some ideas I’d had for Zara’s boots when my mother leaned across the table and put her hand on mine, squeezing gently.

“I’m so pleased the business is working for you,” she said. “You’ve been so... I don’t know...*content* lately. As though you’ve found your place in the world. And tonight you’re just glowing.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, things are going well right now. Life’s pretty good. And, um, I’m kind of seeing someone.”

My mother’s whole face lit up. “Ha! I knew it. I’ve always said that intercourse is wonderful for the complexion.”

“Mom,” I said.

She’s always been a bit risqué after a few glasses of wine.

“A little bit of decorum, Lois,” my father said. “We all know both my girls are virgins.”

My mom and I laughed dutifully at my father’s favorite joke.

“So, when do we get to meet him?” my mother asked, all bright-eyed interest.

“I don’t know if we’re at that stage yet,” I said cautiously.

“Well, all right, but know that your mother and I are standing by, ready to embarrass you at a moment’s notice,” my father said. “I’ll even dust off the old family photo albums, just in case.”

“Oh, please do,” I said. “He can laugh at that time you got your hair permed.”

My father looked wounded. “I’d always wanted curly hair. You can’t blame a man for following his dreams.”

“I can,” my mom piped up.

We all laughed and suddenly it seemed silly to hold back my good news.

“All right, you twisted my arm. I’ve been seeing Daniel Beck,” I blurted.

My mother frowned as though I was speaking a foreign language and she was trying to decipher what I was saying.

“Daniel Beck. Not Jess’s Daniel?” she clarified.

“We ran into each other through work, and one thing led to another.”

I could tell by the way they were both working hard to appear neutral that my news had thrown them. And not in a good way.

“I always just assumed he’d stayed in New York after he and Jess broke up,” Dad said.

“He’s living in Montpelier. He and his brother have started a coffee-roasting business.”

“Huh,” Mom said. “So, how long has this been going on?”

She was trying to keep things casual, but I knew what she was thinking: out of all the men in Vermont, why pick Beck when I knew how sensitive and volatile my sister could be?

“It’s only been a few weeks. But I really like him,” I confessed, hoping they could see that this was important to me, and not just some infatuation or fling.

“You know Jess will be upset when she hears about it,” Mom said, finally getting to the crux of the issue.

“She’s never been a big sharer,” Dad joked, trying to relieve some of the tension. “And she was pretty worked up about the breakup, if you remember.”

“I do,” I said.

I wasn’t surprised their thoughts had automatically gone to Jess, but it was a little disappointing they couldn’t also be excited for me. Did the two things have to be mutually exclusive?

“I was thinking I should give her a call and fill her in, so she doesn’t hear it from someone else first,” I suggested.

My mother and father both frowned.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. She’s been doing so well lately. We don’t want to derail her,” Mom said.

“But wouldn’t it be more derailing if one of her friends saw me and Beck together and let her know?” I countered. “I’m thinking it would be

smarter to get ahead of this.”

They exchanged looks, clearly trying to discern where the other stood.

“She’s been doing really well lately,” my father reiterated, backing my mother up.

“I’m visiting her next month. Why don’t I do the deed then? That way I can be on hand to contain any fall out,” my mother suggested.

“But what if she finds out before then?” I asked.

It seemed to me that it would be better to be upfront with Jess, even if it meant she blew up at me and all that that would entail. A barrage of phone calls, nasty text messages full of imagined slights dredged up from our shared childhood. No doubt she’d try to blacken Beck’s name, too, at some point.

So much fun. But she’d run out of steam eventually, and if Beck and I were going to keep seeing each other, it had to be done. I’d rather just grit my teeth and get it over with.

“Personally, I think waiting until your mother can break the news is worth the risk,” Dad said.

“So do I,” my mother agreed.

I stared at them both, outnumbered. They were always more conservative than me when it came to managing Jess.

“Okay. If that’s the way you want to handle it,” I said.

Suddenly, I felt tired. It wasn’t anyone’s fault that my sister was so high-maintenance, but sometimes it was exhausting having to second-guess everything in order to try to soften the blows that most people took in stride.

But Jess had always been like that. She probably always would be.

It wasn’t something I could talk about with my parents, however. We’d had a frightening insight into how quickly and easily our lives could have changed that night ten years ago, and my parents’ sole focus now was on ensuring Jess never reached that low again. Everything was subsumed by that goal, no matter what else had to fall by the wayside.

“You should bring Beck with you next time you come,” Mom said, belatedly realizing that they hadn’t exactly welcomed my announcement with open arms.

Before I could respond, my mother’s phone lit up with a call, vibrating on the table.

“It’s Jess,” she said when she checked the screen. “She must be calling to wish you happy birthday.”

She was smiling as she hit the button to take the call on speaker mode.

“Jess, sweetheart, perfect timing,” Mom said.

“Something really horrible has happened and I don’t know what to do or where to go,” my sister said, her voice thick with tears.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? What’s happened? Are you safe?” Mom asked, instantly on the alert.

“I lost the job. I was so sure I was going to get it, but they chose another girl, and I came home to tell Jonny, and he just didn’t give a shit, Mom. He said I needed to grow up and not get upset about every little rejection, and we had a huge fight and—and he told me I was more trouble than it was worth—” Jess started crying in earnest, the sound heartbreaking.

My parents exchanged looks and I knew exactly what they were thinking: it was going to be a long night. When Jess got worked up like this, it took hours to dig down and work out what had really happened and help find ways to resolve it.

“Okay, deep breaths, honey,” Mom said. “Dad’s here, and Haley. We’re all here for you. We can work this out. What’s happening now? Where’s Jonny?”

“I don’t know. I’m at Sabi’s place. She said I can sleep on the couch if I need to.” Jess sniffed a couple of times.

“That’s sounds perfect. Tell me about the job you missed out on,” Mom said.

“The people at *Vogue* were interested in me. That’s what my agent said. He told me they wanted me for the April issue. He said they loved my look.”

I shifted guiltily, remembering the conversation I’d had with Charlotte at the art store. I’d been intending to warn my parents about the *Vogue* shoot she’d mentioned, but that was the afternoon that had started it all with Beck, and I’d forgotten.

“That’s exciting,” Mom said, her tone calm and everyday as she did her best to normalize the situation.

I’d seen her do this a lot over the years. She was a pro at it, as was my father. Me, too, I suppose. We’d all done more than our fair share of talking Jess down.

“I didn’t want to tell you guys about it until it was booked,” Jess hiccuped.

For the next half hour, I sat at the kitchen table with my parents, chipping in when needed to offer a positive observation or bolstering point of view. A fuller picture of what had gone down emerged when Jess revealed that Jonny had been involved in an important work Zoom when she'd come home and demanded his attention. When he'd told her he'd be finished in ten minutes, Jess had pulled the router out of the wall and demanded he be more supportive.

In other words, my sister had gone into full hurricane mode and Jonny had had some grounds for his reaction. I knew from living with Jess that it was disastrously easy to get sucked into the turmoil of her heightened emotional blowups. When she went over the top, it was all too easy to follow her, especially if she'd done something unfair or cruel or outrageous.

By eight, my mother's phone battery started to fade so she went into the study so she could keep talking to my sister while she plugged into a charger.

After she was gone, my father let out a sigh and massaged the skin between his eyebrows.

"So much for things going well with Jonny."

I patted his hand, because there wasn't much to say about the state of my sister's love life. As with all her boyfriends, Jess had idealized Jonny when she first met him. No one was smarter, kinder, sexier, more generous than him. But her relationships always got fractious when the honeymoon phase was over.

What goes up must come down, right?

Inevitably, the new, perfect man showed that he had feet of clay, and went from being the sun, moon, and stars in my sister's eyes, to being a suspect person until eventually the relationship became untenable, and either my sister detached and walked away, or the poor guy trying to navigate the storms of my sister's personality decided he'd had enough.

That was when things could sometimes get really hairy, because my sister did not handle rejection well.

"I was really hoping she was going to grow out of all of this," my father said, his tone weary. "Once she started doing well with her modeling, and finding her feet in New York, I thought she'd finally found her place in the world."

I didn't know what to say to him. Jess had always been high-strung and changeable. The idea that she might simply grow out of her own personality

had never occurred to me.

With the help of a good therapist, maybe, but that subject had been off limits with my sister—and my parents—for years, ever since my sister had quit her mandated therapy after her suicide attempt.

“I’ll help you clear the table,” I said.

Together we tidied up, scraping plates and putting them into the dishwasher. I was putting away the placemats when my father made a dismayed sound.

“We didn’t do your cake,” he said. “Haley, I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. “I’m twenty-six. I’ll live.”

“We can do it now. I’ll get the candles.” My father went to the pantry to rummage.

The idea of the two of us going through the blow-out-the-candle routine while my mother counseled Jess in the study felt weird and wrong.

“Dad, it’s fine. We don’t need to do the candle thing.”

He stopped looking and turned back to me. “Alright. Do you want ice cream or cream with your cake?”

Before I could reply, Mom appeared in the doorway. “Chris, she’s talking herself into a self-hate spiral. Help!”

Getting caught up in a vortex of self-loathing was almost always the outcome of any major crisis in my sister’s life.

“Okay. I’m on it,” Dad said, hustling toward the study.

My mom sighed, harried. “I might be on a train to New York tomorrow the way things are going.”

“She’ll settle once she’s cried herself out,” I said, even though I was far from confident that was the case. When Jess got herself worked up, she could stay that way for a long time.

“I hope you’re right.” She rested a hand on my shoulder. “You go home. You don’t need to hang around while we put out the fire.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. And don’t worry about Daniel. I’ll think of some way to sell it to her when I’m visiting next month, if it’s still an issue.”

It took a moment for me to understand that she meant if Beck and I were still together. No doubt she’d be hoping that wasn’t the case by then, based on tonight’s response.

“Lois.” My father’s voice echoed up the hall from the study.

“Duty calls. Speak later.” She pressed a kiss to my temple and rushed off.

I stood in the kitchen for a beat, listening to the low murmur of my parents’ voices as they talked my sister down. On the counter was my birthday cake, along with the wrapping paper and ribbon from my present.

Not quite the way I’d envisioned this evening ending. And yet not entirely unfamiliar, either.

We’d been through scenarios like tonight before, so many times. All of us dropping everything to rally around and make sure Jess felt supported. Putting aside our own burdens to take up hers.

I gathered my birthday card and the pretty box my necklace had come in and tucked them into my bag, then I let myself out of the house. The streets of Colebury seemed very dark as I drove home, the moon and stars covered by low-lying clouds. I let myself into my apartment and wandered through the darkened rooms, not quite sure where to put myself.

The problem with these crises of Jess’s was that we never knew which ones would blow over and which ones were serious. Not at first, anyway. As my mother had said, she might be on a train to New York tomorrow if Jess showed signs of truly melting down. On the other hand, Jess might reconcile with Jonny in a tearful reunion and all would be fine again, tonight’s big drama quickly forgotten.

By Jess, anyway.

The ping of my phone distracted me from my thoughts, and I pulled it out to find a text from Beck:

Know you’re with your folks, so don’t worry about this till later, but you okay with seafood? Planning my next gastronomic seduction.

I tapped back that I was fine with seafood, and he responded right away:

Didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner, sorry.

I texted back that he hadn’t and that I was home, and the next thing I knew my phone lit up with his call.

“Hey,” he said, his voice deep and smooth and lovely. “You’re home early.”

“Something came up with my parents.”

He was the last person I wanted to discuss Jess’s crisis with, for obvious reasons.

“Shame to waste a perfectly good evening when it’s only eight thirty,” Beck said, his tone loaded with dirty intent.

I couldn’t help smiling, but I wasn’t about to inflict my flat mood on him.

“I’d invite you over, but I’m not great company right now,” I admitted.

There was a short pause.

“Does that mean you don’t want company? Because I’ll take you any way I can get you,” he said. “We can chillax, watch a movie or something. No planning necessary.”

I could hear the warmth and concern in his voice and the thought of having him here, a big, sunny presence, was very tempting.

“You don’t want to put up with me being mopey,” I said.

“Can I seal the deal with the offer of a pint of ice cream?” Beck joked.

He was being so sweet, and talking to him had already made me feel better. I stared at my shoes, trying to work out if it was fair to invite him over or not.

“I can be there in twenty,” he said, clearly sensing my weakness.

“All right. That sounds nice,” I said.

“Be there soon.”

He ended the call and my gaze fell on the pile of clean laundry I still hadn’t folded and put away. If this thing between us had a future, Beck would soon learn I was not the tidiest person in the world.

Still, there was no reason for him to find that out just yet.

Moving quickly, I began the challenging task of making my place look presentable in just twenty minutes.

BECK

“Hey,” Haley said when she answered my knock, opening the door wide for me to enter.

She looked so good to me that my first impulse was to press her against the wall and reacquaint myself with her amazing mouth. Only the sadness shadowing her pretty eyes stopped me. She’d said she wasn’t good company before I’d more or less forced myself on her. The least I could do was show a little self-restraint and do what I’d come to do, which was offer a comforting shoulder if I could. Along with ice cream.

And, if she wanted it, crazy-sexy times.

But only if she wanted it, and only after the comfort and ice cream. I wasn’t a complete caveman.

“You look great,” I said, because she did.

She was wearing a pair of gold shoes with tiny heels, and her dress was black with little birds in gold cages printed on it. The fabric hugged her waist and breasts before flaring out over her hips. There was probably a fancy name for the style, all I knew was that it suited her curvy figure to perfection.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling, but I could see she was making an effort to be bright and pretend nothing was wrong.

“Let’s eat ice cream and dish,” I said, and this time I was rewarded with a genuine laugh.

“Follow me to the kitchen,” she said, leading the way up the hall.

Last time I’d been here I’d been too busy thinking about getting her naked to pay much attention to my surroundings, but this time I had a good look around as we entered her living room.

Her sofa was a soft blue color and looked as though it would be good to touch. There were lots of cushions, and the walls were covered with art. Sketches, framed postcards, an old cuckoo clock someone had painted in crazy colors, antique photographs, a couple of collages.

I stopped to examine one and recognized the style of a fluffy dog sketch fixed in the corner of the frame.

“Did you do this?” I asked.

“It’s mostly just fooling around,” she said with typical modesty. “I threw a few ideas together and slapped a frame on it.”

She shrugged.

I examined the collage with new eyes. There was a small scrap of fabric with a face embroidered on it—just a few stitches, but more than enough to convey character and emotion—as well as tiny landscapes painted on used teabags, the sepia tone lending the images an antique feel. There were old coins, some paper that had been folded many times and then smoothed flat, some found objects. It was an eclectic collection of tiny moments in art and incredibly charming.

“I like it,” I said.

“We should eat that ice cream before it melts,” she said, taking the bag from my hand.

I followed her into the kitchen and watched as she collected bowls and spoons before prying the lid off the ice cream.

“How many scoops?” she asked, glancing across at me as she reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

There was something about the small nervous gesture and the careful way she was carrying herself and the shadows behind her eyes that made me want to cross the room and haul her into my arms.

“Whatever a normal serving looks like, then double it,” I said, shamelessly trawling for laughs.

“Maybe I should just take out what I want and you can eat yours right out of the carton?” she suggested.

“Genius plan. Let’s do that,” I said.

She smiled and shook her head, concentrating on scooping ice cream into the two bowls. While she was working, I walked to the sink to wash my hands and glanced out into the closed-in porch outside the window.

“Hey, there’s a workshop out there,” I said, surprised. “It that yours?”

“That’s where I do my leatherwork.”

I frowned, because this was the first I'd heard about this.

"What sort of things do you make?"

"Bags, belts, shoes, and boots." She put the lid back on the ice cream and then stashed it in the freezer.

"Boots?" I asked, a little stunned by the continuing revelations. "As in objects people put on their feet and walk around in?"

"That's right."

"Do you mind if I...?" I gestured toward the doorway to the porch.

"Sure. If you're interested. But you don't have to look just to be polite."

"Are you kidding me? I just found out I'm dating a cobbler. This is awesome."

I walked out onto the porch and surveyed the space. A large workbench ran the length of the rear wall, its surface bearing the scars of many years of hard labor. An industrial sewing machine was placed at one end, and a rack of tools marched neatly along the wall, the wooden handles stained with the patina of age. To the right was a tall shelving unit filled with large cardboard tubes, each filled with rolls of brightly colored leather.

"Technically, a cobbler repairs shoes. I'm more of a cordwainer. But people don't even know what that means anymore."

I glanced back to where Haley stood in the doorway, two bowls of ice cream in hand.

"This isn't a hobby."

"I have a shop on Etsy," she said.

"Can I see some of your work?"

"I'm in between commissions at the moment, but I keep photos of all my pieces."

She approached the workbench and set down the ice cream before pulling a beat-up, old laptop from the shelf underneath. She flipped the screen up and clicked on a folder, and I stared in awe as she flicked through images of boots, satchels, belts, backpacks, saddle bags, vests... You name it, if it could be made out of leather, Haley had made it *exquisitely*. It was hard to take in all the little details as the images clicked past, but I saw enough to know she was a master of her craft.

"How did you get so damn good at this?" I asked, blown away.

"When I was growing up, the old man next door was a cordwainer. I was fascinated by what he did, and I used to hang around his workshop like a bad smell, asking too many questions. Eventually he started giving me

jobs to do, to make myself useful. Honestly? I think he probably thought it would send me packing, but I loved it. This bench is his, and a lot of my tools. He gave them to me when he retired.”

“Haley, these are amazing,” I said, staring at a pair of burnished oxblood-colored boots on the screen. “What do you call this detail with the little holes?”

“Brogueing. The theory is that originally the holes were to help drain your shoes after you’d been walking in mud. Now it’s just decorative.”

The work that must go into something like that, all the careful, well-thought-out details...

“The ice cream is melting,” she said, picking up our bowls and taking a step toward the door. “It’s nicer in the living room.”

I understood then that she was uncomfortable having me in her workspace, and intuited that she must spend a lot of time here alone, making beautiful, clever things with her hands.

This was her inner sanctum, her bat cave.

“No wonder you have such a firm grip,” I said as I followed her through the kitchen.

She threw a startled look over her shoulder. “Do I?”

“Not too strong, don’t worry. Just right,” I said.

She blushed and laughed. “Okay, I’ll take your word for it.”

We sat on the couch, and I tried not to get distracted by the way her skirt rode up when she crossed her legs. She passed my bowl over, and for a moment there was nothing but the sound of our spoons clinking against our bowls.

“I’m happy to listen, if you want to talk about whatever it is,” I said.

Haley offered me a small smile. “Thanks, but it’s okay.”

I tried to work out if this was one of those situations where I should push or not. It was hard to know, given the newness of our connection. She could be so open and vulnerable sometimes, but she was also self-contained and, it turned out, very private about certain things.

Then I caught her frowning down into her bowl and suddenly it hit me why she’d rejected my offer.

“If it’s about Jess, I can handle it,” I said.

She stared at me. “How did you know?”

“Family’s the one thing that can really fuck a person up. Plus, you were at your folks’ place tonight.”

“Right.” She darted a look at me, and I could tell she was deciding whether to take me at my word or not.

“Hit me with it. You know you want to,” I said.

“Jess called while I was at my parents’. She and her boyfriend had a big fight tonight and she was really upset. She gets herself worked up sometimes—” Haley caught herself and shook her head. “What am I talking about? You know how she gets.”

“Yeah. I do.”

I was intimately familiar with Jess’s hysterical crying, her litanies of my failings and the way I’d hurt her, the threats to leave, the threats to tell everyone we knew how horrible I was...

“Mom and Dad are trying to talk her down right now. Mom’s talking about maybe catching the train into New York tomorrow, and I’m wondering if maybe I should offer to go. Mom went last time, when... Well, when you guys broke up, actually. It’s my turn. I’m just not sure about asking for time off when I’ve only just started at the Bean.”

“What do you mean, it’s your turn?” I asked.

“We all do our part,” she said simply.

“To manage Jess, you mean?”

“To keep her safe.” She gave me a searching look. “Did you know about what happened when she was seventeen?”

It took me a moment to answer.

“Yeah, I knew.”

Jess had reminded me of her suicide attempt every time she felt the need for leverage. She’d used it as a cudgel to beat me back into line. Toward the end, she’d used it as a threat to make me stay when I’d finally had enough.

I rubbed the back of my neck, conscious of how stiff it was all of a sudden. After telling Haley I was fine talking about her sister, it turned out that maybe I wasn’t. Dredging up the Jess stuff made me anxious. That’s why I didn’t go there, not even in the privacy of my own mind. That’s why I always avoided talking about her as much as I could.

The twelve months we’d lived together in New York would forever be branded on my psyche as the worst of my life. She’d pushed me to the breaking point and beyond—and I’d stayed because I’d felt absurdly responsible for her happiness and because she’d gaslit me into believing all our problems were my fault.

“None of us saw it coming that time,” Haley said. “So we try to stay vigilant, but it’s hard to know when to hit the panic button.”

Because Jess was always up and down like a roller coaster. Boy, was I familiar with that ride.

I shifted on the couch.

“We don’t have to talk about this,” Haley said, and I knew she’d picked up on my unease.

I moved my tongue around my suddenly dry mouth. “Probably a good idea.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault.” I was the one who’d insisted on us talking. I was the one who’d thought I could handle it.

But apparently I couldn’t. Apparently, I was still a lot more fucked up over her sister than I’d let myself believe.

We were both quiet for a beat, then Haley stood and collected the bowls. “Would you like a cup of coffee? Maybe tea?”

I looked at her standing there, her eyes full of questions, wanting to smooth over the moment. She was so pretty and lovely and funny. And her sister was a manipulative, chaotic force of nature who had cast a blight over several years of my life.

Suddenly, the fact that Jess was a huge part of Haley’s world felt like something I couldn’t just keep stepping around because I wanted to keep having fun with Haley. Suddenly, it felt very large and very unavoidable.

If I kept coming here, if Haley and I kept falling into bed and going for walks and cooking each other dinner and all of the other things that people did when they fell for each other, I wasn’t going to be able to pretend Jess and that part of my life didn’t exist.

She was Haley’s sister, her family. If I kept seeing Haley, I’d be inviting Jess back into my life, by extension.

The thought was enough to push me to my feet.

“I might go,” I said. “You’ve had a big day. And I’ve got a delivery due first thing.”

I watched Haley absorb my retreat, saw the way she lifted her chin and took a small, bracing breath before responding.

“Sure. That makes sense.” She stared at the bowls she was holding as though she wasn’t sure why they were in her hands. “Just give me a second to get rid of these.”

She disappeared into the kitchen, and I stood and shoved my hands into my pockets. Now that I'd formed the idea, I just wanted to be gone. Away from temptation, away from all the memories and conflicts. My gaze bounced around the room and landed on Haley's handbag on the coffee table. The top of a birthday card poked out of the side pocket, along with a scrap of ribbon. I frowned, putting the card together with her pretty dress and fancy shoes, and when Haley returned I turned to her.

"Is today your birthday?" I asked.

"Yep."

She seemed embarrassed by it, which was very on-brand for Haley. This woman had probably never knowingly hogged the spotlight in her life. No doubt she'd learned early on that there was room for only one prima donna in her family.

"You should have told me," I said.

"Only jerks advertise their birthdays."

It was supposed to be a joke, but it wasn't funny. What must it have been like for Haley, growing up with a sister like Jess? The love bombing, the mood swings, the intense, ever-present fear of rejection, the bouts of self-loathing and flagellation, the rages and tantrums and the rash impulses...

Was it any wonder Haley was so sweet and self-effacing and private? I thought about the way she'd hidden her leatherwork from me—not intentionally, I knew, but because it simply hadn't occurred to her that something she cared about and had invested a great deal of time and energy in would interest me—and it made me feel so fucking sad.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Haley had learned to blend into the background and just get on with shit while her family focused all their energy on her troubled sister.

"It really isn't a big deal," Haley said, and I realized the silence had stretched a long time. "Thanks for the ice cream, and for coming over. It was really nice."

She turned to see me out.

"Wait. I don't have to go. We can still watch that movie," I said, feeling bad.

I'd come over to make things better, not worse.

"You don't have to stay because it's my birthday."

"I want to stay," I said, because part of me did. A large part of me.

"So I totally imagined you checking out and running for the hills after I brought up my sister just now?" she asked.

I tried to find the words to explain the conflict raging inside me. Only a person who has survived emotional abuse can understand how hard it is to reclaim yourself when you finally make the decision to leave. How much effort it takes to forgive yourself and understand that it's never your fault. I thought I'd reached that place a while ago, but tonight had shown me that the ground I was standing on was shakier than I'd imagined, and I'd be lying if I pretended that didn't freak me out. I didn't want to go backwards.

I didn't want to invite that darkness back into my life.

"Don't worry, you don't have to answer that," Haley said.

She turned and headed for the front door, leaving me with no choice but to follow her. When she opened the door to the warm night air, I moved past her and hesitated on the threshold.

"Happy birthday," I said. "For what it's worth, you deserve to be spoiled."

She blinked rapidly a couple of times then dropped her gaze to her feet.

"Thanks."

She was so damned lovely. I could only imagine the shit she'd swallowed over the years. And here I was, serving her up another portion.

"I'm so fucking sorry." I pulled her into my arms, wrapping myself around her. Her head rested against my chest, her arms circling my waist, and I had to exert real self-control not to squeeze too hard.

She was such an amazing person. I really, really liked her.

But the Jess issue... the Jess issue was *big*.

I'd been dancing around it, avoiding thinking about it, losing myself in how good I felt when I was with Haley. But you could only avoid your truths for so long, and tonight reality had come crashing in, forcing me to face up to what was happening between me and Haley and what that would mean for my future.

The thought made me tighten my grip on her. Then I forced myself to let go and step back.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I said.

"Drive safe," she said, her gaze infinitely sad.

"I will."

There was nothing else to say, so I pressed a single, firm kiss to her lips and turned to go. Two steps to cross the porch, three steps to the front gate,

then I was striding up the street to my van, hating that even though I felt sad and guilty, I also felt as though I'd escaped something.

HALEY

I wasn't surprised when Beck called me the next morning to cancel our date. He checked to make sure everything was okay with Jess first, and I passed on what my mother had texted me first thing—they'd successfully talked her down and she'd gone back to her apartment and reconciled with her boyfriend.

Beck told me he was glad it had all worked out. Then he'd canceled our date for that night. To his credit, he was brutally honest with me.

"I really like you, Haley. But the thought of having Jess back in my life, even in a small way... It's pretty much my worst nightmare. So I'm going to take a step back, get my head on straight, if that's okay with you?"

I was so proud of how clear and calm my voice sounded when I responded, because inside I was gnashing my teeth and wailing, shaking a fist at the sky.

I'd sensed this was coming last night, when he'd withdrawn from me. When he'd hugged me goodbye on the doorstep, it had felt like just that—goodbye. I could feel how far away he already was, even though he'd been standing right there.

"I understand," I said. "I'm really sorry for upsetting you last night."

"You didn't do a single thing wrong," he said. "It's just that when your sister and I broke up, I promised myself I would never let myself get sucked back into her orbit again. It got very intense between us. Especially at the end. It's not something I like to think about much. If we keep seeing each other, I've got to work a few things out for myself. And it's better to do it now, I think. Before this thing between you and me takes on a life of its own."

“Sure. I get it,” I said, as though I hadn’t passed that point days ago. As though I wasn’t head over heels for him already, and it didn’t hollow out my chest to know he was essentially asking me to give him space to work out if I was worth the pain and hassle of having Jess in his life again.

“We’ll speak soon, though, okay?”

“Look after yourself,” I said.

Then I ended the call and went and sat on the back steps and had a quiet, pathetic cry all on my own. I didn’t even bother wiping the tears off my cheeks, just sat there and let them drip from my chin onto my pajama pants.

That saying, be careful what you wish for? Tailor-made for this situation. Once upon a time Beck had been the secret wish of my heart, and for a few brief days he’d been mine and I’d had a glimpse of how good we could be together.

And now it was starting to look as though those few days were all I was going to get—and there wasn’t a thing in hell I could do about it. It’s not like I could divorce my sister or cut her out of my life. Apart from what that would do to my parents, I loved Jess, and even though she had hurt me terribly over the years, I didn’t doubt her love for me. I wanted her to be happy, and I saw her struggles and pain. Mental illness wasn’t something anyone ever chose for themselves, and I knew that at heart she was a deeply, deeply afraid person who desperately craved love and security. The great tragedy was that her desperation and fear actually pushed away the very people she most wanted in her life.

Even if by some miracle she suddenly did a one-eighty and agreed to therapy, Jess was always going to have her ups and downs, and she was always going to need us to have her back.

As much as I couldn’t change my family, I couldn’t change whatever had happened between Jess and Beck, either. I couldn’t undo the wounds my sister had inflicted on him. All I could do was give Beck the space to decide whether being with me was more important to him than who my sister was and what she’d done to him.

Whatever that was. At this point, I was almost afraid to ask, because Beck had clearly been profoundly affected by whatever had taken place between them.

Thank God I had Zara’s birthday boots to distract me.

Dave dropped by my place on Sunday and I took measurements from Zara's favorite shoes, noting where the rub marks were inside the leather and where the pressure marks were on the insole. We talked colors and themes, and I showed him a few ideas I'd been working on. He enthusiastically endorsed all of them, which was very sweet but not nearly as helpful as he thought it was, but he did offer one tiny bit of guidance.

"I'd really like for there to be a mountain goat somewhere, if that won't ruin the overall aesthetic," he said. "We first met at the Mountain Goat, so I'd like to pay homage."

"I can definitely squeeze a mountain goat in there," I said.

We ended the visit with him helping me select a beautiful whiskey-colored leather and deciding on oiled bronze eyelets and hardware, and that night I cut the uppers from the leather, taking my time with the task to make sure I got it exactly right.

As I worked, I rehearsed what it was going to be like seeing Beck the following day at the Bean when he arrived with his delivery. How crazy that I'd gone from being worried everyone would know we were dating to being terrified I'd break down in tears at the sight of him, all within a space of a few weeks.

I was jumpy and nervous all morning, burning myself not once but twice on the steaming wand.

"You are on a mission to cook yourself today, girl," Roddy said when, during a lull in business, he applied burn cream to the worst of my injuries.

"Stupid," I said.

His gaze was searching as he looked at me. "Anything you want to get off your chest?"

I forced a smile and shook my head. "Thanks, but I'm good."

There was too much to unpack, and I'd long ago formed the habit of keeping my family's business private. Jess had pulled some stunts in her time when she was living in Colebury, and after she'd tried to hurt herself, there had been talk in the community. She'd hated it, and so had I. So nice as it was for Roddy to offer, it was best to keep my own counsel, even if a part of me wanted to howl on his shoulder and beg for reassurance.

I returned to the counter and wiped away the coffee grounds around the grinder. Some sixth sense drew my gaze to the staff entrance, and sure enough, Beck was pushing the door wide, wheeling in our first delivery for the week.

I was almost afraid to look at him, worried how I'd react, and what he'd do. But I did, and he made eye contact with me, tilting his head in acknowledgement. I could see the warmth in his eyes alongside the wariness, and, weirdly, it gave me hope.

We had something special. I *knew* we did. Right there and then, I decided I was going to allow myself to hope. I was going to believe in us, in the way I felt when he held me, in the tenderness I felt in his touch. If I was wrong, if he opted for safety and keeping me and, by extension, my sister out of his life, I would be heartbroken. But pretending that I didn't want to be with him wasn't going to lessen that pain.

The only person I'd be fooling was myself.

BECK

It was really fucking tough seeing Haley when I made deliveries at the Bean. Every time I looked into her pretty face, I remembered all the good times we'd had together, in and out of bed.

Then I recalled the discussion we'd had at her place that night, and I remembered all over again why being with her was complicated. To put it mildly.

The eighteen months I'd spent with Jess Elliot had messed me up, no lie. I'd had girlfriends before her, but nothing had prepared me for the off-the-hook intensity and unpredictability of my relationship with her.

She'd dazzled me from the moment I'd seen her across a bar in Burlington. She'd easily been the most beautiful girl in the room with her long, wavy blond hair and perfect features. And her body... She'd been every *Sports Illustrated* cover come to life in a tiny minidress that molded her incredible figure. I'd pinched myself when she'd started paying attention to me, and when she took me outside and insisted I fuck her against the wall in the alley, I'd been so turned on I'd done it, even though I'd been waiting for someone to bust us the whole time. I'd soon learned that Jess got off on that kind of excitement, and I'd told myself she was passionate and bold and had gotten sucked all the way in.

I'd been just twenty-four when we moved to New York together with nothing but my car and a trunk full of her shoes and clothes. She'd had dreams of being a model, and I'd been so besotted I'd believed it was inevitable she'd hit the big time. In the meantime, it would be my job to support us tending bar at night and working as a barista during the day while she made the connections she needed to fly high.

I had been utterly unprepared for the way Jess had unraveled in the ensuing months. She'd expected the city to embrace her with open arms, but there were thousands of beautiful girls like her with the same dream of finding fame and fortune on the runway. Every rejection had sent her into days of tears and anger, and navigating her changing moods became my biggest challenge.

Then suddenly I became the problem. I wasn't supportive enough. I didn't believe in her enough. I didn't make enough money to pay for the best photographer so her portfolio could blow everyone else's out of the water. She accused me of not loving her anymore. Thought I was flirting with other women. Disrespecting her. Lying to her. Cheating on her.

To say I was dizzy with the switch from being the center of her world to being the root of all her unhappiness was an understatement. I reached out to my parents back home in Vermont, needing guidance, and my mother had seen what I couldn't. "She's not well, Danny. Those kinds of mood swings aren't normal. She needs help."

Then Jess had landed her first big shoot, and the sun had come out from behind the clouds. It had all been worth it, she loved me so much, our life together was going to be so amazing. I bought into the high because I didn't want to believe what my mother had told me. I told myself Jess had just been rocked by the callousness of the industry.

And then the high had peaked and we'd dipped down again. I'd come home from work to find another man's jacket left on the couch, only for Jess to explain a "friend" had loaned it to her because she was cold. Money had disappeared from my wallet with no explanation, then Jess would walk through the door in new shoes or an expensive dress that someone had "given" her.

I'd swallowed my suspicions, but nothing seemed to make her happy. When I'd dared to suggest couple's counseling, thinking that going together might help sell the idea of therapy to her, she'd erupted in a way I'd never seen before, to the point where our neighbors had pounded on the ceiling to signal their displeasure and the police had come knocking to make sure I wasn't beating Jess to a pulp. Afterward, I was punished with days of brutal, cold silence—and then Jess had landed another shoot and suddenly the lights had come on again.

It's amazing how quickly you can lose your markers for what's normal when one person is your whole world. Looking back now, I can't believe

how much shit I'd taken. How much I'd swallowed and ignored or waved away. At first it had been because I was crazy about her, and I believed in the dream of us. Then it was because I was convinced if I could just say or do the right thing, Jess would be happy. I could be the solid foundation she needed to keep her anchored.

And then it was because I was so tied up in knots I couldn't work out where the truth ended and her manipulations began.

It had taken finding a condom packet beneath our bed to snap me out of it. It was a brand I'd never used, and there was no pretending that it didn't mean what I thought it meant. That wrapper had given me solid ground to stand on, and I'd managed to fight my way free—but not before Jess had lashed out with one final act of cruelty.

I wasn't proud of the way I'd handled myself during those wild twelve months. I'd proven myself to be way too gullible, and I'd absorbed insults and—very occasionally—physical blows that no person should ever accept from an intimate partner. I'd promised myself that I'd never again let myself get dragged down the slippery slope into that kind of dysfunction again.

And yet here I was, inviting Jess back into my life by sleeping with her sister.

Seeing Haley had been asking for trouble. That was the conclusion I came to every night as I lay staring at my ceiling, weighing pros and cons, swimming in a sea of disturbing memories.

Then I'd dream of Haley, and wake up remembering something funny or goofy she'd said. Or I'd see her at the Bean, smiling and laughing with her customers, teasing Roddy or Audrey or Zara, and I'd feel the pull of her sweetness.

But how much right did it take to get past all the wrong her sister brought to the table?

I didn't know the answer to that question. And I knew it wasn't fair to Haley that I was holding back from committing to her because of something outside of her control. But it wasn't as though I could erase the memories that lived inside my head, either. It was a shitty situation.

As time went by, I thought less about Jess and the messiness of the past. My bed felt emptier and emptier, and I found myself picking up my phone on a daily basis and scrolling to the one picture I'd taken of Haley while we'd been enjoying our care-free fling.

She been standing beside my bed wearing my old hockey jersey, and the sleeves dangled past her hands. She'd looked like Tom Hanks in *Big*, after the magic spell had worn off and he'd shrunk back to his true kid self. The look on her face was wry, full of the knowledge of how ridiculous she looked.

It was a great picture. She obviously had no idea how pretty and sexy she was. It made me think about her workshop, and how she didn't tell me about the great passion in her life. It made me think about the kind of life lessons a person has to learn before they hide the important parts of themselves like that.

It made me think about the way she offered Sam and me the sketch she'd done for our logo with no strings attached and no expectations.

Most of all it made me think about how right it felt when we were together. It wasn't just the smoking sexual chemistry, it was everything. Haley and I were good together. I knew in my gut we could have something really special.

I just didn't know if I was prepared to pay the price of entry.

HALEY

For the next couple of weeks, I let the rhythms of my life carry me along.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't jump on my phone every time it rang, hoping against hope that it was Beck. But mostly I managed to keep my head above water and hang onto the belief that what we had together was too important to give up.

He'd asked for time, and I would give it to him. I wanted him to be sure about his feelings if he came back to me, because I was very sure about him.

Painfully so.

Did it hurt that maybe he wasn't quite as sure about me? Yes. But I knew that was really about his history with my sister, not me. In a perfect world, one thing would not affect the other, but the world I lived in wasn't perfect, and I knew that Beck was a kind, loving person.

He was worth waiting for. *We* were worth waiting for.

In the meantime, I did my bit to support my sister via FaceTime and text and phone calls, and caught up with friends for drinks and fulfilled a long-held promise to myself to use one of my afternoons off to visit businesses in the area to try to drum up local sales for my work. I struck gold with an eclectic little gift store in Stowe, where the owner fell in love with my hand-painted belts and coin purses. We talked about me producing a selection of leather keyrings featuring landscapes from the area as well, something she was certain would appeal to tourists, and I left feeling proud of myself for adding another string to my business bow.

After that, I split my time between working on Zara's boots and creating inventory for my new customer. Being busy helped stop the worry hamster

from getting too out of control in the back of my mind. It didn't silence him completely, but it helped.

And then, two weeks to the day after our difficult discussion and the hug that had felt painfully like goodbye forever, I walked home from work and spotted a white van parked across the street from my house.

My heart kicked against my ribcage with excitement and trepidation, and I stopped in my tracks.

Beck. Beck was here. He'd made his decision.

I started walking again, and by the time I reached the gate to the front yard, my palms were sweaty. Beck was sitting on the porch's top step, waiting for me, and he stood the moment he saw me.

The look in his eyes made up for the two weeks of distance without him having to say a single word. I pushed the gate wide, closed the few feet between us, and threw myself into his arms.

"About fucking time," I told him as he crushed me close.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to be sure."

I tilted my head back to look into his beautiful face, drinking in his blue-green eyes, the shape of his nose, the clean lines of his jaw. It was scary how important he'd become to me so quickly. Scary, but wonderful, too.

Beck cupped my cheek in one of his hands and I pushed into his palm like a cat, eager for his touch, starved for his easy affection.

"Would it be wrong for me to rush you inside and tear your clothes off with my teeth?" he asked, and I laughed, relieved that he'd lightened things with a joke.

Some moments are so loaded with feeling they're almost unbearable.

"Go for it. But you'd better be fast with those teeth, because this woman has a lot of pent up sexual frustration you're going to need to satisfy," I told him.

"On it," he said, his hand coming around my waist to urge me toward the front steps.

The moment I had the door open, he pushed me against the wall and kissed me, his hand sliding under my skirt and inside my panties. He pinned me against the wall for long moments with the weight of his body, his mouth pleasing mine, his dexterous fingers driving me wild.

My knees went weak as I started to spiral into climax, but Beck muttered an imprecation and the next thing I knew he'd boosted me up and

carried me into my bedroom to dump me on the bed. I watched with greedy eyes as he stripped of his clothes, then belatedly realized I was going to be woefully overdressed for this reunion party if I didn't get my ass into gear. Beck solved the problem by whipping my dress over my head and getting rid of my underwear with a ruthless efficiency that was, frankly, as hot as hell.

I opened the drawer of my bedside table, found a condom, and passed it to him. He smoothed it on with the same speedy economy, as desperate to be inside me as I was to have him there. Then he was on top of me, holding my gaze as he nudged the tip of his cock inside me. I sighed and gripped his hips and urged him all of the way in. We both gave a full-body shudder as he slid home.

I'd missed this so much. Missed him and the magic we made together. When he started to move, I wrapped my legs around his waist and lost myself in what he did to me. One of his hands roamed my body, teasing my nipples, smoothing down the outside of my thigh, and, finally, gripping my ass and urging me into a sinuous new rhythm that hit all my sweet spots and then some.

"Beck," I warned, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I arched my back.

"Come for me. Come hard for me, sweetheart," he said.

I gave myself over to a climax that throbbed through my entire body and stole the last gasp of air from my lungs.

"Yes. Perfect." He ducked his head to pull one of my nipples into his mouth, his hips still moving as he worked himself inside me. "Now do it again."

I laughed, both because he was so demanding and because I could already feel myself starting to climb again. Then he reached between us and found my clit, using his thumb to stroke me every time he pushed himself deep inside me, and pretty soon I was trembling beneath him, on the brink of coming again.

"So. Fucking. Beautiful," Beck groaned.

I felt his body tensing just as my second climax hit. We came together, clutching at each other, breathless and damp with sweat and sex.

I closed my eyes afterward, so grateful he was here, so grateful I hadn't lost the most amazing connection I'd ever experienced in my life. When I

opened them again, Beck was watching me. He lifted a hand to brush my hair off my temple, his touch light as a feather.

“Let’s stay here all afternoon and see how many times we can make that happen,” he said, his low voice rumbling through my body.

I smiled up at him. “I really wish I could, but I’ve got to deliver some products to a new customer. A place in Stowe wants to stock some of my smaller leather goods.”

“I’ll come with you,” Beck said easily.

And that was what he did.

HALEY

We drove through the afternoon sunlight with the windows down, the lush Vermont countryside rushing by outside. An old Fleet Foxes song came on the radio, and Beck caught my hand and brought it to rest on his thigh. I looked at him and felt my chest get tight with gratitude and affection and happiness.

He'd come back to me. He'd chosen me. I'd been right to hope.

When we got to Stowe, we parked in a central location, and Beck insisted on carrying the box containing the belts, purses, and keyrings I'd made for my new customer. We walked past the quaint shopfronts until we found the gift shop. A bell rang as we pushed the door open and a slim, grey-haired woman in a wafty-looking linen dress looked up from where she was writing something on a pad at the counter. Her face lit up when she saw me, and I couldn't help smiling back.

"Haley. Perfect timing. I've just been doodling out a display idea for your beautiful things."

"Anne, this is Beck. He insisted on being my muscle for the day," I said.

"Such a hardship for you," Anne said, eyeing Beck appreciatively. "Nice to meet you, Beck. Now, Haley, show me the goodies."

She rubbed her hands together in comic anticipation, and Beck set the box down on the counter for her to open.

"Oh, my. These are so, so beautiful," Anne breathed as she lifted out the half dozen women's belts I'd painted for her.

Each belt featured a mountainscape, the features and time of day varying in accordance with the color of leather I'd chosen and the time of year I was depicting. There was a cognac-colored one decorated with maple

trees in all their gold and red glory, a sage-green one verdant with grass and wild flowers and abundant foliage, and a deep-blue belt with a stark and snowy winter scene, stars twinkling overhead, the snow-capped hillside bright against the color of the leather.

“Amazing,” Beck said, his gaze admiring as he looked at me.

Anne unearthed the coin purses next, and I started to blush as she and Beck gushed over my work.

“Okay, that’s enough of that, now,” I said, my cheeks warm.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Anne said as she discovered the tissue-wrapped stash of keyrings. “Haley, these are perfect. I can guarantee these are going to sell like hotcakes.”

“Well, good. I can get you more pretty quickly now that I’ve been through the process of making a batch.”

We talked a little about ideas for the next order, then Anne wrote me out a check on the spot for my wares.

“Thank you, Haley. I can’t wait to see what we can do together,” she said.

“Thanks for taking a chance on me,” I said.

Anne laughed as though I’d made a joke, and I turned to go, frowning when I saw Beck had one of my belts in his hand.

“I’ll take this one, thanks,” he said, handing it over to Anne. “My niece turns sixteen next week, and she’ll love this.”

He’d chosen the snowscape belt, and I opened my mouth to tell him I could easily make another for his niece, only to realize that by doing so I’d rob Anne of a sale. Beck caught my eye and smiled, all innocence, but I knew he’d deliberately outmaneuvered me.

“Look at that, sold it before it even hit the shelf,” Anne said. “Can I gift wrap that for you?”

I waited until we were walking back to the car, with Beck carrying a small, gorgeously wrapped box, to voice my displeasure.

“I would have happily made a belt for your niece if you’d asked,” I said.

“I know. I wanted to pay what it was worth.”

“As if I would charge you!” I said, shocked by the idea of presenting him with an invoice.

“Exactly.”

I huffed out my breath. “Well, that’s just nuts.”

“What’s nuts is you not understanding that this is a piece of artwork and my niece is going to look back in a few years’ time and marvel that she owns a genuine Haley Elliot belt.”

I stopped in my tracks and stared at him. “What? No, she isn’t.”

“She is. Trust me. You’re ridiculously talented. The world’s going to realize it soon and then you’ll be unstoppable.”

“No. My stuff is too expensive,” I said. “People are used to buying things made in bulk in sweatshops where they pay people a pittance. They don’t appreciate the fact that my things are unique and handmade. Most of them, anyway.”

“You don’t need most people, you just need the right people. The things you make are special, Haley. People respond to them, and I am a big believer in cream rising to the top. This is just the beginning, baby.”

He was so confident on my behalf I couldn’t help but be touched.

“Thank you for saying that,” I said.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” he said, his mouth twisted into a wry smile.

“If I’m lucky, I believe I can build my online store and maybe find more people like Anne to take on my smaller pieces. Then maybe I can give up the coffeeshop and work on my leather business full time. That would be my dream,” I said cautiously.

Beck slung an arm around my neck and pulled me in for a firm, thorough kiss.

“Dream bigger, baby,” he said. “Your talent is going to take you places.”

It was hard not to be buoyed by his words and harder still to resist when he suggested we take advantage of our time in Stowe to find somewhere for a late lunch. We wound up sitting in the vine-covered rear courtyard of a cafe off the main street, drinking locally made cider and eating the best eggs Benedict I’d ever tasted.

It wasn’t until we were almost done that I remembered Beck had a business to run.

“Is your brother going to be pissed at you for taking the afternoon off?” I asked.

“He strongly encouraged me to come. Apparently I’ve been a grumpy asshole the last couple of weeks.”

We still hadn’t touched on the subject of my sister. I didn’t want to bring her up and potentially ruin a perfect afternoon, but we’d gotten into trouble

before by sidestepping the big issues. I wanted to make sure we were both on the same page this time around.

“About Jess,” I said boldly, jumping in feet first. “She’s my sister, she’s always going to be a part of my life. But I want you to know I’m not going to shove her down your throat or drag you along to family reunions or anything like that.”

“Thanks for saying that, but I figure we just need to tackle whatever comes up whenever it comes up. Roll with the punches.” He hesitated. “We should probably talk about what happened between me and Jess, too.”

“Only if you want to.”

He tilted his head a little. “Want is a strong word. But it might help if you understand what went down between us. I’d rather not do it today, though, if that’s okay.”

“We can do it whenever you like,” I said quickly, conscious that just talking about my sister had brought tension into his shoulders. “There’s something else I wanted to talk about with you, too. I want to make you a pair of boots. And no, you cannot pay for them. This would be a gift from me to you. I want you to have something I made.”

He gave me a searching look. “I’m not going anywhere. You know that, right?”

“I know. I still want to make you a pair of boots.”

It was something I’d thought about a lot during the past couple of weeks, in between hoping there was an us to talk about.

He leaned close and kissed me. “Thank you. Having seen your work, I know how lucky I am to have that offer on the table.”

Now that he’d agreed, my head was suddenly full of ideas for his boots, and I hustled us out of the café and into my car.

When we got back to my place, I led him into my workshop and spent twenty minutes poring over his bare feet. Like a lot of people, his right foot was slightly larger than his left, but this was something I could easily accommodate.

“You aren’t going to recognize yourself once you get my shoes on your feet,” I bragged as I jotted down measurements in my notebook.

Beck wiggled his bare toes. “I’m feeling very vulnerable, being half naked over here, and you fully dressed over there.”

“You poor baby,” I said. “Let me see if I can even things out a little.”

Because—as always—I was ready for him. Now that the urge to create had been channeled onto the pages of my notepad, I was happy to move on to the important matter of slaking my never-ending lust for Beck’s beautiful body.

Tossing my notepad aside, I stood and toed off my shoes. Then I undid my jeans and coolly and calmly shed them, along with my panties.

“Holy shit,” Beck said. “Talk about your wish is my command.”

I closed the distance between us and straddled him where he sat on my work stool. Then I reached for the hem of my shirt and yanked it over my head. It was the work of seconds to dispense with my bra, and then suddenly I was the one who was vulnerable and exposed, sitting naked in Beck’s lap.

I didn’t feel self-conscious or hesitant, however. I felt powerful. And really, really horny.

“Not sure where to go first but let’s start with these gorgeous tits,” Beck said, ducking his head to draw my right nipple into his mouth.

He sucked on first one nipple and then the other until I was aching to have him inside me. When I breathlessly shared this piece of information with him he gave me a wolfish, deeply satisfied grin.

“I got you, sweetheart,” Beck promised as he slipped his hand between my widespread thighs.

I clenched my hands into his shoulders and moaned as he ran an exploratory finger through my wetness.

“Fuck, yeah,” he said.

He slid one thick finger inside me before finding my clit with his thumb, and for the next few minutes I rode his hand, thrusting my breasts into his face when I needed an extra nudge to get me over the edge. He obliged me with his talented tongue, and I came with a low, animal groan, my whole body throbbing with pleasure.

Beck reached between us to free himself, somehow securing a condom from his rear pocket. I rolled it on with shaking hands and then used my hand to guide him to where I was desperate for him.

“Oh, God. You feel so good. I love your cock,” I told him as I slid down onto him and started to work myself on his beautiful, hard erection.

“Mngahuh,” he grunted, the tendons standing out in his neck as he sought his own climax.

I kissed him deeply, slipping a hand between our bodies to find my swollen clit. Beck broke our kiss and pulled back an inch, glancing down to confirm what I was doing.

“Keep doing that,” he said, and I was happy to oblige as he thrust up into me, his muscles turned to granite as he kept his gaze fixed on what I was doing with my hand.

“So damned hot,” he panted. “I’m close, baby.”

“Me, too,” I assured him.

I held his gaze as the first shudder radiated through me and I saw the exact moment he tripped into his own climax. He pulled me closer, pressing his face against my neck as he came.

He kept his arms wrapped around me afterward and we stayed like that for a few minutes, Beck’s palm flat and warm on the center of my back.

“I’m sorry I stayed away so long,” he said. “Please know it was never about you. I missed you like crazy every day. I just needed to sort through some stuff in my head.”

I tightened my arms around him. “I missed you, too. And you’re worth waiting for.”

I didn’t say the other things my heart wanted to say. There would be time for that. Other days, other nights. Yes, there were a few hurdles we still had to clear, but we’d worked out the hard part now: we both wanted this, and we both knew this was important.

The low, gurgling growl of a hungry stomach broke the silence, and I started laughing.

“I have no idea if that was you or me,” I said.

“If you’re not hungry after the sex Olympics, I don’t know what to say to you,” Beck said. “Who does the best pizza in town?”

“I love the way you ask that as though we have a choice,” I said. “There is exactly one place that does takeout pizza in Colebury.”

Beck snagged his phone from the workbench. “Don’t move. I’ll order and we can work out what to do while we wait.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I smiled and pressed a kiss to his cheekbone. “You’re a monster.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” he said.

And the moment he hung up from ordering us pizza, he proved it to me.

BECK

Being with Haley was so much fun, so easy and effortless, a part of me didn't know whether to trust it or not. I kept waiting for something to explode and ruin everything, but as the next couple of weeks passed by, it only got better between us.

We spent almost every night together, alternating between her place and mine, and I learned a hundred little things about her, such as the fact that she hated canned tuna with a white-hot passion, and she got cranky if I left the lid off the toothpaste, and she had a minor obsession with a British reality-TV show about baking, so much so that she'd happily watch reruns even if she already knew the season's winner.

Sam quickly became her biggest fan, especially when we'd gotten our new sign back from the printers and we'd seen how well her artwork looked on the glossy metal. Haley had held the ladder and passed up screws as Sam and I had positioned the sign above the front entrance, then all three of us had walked down the drive to the road and stood there laughing over how freaking quirky and attention-grabbing Haley's masked horse looked on the front of our building.

"You're a superstar," Sam had said, patting Haley on the back, and she'd blushed adorably and almost, but not quite, shuffled her feet.

Zara Rossi's birthday party loomed large on the horizon, and I watched Haley get more and more tense as the big day drew closer. She'd poured her heart and soul into the boots she'd made for Zara, and even though I knew she was proud of the work she'd done, I also knew she was anxious about Zara loving them, given how many times Zara had raved about Haley's own boots.

“I didn’t want to just copy mine, you know? These are Zara’s boots. They have to reflect her life, her loves,” Haley explained to me as we got ready to go to the party.

She’d been talking like this ever since Dave Beringer picked up the boots earlier that afternoon, but I knew she had nothing to worry about.

Not only had I followed Haley’s painstaking process as she’d created Zara’s boots, I’d also been there when Dave picked them up. The guy had choked up when he’d seen all the little details Haley had incorporated into the design, which was essentially a beautifully illustrated map of Zara’s life. On one boot there was a man and woman skating on ice, two children supported between them, and they were linked to a charming little two-story house that was a perfect representation of Dave and Zara’s place on Colebury Green. The house scene blended into another scene with tall trees reaching for the sky and a perfectly painted mountain goat on the slope of a mountain. The second boot featured references to the Rossi farm, Dave’s career in hockey, and the Busy Bean and Zara’s great friendship with Audrey. Work and family. Home and hearth.

Zara was going to freaking love her boots, but I knew Haley wouldn’t believe that until she saw it for herself. So while I kept saying all the right things, mostly I just listened as she shared her doubts and fears with me.

Her stream-of-consciousness chatter ramped up as we made the short walk down the hill, past the Bean and Gin Mill and along the short forest trail to Speakeasy, where the night’s festivities would be held.

“I love this place. Alec Rossi did an amazing job with it, don’t you think? Such a great combination of old and new,” Haley babbled as we approached the front entrance, her small hand in mine.

I gave her hand a squeeze. “Yeah, he did good.”

“Sorry for the word vomit,” Haley said, shooting me a sheepish look. “I really wish Dave wasn’t giving her the boots tonight in front of everyone. That’s a lot of pressure. It’s freaking me out.”

“She’s going to love them. You smashed it out of the park,” I said for the fifth time as I reached out to push the door open. I would have said it a hundred times if it would help.

“Zara’s got such classic style, though. I just hope I didn’t make them too whimsical.” She twisted the strap of her purse.

The bar was jumping, the staff running around with trays full of drinks and food, and there was a duo playing on the stage in the corner, the guy

playing an acoustic guitar and the woman a fiddle. We made our way through the noisy crowd, and I kept my hand on the small of her back as we climbed the rugged wooden stairs to one of the private party rooms, conscious of Haley's high heels. My girl was not taking a tumble on my watch.

The sound of laughter and music led us toward a set of double doors that had been thrown open to access a large space. People were already milling around inside, drinks in their hands, but Haley suddenly planted her feet, coming to a halt.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"I've been so busy worrying about the boots I just realized this is our first big outing together. We're about to go public." She sounded a little wary about the concept.

I let my hand fall from her back. "Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

"It's a good thing. I'm claiming you. You're mine now." She winced. "Sorry, that came out wrong. You're not my property. Can I start again?"

I smiled. "Go for it, babe."

"I'm really proud to walk in there with you. And I'm glad people will know we're together. But there's a chance there's someone here who might know Jess, too. So this could be our outing in more ways than one."

"I can back off if that's a big problem. Keep my hands to myself, just limit myself to fucking you with my eyes from across the room," I offered.

It would kill me to keep my distance, but I'd do it for Haley.

"I am always up for a good eye-fucking, for the record. But I don't want to hide us. If Jess finds out because of tonight, so be it. It'll be done, and I can stop worrying about it in the back of my mind."

It was news to me that she'd been worrying, but then we didn't tend to talk about her sister a lot.

Okay, we didn't talk about her at all, for obvious reasons.

Haley caught my hand in hers and moved closer. "Sorry for the brain fart. I'm good to go now. Let's go in there and let the good women of Colebury know you are no longer an object to be freely ogled and objectified."

I frowned. "Pretty sure that wasn't happening in the first place."

Haley laughed. "It's really sweet you think that, but women are animals. Trust me on this."

"If you say so."

Haley took a deep breath, lifting her chin. “All right, Daniel Beck, let’s do this.”

HALEY

Beck's hand was big and warm around mine as we walked into the private-party room to greet our friends as a couple for the first time.

As I'd told him, I was more than proud to call him mine, but I also knew it was going to generate a bit of fun teasing from my workmates and the extended Bean family, and I was always uneasy about being in the limelight, for any reason.

I distracted myself from the upcoming ordeal by taking in the details of the room, making note of the exposed red brick walls that echoed the ones downstairs, as well as the huge old beams soaring overhead and timeworn floorboards underfoot. A bar ran along one wall, and a trestle table had been set up to display a cake and provide a place for people to leave gifts for the birthday girl.

I spotted Audrey and Zara at the bar right away. Audrey was the first to see us, and she lifted her hand in greeting. Her eyes widened when she saw Beck and I were holding hands, and she got Zara's attention with a jab to the ribs. One second later, the two women were making a beeline for us, smiles of disbelief on their faces.

"Oh, this is too perfect," Audrey said. "I love this idea *so much*."

"How long has this been going on?" Zara asked.

I glanced at Beck, not sure how to answer. "Um...a few weeks."

"I guess we know where the dark horse name comes from now," Zara said, wiggling her eyebrows at Beck. "You know how to play your cards close to your chest."

"Haley was concerned you guys might frown on us fraternizing," Beck said, his face poker-straight.

I bumped my hip against his. “What a load of bull.”

Zara’s gaze was going from me to Beck and back again and she nodded slowly. “I’m going to agree with Audrey—I love this. You guys are pretty cute together.”

“Cute?” Beck said with a frown, and all three of us women burst into laughter.

“I forgot. Men don’t do cute,” Zara said.

“Cute is for puppies,” Beck confirmed. “And small humans who don’t use the bathroom yet.”

I reached into my bag and pulled out the gift I’d wrapped earlier, offering it to Zara. “Happy birthday.”

“Haley. I said no gifts,” Zara said, taking the present.

“Come on. As if anyone was going to listen to that,” Audrey scoffed.

Zara leaned close and kissed my cheek. “Thanks, Hales. I’m going to open this later, so I can savor the goodness. In the meantime, you guys hit the bar. And keep an eye out for the food—Alec’s outdone himself tonight.”

Beck rubbed his hands together. “Are there mini burgers? I love mini burgers.”

“On baby pretzel buns with little dill pickles,” Audrey said. “There’s also pulled-pork sliders with gouda and cherry BBQ sauce and wood-fired chicken wings and a whole bunch of other good stuff.”

Beck’s eyes glazed over with food lust, and I laughed and caught his hand to tow him toward the bar. “Come on, stomach-on-legs.”

We’d just ordered our drinks when Roddy and Kieran arrived. I waved to them and noted the way Roddy’s eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly as Beck reached out to straighten the shoulder strap on my dress.

“Here we go,” I said as Roddy came our way, his eyes alight with interest.

“Hello. What do we have here?” he said.

Beck and I endured his and Kieran’s teasing for a few minutes, then a waiter came past with food and the men were instantly distracted. While they fed their faces, I had a minor freak out when I recognized Mark Tankiewicz talking with Dave Beringer across the room. The Tank was one of my favorite players to watch on the ice, and even though I knew he was married to Dave’s sister, Bess, I was still a little starstruck to realize he was standing just across the room.

“Careful, sweetie, you’ll get drool all over your dress,” Beck said quietly in my ear.

“I don’t care. That’s Mark Tankiewicz. Right there.”

Beck gave me an approving look. “Didn’t know you were into hockey. Maybe you really are the perfect woman.”

“Perfect for you, anyway,” I said, and even though I knew he was only joking, my chest got warm from his praise. Then I recognized the man walking toward the bar with an attractive, athletic blond woman. “Holy shit, that’s Leo Trevi. This is *insane*.”

Beck fanned me with his hand. “Do we need to get you some smelling salts? Should I slap you?”

I turned and grabbed the lapels of his shirt in both hands. “Promise you won’t let me gush if I get a chance to talk to either of them. Promise you’ll save me from myself.”

Beck laughed and pulled me into his arms for a quick hug. “You’re fucking adorable, Haley.”

The next hour and a half passed in a whirl, washed down by copious glasses of Shipley cider and accompanied by lots of laughter. Somehow I managed not to ogle the star guests too much and it was nearly ten before Dave silenced the room with an ear-splitting whistle.

“Thank you, you rowdy bunch of yahoos,” he said when the room fell silent. “Just want to say a few words here about the woman of the hour.”

Zara groaned, but when Dave crooked his finger to invite her to join him by the trestle table, she rolled her eyes and walked into his embrace with a big, goofy smile on her face.

Dave looked down into her eyes, dropping a kiss onto her lips.

“This woman, as you all know, is an amazing person,” Dave said.

Zara squirmed with self-consciousness and rolled her eyes again.

“You can keep doing that, but it’s not going to stop me,” Dave said. “Now, where was I? You’re amazing. You’re also strong, smart, resilient as hell. An amazing mother, an unstoppable businesswoman. Every day I wake up with you, I pinch myself to make sure that you’re real, that this life we’re living together is really happening, because you make me so damned happy, Zara Rossi. Happy birthday, baby.”

I had tears in my eyes by the time he was done. The look on his face as he lay his heart bare in front of everyone...it was *everything*. I felt Beck’s

arm slide around my shoulders and when I glanced up at him, he offered me a warm smile before giving my shoulder a little squeeze.

“And now I want to give you the rest of your birthday present. You got the most important part this morning,” Dave said, giving the world’s most ostentatious wink.

Zara punched him in the arm and everyone laughed. “He made me pancakes, people. Get your minds out of the gutter.”

“Pancakes with the works,” Dave said, winking again.

This time Zara laughed, shaking her head at his clowning. Then Audrey came forward with a beautifully wrapped box and handed it to Dave, and suddenly I was incredibly nervous because this was the big reveal.

“What have you done?” Zara asked. “I told you the party was my present. I told you I didn’t want anything else.”

“I know, but I wasn’t born yesterday, babe. You’re looking at a man with well-honed survival skills. And excellent taste. Open your present,” Dave said.

Shaking her head again, Zara applied herself to removing the ribbons and wrapping paper. When she’d exposed the lid of the box, she glanced at Dave, a puzzled frown on her face.

“I have no idea what this is.”

“Open the box,” Dave said.

I swallowed a nervous lump, and Beck tightened his arm around me before leaning close to my ear. “Brace yourself. She’s about to lose her shit.”

Zara lifted the lid, and we all watched as her eyes popped wide open. She opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came out. Then she looked at Dave, astonished.

“How did you do this? Oh my God, I can’t believe this. They’re *beautiful*. Oh.”

She lifted a boot out of the box, holding it with such reverence I almost laughed, I was so touched by her reaction. A little stir went through the crowd, and I saw a couple of people point in my direction, identifying me as the bootmaker.

“Our house is on here. And us with the kids.” Zara laughed, lifting her face to her husband. “And there’s a mountain goat.”

“Had to get the goat in there,” Dave said, his smile wide as he watched Zara enjoy her gift.

“Haley, where are you? Get up here. These are amazing,” Zara called out, scanning the crowd for me.

Beck gave me a little nudge to get me started, and I reluctantly joined Zara and Dave in front of everyone.

“Thank you. These are... I don’t have the words. They’re so special. I’ll treasure them forever,” Zara said.

“It was my pleasure,” I said sincerely.

Zara gave me a big squeeze hug, then insisted on taking off the high-heeled sandals she was wearing and putting the boots on.

“Totally knew this would happen,” Dave said smugly. “There’s a pair of socks in the box.”

Someone brought over a chair, and Zara sat and pulled on first the socks, then the boots.

“Oh, they’re so soft. And they fit perfectly.”

She tied the laces and stood, then took a few steps, her eyes glued to her feet. “I’m going to be too scared to wear them, they’re so amazing.”

“They’re designed to be worn,” I said. “They’re protected and waterproofed. Just apply a clear leather treatment at the beginning of each winter, and they’ll last a lifetime.”

A bunch of people came forward to inspect the boots and I took advantage of the opportunity to slip away and rejoin Beck.

“You’re a rock star,” he said as he tucked me against his side again. “Get used to moments like that. They’re going to keep happening.”

“I’m just glad she liked them.”

Beck gave me a fond smile. “I know you are, you ridiculously modest human.”

After a few minutes, Roddy lit the candles on the cake and Dave started a rousing round of *Happy Birthday*. Zara was laughing so hard she had trouble blowing out the candles, but she eventually did and Roddy got busy handing out pieces of cake.

The night got rowdier after that. Beck and I danced, then he took me outside to kiss me silly, then we danced some more, and I got to have a whole conversation that was mostly coherent with Leo Trevi and his lovely wife, Georgia. She asked a lot of questions about my shoemaking process and made me sweaty-embarrassed with her compliments about my work. She wasn’t the only one who came over to let me know how much they

admired Zara's gift. Every time it happened, I caught Beck watching me with a knowing, proud smirk, one eyebrow cocked as if to say "see?"

It was nearly two by the time the crowd started to thin, and Beck and I mutually decided we were partied out. We had just said our goodbyes to Zara and Dave and thanked them for a great night when Georgia Trevi caught us as we were about to leave.

"I just wanted to show you this," she said, handing me her phone.

An Instagram post had a close-up shot of Zara's boots as she struck a pose.

"I hope I got the name of your business right. It's Haley Made, right?" Georgia asked.

"That's right," I said, a little stunned by how many likes the photo had, even though it had only been posted an hour ago.

"Those boots are wearable art, Haley. Hope you've got a lot of capacity in your inbox." Georgia patted my arm approvingly.

I was feeling a bit dazed—and, let's be honest, tipsy—as Beck and I made the short walk through the woods back toward the Gin Mill and the Busy Bean.

"Great night," Beck said, tilting his head back to look at the stars. "I love nights when the air stays warm even after dark."

"It's nice. I could do without the bugs, though."

"All part of nature's bounty," Beck said in a very bad attempt at an English accent.

"Was that...was that supposed to be David Attenborough?"

"Pleased to meet you, milady," Beck said, offering me a half bow.

"So now you're Oliver?"

We made our way up the hill laughing and messing around. We let ourselves into my apartment to find Larry very happy to see us. Beck took her outside to take care of business while I brushed my teeth. Then we tumbled into bed and even though we were both tired and footsore from dancing too much, we very quickly got each other so hot and bothered we wound up having a frenzied, satisfying five minutes of glory before falling asleep in each other's arms.

The next thing I knew it was morning and Beck was easing out of the bed to pull on his boxer briefs. Seeing me stir, he rested a hand on top of my head, ruffling my hair affectionately.

"Just gonna let Larry out."

I peered blearily at the clock on my bedside table and saw that it was just before eight. “Ugh.”

“I’ll bring you back some water,” Beck said. “And some Tylenol.”

I held up two fingers.

“Two Tylenols. Got it.” He disappeared out the door.

I flopped back onto my pillow and blinked at the ceiling, trying to work out how bad my hangover was. I didn’t feel nauseous. So that was good.

An abrupt knock on the front door made me start, and I swore under my breath as I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

I couldn’t think of a single person who would show up at eight on a Sunday morning and figured it was probably someone with the wrong address. I shrugged into a bathrobe and made my way to the front door.

“Hello?” I asked, opening the door just wide enough to show my face and nothing more, blinking in the bright morning sunlight.

Two people stood on my doorstep, their faces worried.

“Mom, Dad,” I said stupidly.

“We’re sorry to disturb you so early, sweetheart,” Mom said. “But your father and I are about to drive down to New York to get your sister. She and Jonny had a big fight last night, and he’s kicked her out of the apartment. We’ve been on the phone with her all night.”

“Oh, no,” I said, pushing my hair off my forehead as I tried to get my fuzzy brain to think. “What can I do to help?”

“That’s what we dropped by to ask you,” Mom said. “I’ve been sorting through a bunch of things in the house and storing the stuff we plan on giving to Goodwill in Jess’s old room. It’s a disaster in there, and I really don’t want Jess to come home to that when she’s so fragile.”

“Of course. I’ll head over to your place today and get it cleaned up,” I said.

“Just dump it all in the garage,” Dad said. “Probably where we should have put it in the first place.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” Mom said, shooting him an annoyed look.

“Is Jess in a bad way?” I asked, heading off a minor domestic squabble. My parents had a tendency to get snappy with each other when they were stressed.

“She’s very upset,” Dad said. “That’s why we insisted on her coming home for a few weeks.”

“She needs to have the support of her family around her,” Mom agreed. Dad looked at his watch. “We’d better get going.”

“Leave the house to me,” I said. “I’ll make sure her bed is made and all that stuff.”

“Thank you, darling. We knew we could rely on you.” Mom leaned in to give me a kiss on the cheek.

I heard the heavy tread of Beck coming up the hallway behind me.

“Oh. Hello,” Mom said, her gaze taking in his big body clad in nothing but boxer-briefs. “We didn’t know you had a guest.”

Her cheeks went pink, and I could feel my own face getting warm. They knew about Beck thanks to the conversation on my birthday, but there’s nothing like getting visual proof of concept.

And there was *a lot* of proof on display.

“Beck and I went to Zara’s birthday party last night,” I explained, even though I was twenty-six years old and didn’t need to justify myself to my parents.

“Hi Mrs. Elliot, Mr. Elliot. I didn’t realize you were here,” Beck said, shooting me a sideways look.

If I had to interpret it, I’d say it was part *Thanks for the heads up*, and part *Help! Your Mom just saw me in my underwear*.

“Daniel. It’s nice to see you again,” Mom said.

My father offered his hand and Beck had to lean across me to shake it, the whole exercise deeply awkward.

“Mom and Dad are heading down to New York to bring Jess home,” I explained.

“Right,” Beck said.

For a moment we were all silent, stuck in conversational limbo as we remembered that Jess was Beck’s ex and that things hadn’t ended well between them and that she was currently unaware of Beck and I being in a relationship.

Facebook relationship status: *It’s complicated*.

“Good to see you again, Daniel,” Dad said heartily. “But we really need to hit the road. Come on, Lois.”

“I’ll call and keep you posted,” Mom said.

“Same. Drive safe,” I said.

My father lifted a hand in acknowledgement, already heading for the car. I gave my mother one last wave before shutting the door and turning to

face Beck.

“Sorry. That was... unexpected.”

“Your father doesn’t own a shotgun, does he?”

“Don’t worry, he knows that ship sailed a long time ago,” I said with a quick smile.

“I take it Jess has had a meltdown?”

“She’s broken up with her boyfriend, Jonny. Apparently, he kicked her out.”

My fuzzy brain was coming back online, and it was starting to sink in that it must have been a tough night with Jess if my parents were driving to Manhattan this early in the morning.

Beck’s eyebrows lifted slightly, and I knew he was holding back a bunch of stuff. Even though we’d moved past the whole my-sister-is-your-toxic-ex phase, there were still a few elephants left in the room between us. For example, we’d never had that conversation where he filled me in on his breakup with Jess. Probably because neither of us had been very eager to have it.

“Mom and Dad asked me to get her room ready for her. Apparently it’s full of a bunch of junk. So I think that’s the end of brunch for me today, sorry,” I said, pulling a face.

“I’m happy to help. Slinging boxes around is pretty much my wheelhouse these days,” Beck said easily.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

It honestly hadn’t occurred to me that Beck could help.

“You didn’t ask, I offered. We can grab something to eat from the Bean on the way. Larry will be okay in your parents’ yard, right?”

I stared at him, touched by his easy generosity. “Thank you.”

He dropped a kiss onto my mouth. “Anything for my favorite girl.”

Every day brought new revelations about Beck, almost all of them good. He made me so happy, sometimes it was hard to believe this was real.

“Come on.” One of Beck’s big hands landed on my ass, encouraging me toward the bedroom. “We’d better hustle if I’m going to have my wicked way with you before we leave.”

“That wasn’t part of the schedule we just discussed,” I said.

“Babe, it’s always part of the schedule.”

I was still laughing when he tumbled me onto the bed.

BECK

It was weird returning to Chris and Lois Elliot's house. I'd only ever visited a handful of times before Jess and I left for New York together, but it was a place I had firmly consigned to the past, never to be revisited.

And yet here I was, following Haley up the walk to the front door. From what I could see, not much had changed. Chris Elliot had always been very into his lawn and it was still perfectly cut and perfectly green. There was still a birdbath in front of the living room window, and the doormat still had *Welcome* printed on it in cursive script.

"Take it your Dad is still obsessed with his lawn?" I said as Haley unlocked the front door.

"Oh yes. It's his pride and joy. I once caught him on his knees with a pair of scissors trimming a strip he'd missed with the lawn mower. Completely nuts."

"Is your Mom still teaching?" I asked as I followed her into the entryway.

A glance into the living room showed me that nothing had changed in there, either.

"She's committed to that job until retirement," Haley confirmed. "She loves it and they love her."

She led the way into the kitchen and I set down the takeout bag I was carrying. There were grease spots from our cheese and bacon bagels and my stomach rumbled in anticipation as Haley grabbed a couple of plates and passed one to me.

We sat opposite each other and applied ourselves to breakfast, the silence broken only by the occasional "Mmm, so good" from one of us.

I finished first and stood to wash my hands. There was a photo frame on the window ledge behind the sink, and I studied the shot of Jess and Haley as little kids. They had looked a lot more alike when they were children, and I realized for the first time that they shared the same nose.

“Is it strange for you, being back here?” Haley asked.

I shrugged. “A little, I guess. It wasn’t as though I came here much, though. Jess wasn’t big on hanging with my family or me hanging with hers.”

“She never used to bring her boyfriends home. You were the first, now that I’m thinking of it. Mom and Dad were super excited about you,” she said with a small smile. “They thought you were a sign she was settling down.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t say anything. Jess had resisted everything domestic and routine in our relationship. She’d been terrified of being boring and missing out.

I dried my hands on a dishtowel hanging from the oven handle. “Ready to do this?”

“Sure. Although I feel like I should give you one last opportunity to bow out if this feels too weird.”

“It’s fine.” I wasn’t going to leave Haley lugging boxes around on her own.

“All right, then.”

She led me down a hallway and opened the door at the end.

“Oh boy,” Haley breathed.

We both fell silent as we took in the mess inside—boxes piled against the wall, boxes on the floor, piles of clothes on the bed, an old exercise bike, a bunch of small items crowded together on a dresser.

“What’s the best way to get into the garage from here?” I asked.

“There’s a door in the laundry room, which is off the kitchen.”

I headed back up the hallway and then checked out the garage. There was plenty of room, and I figured if we stacked the boxes along the rear wall, her parents would still be able to fit both cars in the space.

I returned to Jess’s bedroom to find Haley sorting through the clothes on the bed.

“These are all Jess’s. I can’t believe she left so much behind,” Haley said.

Being intimately familiar with Jess’s shopping habits, I could.

“I’m going to start getting rid of these boxes.”

“Right. Good plan.”

Haley and I hefted boxes for the next ten minutes, making multiple return trips to the garage. Haley grabbed a couple of trash bags next and bundled up the clothes while I ferried out the exercise bike and some musty-smelling snow gear.

By the time we were done the room was empty of everything except the single bed and the dressing table. After Haley found the vacuum cleaner, I took care of the floor while she went to find some clean sheets.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” she said after dumping sheets and blankets on the bed. “I would have been here all day if you hadn’t.”

Not to mention exhausted. At least half the boxes had been filled with books and I’d banned Haley from attempting to carry them, they were so heavy. Her parents should have thought of that before they dropped this job on her, but I suspected they’d been too focused on their other daughter to consider what they were asking of Haley.

Haley glanced around the room. “Do you think we should move the bed under the window? That was the way Jess used to have it. It might feel more like home that way.”

“Sure, why not?”

We each took opposite ends of the bed and pushed it across the carpet, adjusting it until it sat beneath the window. The new position provided a prime view of the backyard.

“Pretty nice room. I think mine was half this size growing up,” I commented, appreciating the size of the space.

“It’s got great light,” Haley agreed.

She was busy shaking out the fitted sheet and I went to take the other end from her.

“Goes faster with two,” I said when she gave me an appreciative smile.

“I feel like I’m going to wake up from a dream. A hot guy who knows where the clitoris is, vacuums, and helps change the sheets? You’re officially a unicorn.”

“Let’s not get too carried away,” I said. “Housework and I are casual acquaintances. But I figure the sooner this is done, the sooner Larry and I get you back.”

Haley shot me an amused look. “Not going to touch the clitoris part?”

“Oh, I’m gonna touch it a lot, but that’s also for later,” I said, giving her my best lazy, dirty smile.

She laughed and lifted the mattress’s corner to put on the sheet. She froze, a frown on her face. “What the hell...?”

She nudged the mattress so it slid sideways across the bedframe, and I followed her gaze—someone had cut a hole in the boxspring’s fabric, creating a hiding place between the springs.

“Oh my God,” Haley said, reaching inside to draw out a heavily tarnished silver bracelet.

She blinked at the piece of jewelry, clearly astonished to see it.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“My grandmother gave me this bracelet for my sixteenth birthday. It was one of hers, and I’d always admired it. I thought I’d lost it...” Haley frowned. “I searched everywhere for this thing. I cried for hours. And Jess had it all along.”

“Let me guess—your grandmother didn’t give Jess a bracelet for her sixteenth birthday?”

“I don’t know. It’s so long ago now.” Haley rubbed the bracelet against her shirt, trying to polish off the tarnish. “This is so weird. I can clearly remember Jess telling me she thought this bracelet was ugly. She teased me about it every time I wore it.”

I’m a guy, and even I could tell the bracelet was lovely, a delicate confection of fine links that had been woven and joined together. It was obvious Jess had wanted the bracelet for herself and had taken it. She’d shoplifted several times when we’d been together, and once she’d stolen a small figurine from a friend’s apartment, claiming it had been given to her when I called her on it.

“Anything else in there?” I asked.

Haley shot me a quick look, and I knew it hadn’t even occurred to her that there might be more. She set the bracelet on the mattress and peered inside the hole for a second before reaching in to pull out a stuffed animal, followed by an old paperback copy of *The Hobbit*.

“This thing is like the Bermuda Triangle,” she said.

She was joking, but I could see she was a little thrown.

“Is all this stuff yours?” I asked.

“The book is mine. I know why she took it, too. I was obsessed with *The Hobbit* for a while there. I’d finish reading it and start all over again at

Chapter One. She hated that I preferred it to doing whatever she wanted to do. The Beanie Baby is Laura Carmichael's, though. Her most prized possession. Its disappearance was a neighborhood mystery for years."

"Well. I always wondered what Jess was like as a kid," I said dryly.

Haley shot me a quick, assessing look.

"She only did things like this when she felt threatened. Mostly it was about needing attention for herself. She's always needed a lot of proof that she's loved."

She contemplated the Beanie Baby and book for a few seconds, then tucked them back into the bed base. She shrugged when she saw my frown.

"They're her treasures now. But I'm keeping the bracelet. Granny Elliot's been dead eight years and it would be nice to have something to remember her by."

I helped her right the mattress, and together we finished making the bed. When we were done, Haley studied the room and looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Maybe some flowers from the garden, and then I think we're through here."

"Which bedroom is yours?" I asked as I followed her out of the room.

She pointed to the door across the hall. "That one. Mom turned it into her study a few years ago, but feel free to be a snoop."

She grinned at me and resumed her mission to get some flowers from the garden. It was typically thoughtful of her to go the extra mile for her sister, and I was smiling to myself as I nudged open her old bedroom door.

This room was half the size of her sister's and much darker, thanks to a single, north-facing window that offered a view of the neighbor's fence. Compared to Jess's room, it was a closet, but it made sense that Haley had drawn the short straw—Jess would have made Haley's life hell if she'd scored the better room.

I made my way through the house and out the kitchen door to the backyard and found Haley using a pair of scissors to snip roses and other summer flowers from the garden beds. She piled them on the picnic table while I threw a stick for Larry. When she was done, Haley took the flowers inside and returned with two tall glasses of iced water.

"Read my mind," I said, accepting a glass.

"Being the resident strong man is thirsty work," she said, taking a seat beside me.

We drank, the sound of birds and insects filling the silence between us. Then Haley set her glass down and cleared her throat.

“So, since it looks as though Jess is going to be around for a while, I wondered if maybe we should talk about the stuff that we said we were going to talk about.”

I knew exactly what she meant, because our unfinished conversation regarding the details of my relationship with Jess had been weighing on me, too.

“You’re probably right,” I said, shifting my glass a few inches to the left.

“If you don’t want to do it now, that’s okay,” Haley said quickly.

“Now is good.” I’d rather have it over and done with, then Haley and I would both know where we stood. I took a moment to gather my thoughts, then raised my gaze to meet hers. “You know the basics. We lived together in a little place above a laundromat in Queens. I worked in a café during the day and nights in a bar to pay the rent while Jess looked for modeling work. And at first it was fun. We got to know the city. When I had nights off, we’d find clubs and bars in obscure places. Jess made a bunch of new friends. She was always good at that.”

“Charisma,” Haley said, nodding in recognition. “She’s got it in spades. Same as you.”

“Me?” I gave her a look. “No.”

It was her turn to give me a look. “Seriously? You don’t see the way people flock to you? You’re a charisma machine, Beck.”

I shook my head. “Bullshit.”

“Maybe that’s part of your charm—you have no idea how charming you are,” she mused.

“Anyway,” I said, determined to get this over with. “Things were okay until it started becoming clear that Jess had a lot of competition for every job she went for, and after the rejections started to pile up, things turned sour. She got sad, then angry, and I was the only one around to absorb all of that, so...”

“I know what she can be like when she’s like that,” Haley said. “I’m really sorry you had to deal with it on your own.”

“She started drinking a lot, going out with her friends. There were lots of texts at weird hours from guys I didn’t know. Men’s clothes mysteriously

showing up in our apartment, that sort of thing. I kept telling myself she wouldn't cheat on me, but I realize now that was pretty naive."

Haley looked down at the table. "She once told me that sex is a tool, something she uses to get what she wants. But sometimes she just does impulsive things because it makes her feel good in the moment."

"That sounds about right. I didn't know how to bring it up with her, so I didn't, but then she started accusing me of cheating on her. She'd go through my phone, and every time I mentioned a woman I worked with, she insisted on knowing everything about them. It messed with my head, especially with all the other stuff going on—the drinking, the shopping, the staying out all night. She started blaming me for everything that was wrong in her life, from failed job bookings, to the plumbing in the apartment, to us not being able to afford a vacation. I couldn't seem to do or say anything without setting her off. It was pretty fucking awful."

Haley's eyes were sad as she watched me, but she didn't say anything.

"I was worried about her, to be honest. The way she'd fly off the handle, the crying jags, then suddenly she'd be fine, like all the other stuff hadn't happened. I wound up telling my mom about it, and she said it sounded like Jess would benefit from therapy. So I stupidly raised that idea with Jess, suggesting we could go together."

Haley winced. "I can only imagine how that went down. She has always been super resistant to the idea of therapy."

"It wasn't pretty. She was screaming and yelling so much one of our neighbors called the cops. I backed off, but I was pretty freaked out by then and thinking about ending things. Then she landed a big shoot, and all of a sudden things were good again. I was the best boyfriend in the world, our apartment was cute as a button, the world was our oyster."

"Confusing," Haley suggested.

"I had whiplash from the turn around. It kept going like that, up and down, up and down, and then one day I found a condom wrapper under our bed that I knew was definitely not mine. And honestly, I was kind of relieved I finally had hard evidence of how badly things were fucked up between us. Jess was so, so good at shifting the blame to me. She literally made me doubt my own memory of events, constantly accusing me of making stuff up. When I showed her the condom wrapper and told her it was over between us, she lost it. She accused me of planting it so I could get rid of her and claimed I'd been having an affair with the woman

downstairs and threw a whole bunch of other accusations at me. She was getting more and more upset, so I figured we both could use some space, and I told her I was going for a walk to clear my head. I walked around for a while, called home to let my folks know what was happening, and texted a friend to ask if I could spend the night. Then I went back to the apartment.”

I stopped to take a couple deep breaths, remembering that day.

“If you need to stop, we can do this another time.”

“I want you to know. It might explain a few things. Like why I was such an asshole when you first turned up at Dark Horse.”

“Okay.”

“I really didn't want to go back, you know? I promised myself I'd just grab my things, retrieve Larry, and leave and not get sucked into another fight. Jess was curled up on the couch when I let myself in, her eyes all puffy from crying. She didn't say a word, just stared at me. There was so much accusation in her eyes, Haley. That was when I realized Larry hadn't come rushing to greet me when I came through the door the way she usually did.”

Remembering that awful moment made my guts tight and the back of my eyes burn.

“I asked her where Larry was, and that's when she told me I'd left the door to the apartment open when I went out. According to her, Larry had followed me. She told me she'd heard a horrible noise from down on the street and she'd run down to find Larry had been hit by a car. She said Larry died instantly, and that she would never forgive me for letting that happen.”

Haley gasped, her hands coming up to cover her mouth, her eyes wide. “Beck. No.”

“She'd lied to me before, but I didn't think she had it in her to lie about something like that. Not about Larry, when she knew how much I loved my dog. And hearing it was my fault she'd died... I couldn't get my head around it. Jess and I were both so upset, and somehow over the next couple of days our shared grief turned into a reason to stay. I was hardly thinking straight at that point, I was so busy giving myself a hard time.”

“What did she do with Larry?” Haley asked, her face pale.

I smiled grimly, remembering how I'd put all the pieces together afterward. “She put an ad on Facebook, claiming she needed to rehome her

dog urgently because she had to go home unexpectedly to care for her sick father.”

“She gave Larry away to a stranger?” Haley asked, sitting up straight, a fiery light coming into her eyes. “Are you kidding me? How did you get her back?”

I really hated telling this story, but seeing Haley get so angry on my and Larry’s behalf was almost worth it. She got it. She understood what Jess’s betrayal had meant to me.

“I was so fucking lucky. I was running through the park a couple of weeks later, and I decided to take a route I hadn’t run in months. And there she was. She was playing fetch with this skinny guy with a beard, doing that thing she does where she won’t return the ball right away. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I mean, I thought I was hallucinating, Haley, I really did. Then I called her name and Larry came running over, going crazy. I’ve never seen her so happy, and I was standing there laughing and crying like a maniac. The guy filled me in on the Facebook ad, and I explained I was in the middle of a breakup with my girlfriend. He was a decent guy, didn’t try to stake a claim or anything, just handed Larry over on the spot because he could see how much Larry loved me. I went straight home, packed my bags, and left and never looked back.”

“Jesus. Beck. I don’t know what to say. Jess has done a lot of shitty things in her time, but that’s so cruel. It’s so awful...” She trailed off, unable to find the words.

“I figure she thought it was a win-win—maybe she could guilt me into staying, and if I left, she knew she’d taken the thing I loved more than anything in the world from me.”

“She’s always at her most dangerous when she’s been rejected,” Haley said slowly. “But I still can’t believe she did that to you. No wonder you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

I picked up my glass and drank until it was empty. Then I very deliberately tried to relax my shoulders, which felt as though they were up around my ears.

“Jess and I haven’t communicated in any way since that day,” I said. “It took me a long time to come to terms with how fucked up our relationship was. I took a lot of crap from her. I let her mess with my head in ways I never thought were even possible.”

“I know what that’s like,” Haley said, nodding. “She’s such a good liar. She’ll say and do anything to get what she wants. Or to hurt someone if she feels threatened.”

That was when it hit me that more than anyone in the world, Haley understood what I’d gone through. What it was like being gaslit and manipulated by a pro.

“Sorry if that was hard to hear,” I said, because on top of everything else, I was always conscious that Jess was Haley’s sister and Haley was still looking pale and shocked.

“I don’t know what to say, Beck. What she tried to do to you and Larry... It’s so fucking awful. She’s always been volatile. When she was little, she’d throw tantrums at the drop of a hat. We all learned to walk on eggshells around her when she was in a bad place, because she could make life hell if she put her mind to it. I think Mom and Dad hoped she’d grow out of it, but she never did. When she was in high school the principal wanted her to go to compulsory counseling after she had a major meltdown at school. But Jess flat-out refused. She wouldn’t talk or eat for days and threatened to hurt herself, and finally Mom and Dad negotiated for her to do a ‘personal development’ program after school.”

Larry roused herself from her sunbathing and came to join us at the table, her tongue lolling out of her mouth as she looked from Haley to me and then back again. Then she came to my side and rested her head on my knee, her way of soliciting ear scratches. Haley smiled faintly as I obediently followed Larry’s prompt, scratching behind her ears until her eyes were slitted with pleasure.

“Have you ever googled any of this stuff? I mean, did you ever try to figure out what might be wrong with Jess?” Haley asked suddenly, her gaze searching mine.

“Yeah. Afterward, when I had enough distance to process what had happened.”

“Borderline Personality Disorder seems like the most likely diagnosis. But there are a bunch of other things it could be, too.” She shifted guiltily. “My parents would kill me if they heard me talking like this. They’ve convinced themselves Jess is just highly strung and sensitive. They think that if they wrap her in enough cotton and love her enough she’ll get better, but I don’t think that’s true. And in the meantime, she’s hurt herself, and you, and poor Larry. God knows what’s gone on between her and Jonny.

But my parents are so scared of pushing her after her suicide attempt, they won't even discuss getting her help."

Haley shook her head, her expression bleak.

"I feel like I should give you a head start so you can make a run for it," she said.

I reached across the table and took her hand. As I'd noted before, she had strong hands, the nails short and practical, her grip firm. Good hands. Capable, hardworking hands.

"I knew all this going in," I told her. "You're worth it, Haley. A thousand times over."

She blinked, then her hand tightened around mine and she lowered her head to press a fierce kiss to the back of my hand.

"Thank you for saying that."

"It's just the truth."

We smiled at each other, grateful we'd had the conversation despite how much the memories obviously sucked for both of us.

Haley gave my hand a final squeeze, then pulled hers free and picked up our glasses.

"Let's get out of here and go do something completely frivolous for a few hours," she said.

"Sounds good to me."

As long as I was with her, anything sounded good to me.

As for what would happen when her sister blew back into town... Well, we'd deal with that when we came to it, and we'd do it together.

HALEY

I spent a fun afternoon with Larry and Beck hiking through Hubbard Park. We took donuts we bought at a Montpelier bakery and sat in a sunny clearing to eat them, licking sugar glaze off our fingers before Beck decided to push me back onto the grass and kiss me till I couldn't see straight.

It was a lovely way to spend my Sunday, but I felt weighed down by what I'd learned about his relationship with Jess. I had never discussed my suspicions about her mental health with anyone outside my family before, and being able to talk frankly with Beck about Jess without being worried he'd back off or wouldn't understand was a gift.

But I couldn't stop thinking about what Jess had done with Larry. It haunted me all day and into the evening, and I kept reaching out to caress her silky coat or rub one of her velvety ears as we watched an old movie on Beck's couch that night, feeling guilty by association even though I knew the situation had nothing to do with me.

It worried me that Jess could behave so destructively. She'd always been prone to acting on impulse, but Beck's story revealed she was capable of acting out on a whole new level. It made me feel as though the way my parents and I had been managing her through the years was not only misguided, but maybe even negligent. We'd been telling ourselves that our weekly phone calls and occasional visits were keeping her grounded, but clearly we'd been deluded.

I was staring blankly at the TV screen, my mind churning through all the issues, when Beck pressed a kiss to the side of my neck.

"You're not your sister's keeper," he said, his voice a low, sincere rumble.

I looked at him over my shoulder, stunned he'd intuited what was on my mind.

"How did you know what I was thinking about?"

"The girl in the red in this movie is wearing a really cool pair of shoes, and you didn't bat an eye."

I glanced at the screen, and, sure enough, one of the women was wearing a truly stunning pair of two-tone nineteen fifties pumps with a jeweled buckle.

"Oh, those are *nice*," I said appreciatively.

"There she is," Beck said, smiling.

I smiled back at him, but I had to ask, "If I'm not my sister's keeper, who is?"

"Jess is. She's an adult. She can drive a car, vote in elections, pay taxes, manage her healthcare. She's the only person responsible for her."

What Beck said made sense, but it went against every lesson I'd learned growing up. It had always been my job to help clean up Jess's messes, to absorb the hits when they came my way, and always, always be available when she or my parents needed me. It was simply the way our family had functioned.

I didn't want to get into that with Beck, though—he'd had enough Elliot family for one day, I figured—so I focused on what was happening on the screen and let myself sink into the story. I had to leave early the next morning to go back to my place to get ready to open the Bean, so we turned the TV off at ten and crawled into bed to fool around until we fell asleep.

It was still dark outside when Beck escorted me to my car the next morning and kissed me goodbye. I dashed home and got ready for work and was locking my front door when my mother texted.

Just leaving NYC now. Home soon!

I texted back a thumbs up emoji, then typed in a question:

How's Jess doing?

Three dots appeared, quickly followed by another message:

She's taking it hard. Will be good for her to be home.

I'd already assured them Jess's room was ready for her, so I told my mother I'd see her soon and started the short walk to work. It was a slow morning that turned frantic when a tour bus unloaded a bunch of tourists right before lunch. I was glad of the distraction but disappointed I could only smile in passing at Beck when he arrived with our beans.

After work, I stopped by the supermarket to grab some groceries for my parents, then stowed everything in their fridge and pantry. Then I went home to wait for news that they were back.

I was busy making more keyrings for the gift shop in Stowe when my Dad called at three to say they were home. I took a deep breath before cleaning up my workbench and getting into my car to drive to my parents' place.

I could hear my father talking in the kitchen as I let myself into the house. It sounded like a monologue, because no one was responding to his verbal cues, but when I entered the kitchen I saw that Jess was sitting at the kitchen table, her face blank as she stared at the tabletop, her long blond hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She wasn't wearing makeup and her eyes were red and puffy-looking.

"Hey. You made it," I said.

Jess's gaze flicked toward me briefly before returning to the table. "Hey, Hales."

Her voice was flat, devoid of all emotion. I could see why my parents were worried. I hadn't seen her like this for years.

"Iced tea, Haley?" my father asked, his tone hearty. "I was talking Jess through the menu options for dinner."

"Thanks, Dad. If Dad's offering his chicken with asparagus and polenta you should jump on that, Jess. It's amazing."

"Sure. Whatever is easy," Jess said with a shrug.

I made eye contact with Dad and he raised his eyebrows to signal his concern. Mom came in from the yard carrying a laundry basket and smiled at me.

"Hello, darling. How was work?"

"Good. We got slammed by some tourists at lunch time, but that just means it was a good day for Zara and Audrey."

Jess lifted her gaze from the table to focus on me. “Zara Rossi? I didn’t know you were working for her.”

“Her and Audrey Shipley. You wouldn’t know her. She moved to town after marrying Griff Shipley a few years ago,” I explained.

The gleam of interest left Jess’s gaze, and she returned to her contemplation of the table.

Dad slid a glass of iced tea in front of both of us, along with a plate of cookies.

“Chocolate chip, your favorites,” he said, giving Jess’s shoulder an affectionate pat.

“Try to eat something, darling,” Mom encouraged.

I could see the muscles in Jess’s jaw clench, but she reached out and took a cookie without a word. Then she took a bite and chewed mechanically, her gaze once again fixed on the table.

“How was the trip home?” I asked.

“We got hung up in some traffic in Connecticut,” Dad said.

“Otherwise it wasn’t bad. Our hotel was nice, too,” Mom said.

Jess had started pulling the remainder of the cookie apart, turning it into crumbs, her head bowed now. She looked utterly dejected and miserable, and I wasn’t surprised when a fat tear plopped onto the table.

“It’s going to be okay, Jess,” my mom said firmly. “You’re home now. We’ve got you. You can just rest and sleep and eat good food and everything will feel okay again soon.”

“No, it won’t. Sleep won’t change the fact that I’m a piece of shit. Food won’t change the fact that I fuck everything up. No one is ever going to love me the way I love them.” Jess’s voice throbbed with emotion, her hands pressed flat against the table.

I’d seen her like this before, full of vicious self-loathing, but that didn’t mean it was easy to watch. For the thousandth time, I wondered at the irony and sadness of somebody being so beautiful on the outside, yet so damaged and fractured beneath that perfect surface.

“We love you. We’ll always love you.” Dad took her hand.

“Why don’t you try to take a nap?” Mom suggested. “Haley has made your room so nice for you. You must be tired after the long drive.”

Jess nodded, tears dripping unheeded from her nose and chin. She pushed back her chair and walked slowly from the room. After a few moments, my mother made a quick check of the hallway.

“Her door is shut. Where did you put her bags?” she asked my father in a hushed tone.

“Living room,” Dad said, pushing himself to his feet.

I followed them into the living room, trying to work out what was going on. My mother unzipped a large suitcase and started sifting through the clothes, looking for something.

“What are you doing?” I asked, baffled.

“I didn’t get a chance to do this when we packed,” Mom explained.

And suddenly I realized she was checking for pills. Just in case.

I frowned, understanding their concern but troubled by how invasive their search was.

“Maybe you should just ask Jess if she’s got anything?” I asked.

Mom glanced at me. “And what if she lies? I’d rather be safe than sorry, Haley. Sad, but true.”

She finished searching inside the case then patted down the outside pockets, and I saw that her hands were shaking. The outward sign of her inner turmoil brought home to me how afraid she was of history repeating itself. Sympathy made me bite my tongue as both my parents continued the search. They turned up some antibiotics and supplements, carefully searching the drug names on Dad’s phone. After they determined nothing was dangerous, my mom put everything back and zipped up the cases.

“Okay,” Mom said with a sigh. “I’ll sleep a little easier knowing we don’t have anything to worry about here.”

The three of us returned to the kitchen, and even though I understood their concern, I couldn’t help feeling like a guilty accomplice in the crime of invading my sister’s privacy.

“Can you stay for dinner? I think it would be nice for Jess to have us all here on her first night,” Dad said.

“Sure, I can do that,” I said. “Anything I can help with?”

“I’ve got it.” Dad squeezed my shoulder on his way to the fridge.

“There’s something we need to talk about before Jess joins us again.” Mom patted the seat next to her and I sank into it, eyebrows raised in query.

“What’s up?”

“This situation with you and Beck. Obviously we can’t break the news to Jess right now. She’s already so fragile. Your father and I think it might be best if you and Beck dialed things down for a bit.”

My mother dropped her bombshell as casually as if she were asking me to pick up her dry cleaning or water the garden. My heart sank to my feet as I stared at her.

“You want me to break up with Beck?” I checked, just to make sure I wasn’t misinterpreting her words.

“We’re asking you to put your relationship with him on the back burner for a couple of weeks. Just until she’s found her feet again,” Dad said. “Colebury is a small town; you know that. There’s no way we can keep a lid on things if you and Beck are running around together.”

I looked from my father to my mother, utterly stunned by their request. “How am I supposed to explain this to Beck?”

“Don’t make this into a big drama, Haley,” my mom said. “I’m sure if you fill him in on how Jess is feeling right now, Beck will understand. He knows Jess and how she can get. And it’s not as though you two have been seeing each other very long.”

I blinked slowly. “I’m in love with this man, Mom. I don’t want to ask him to back off.”

It felt wrong to declare my feelings to my parents before I had shared them with Beck, but they were pushing me into an impossible position, and I needed them to understand what they were asking of me.

“It’s only a couple of weeks,” Mom said, her expression perplexed. “I really don’t think it’s a lot to ask, Haley. Surely you can understand how hard it would be for her to see you having a happy relationship with her ex when she’s recovering from a breakup?”

I stared at them, my chest tight, my head full of the stories Beck had told me about his relationship with my sister. The gaslighting, the cheating, and what she’d done with Larry. It seemed impossible that Beck had wanted to be with me. That he thought I was worth it.

At what point did that change, though? At what point did I become the girl with the very messy family who just kept asking more of him?

“You don’t understand,” I said. “Beck is the last person in the world who should ever have to worry about Jess’s feelings after what she did to him when they broke up.”

My mother stiffened. “There are two sides to every story, Haley.”

“She gave his dog away and told him it had been hit by a car and died,” I said, and my mother flinched. “Please find me the other side of that story.”

“She was probably upset. You know she does things without thinking sometimes when she’s worked up,” Dad said. “And I hate to state the obvious, Haley, but if Daniel cares for you, asking him to cool it for a while shouldn’t matter.”

I closed my eyes, needing a moment to get a grip on my temper, more than a little stunned by the way my parents were prepared to make excuses for Jess’s cruelty while simultaneously sacrificing my happiness on the altar of her “fragility.”

"I know you're only trying to do the best thing for Jess, but if she's so unstable that she can't handle hearing about me and Beck, then we need to get her some professional help," I said, finally daring to touch on the untouchable subject of my sister's mental health. "It's probably something we should have done a long time ago, based on what Beck's told me about their relationship."

My mother bristled. "She won't go, Haley. You know that. And it will only upset her if we bring it up. You've seen how low she is. The last thing we want to do is give her another reason to feel bad about herself. She'll be fine if we can just keep things nice and calm for the next few weeks. She'll find her balance again." My mother reached out to take my hand, her expression urgent. "I'm asking you to do this for us, and for Jess. Is it really so much?"

I stared at our joined hands. I had given up a lot for Jess over the years. I'd made a lot of allowances and swallowed a lot of shit because I had always understood how unhappy she was and how much my parents worried about her. But I really, really didn't want to have to give up Beck, even for just a few weeks.

I knew he'd probably do it if I asked, but I felt sick just thinking about it. He'd been so good and patient and caring. He'd even helped me get Jess's room ready for her, after everything she'd put him through. How could I ask for more from him?

After a long, tense beat, my mother pulled her hand away. "If you don't think you can do this, then maybe you need to stay away for a while."

Her words hit me like a slap. I lifted my head to stare at her, blinking rapidly.

"You want me to stay away?"

"What's the alternative?" my mother asked coolly. "We can't risk upsetting Jess. If it's not too much to ask, perhaps you and Beck could at

least try to be discreet when you're in Colebury.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see my father gesture as though he was going to intervene, but he didn't say anything.

I blinked once, then twice. Then I pushed back my chair and stood. I reached for my car keys and bag. Not looking at either of them, I exited the kitchen and walked down the hallway to the front door.

It was a surprise to walk out and find that it was still summer in Vermont. The sky was blue, the trees were green, the breeze was warm on my bare arms and face.

I walked to my car, got inside and started the engine. It was a five minute drive to my place, and I kept my mind carefully blank until I'd parked the car.

And then suddenly I couldn't move. All I could hear was my mother's voice in my head, cold and distant and implacable.

If you don't think you can do this, then maybe you need to stay away for a while.

All my life I had been the good daughter. The quiet one, the obedient one, the undemanding one. I'd borne my sister's insults when she was raging, comforted her when she was desolate, and tag teamed with my parents to ensure we would never, ever miss the warning signs again.

And the one time I'd asked for something for myself, the one time I'd pushed back against the narrative that my sister and her needs must come first, my mother had kicked me to the curb.

If you don't think you can do this, then maybe you need to stay away for a while.

My phone rang in my bag, and I was so distracted it took me a moment to understand what the noise was. I dumped my bag onto the passenger seat, too out of it to fumble through pockets. Beck's smiling face filled my phone screen, letting me know he was waiting for me to pick up his call.

I'd taken the picture during our weekend hike. It had been such a good day, just him, me, and Larry walking through the sunshine, licking donut sugar off our fingers.

My chin started to wobble as I pressed the screen to take the call.

“Can you come?” I asked on a sob.

His reply was instant. “I'll be there in twenty.”

BECK

I sat on the speed limit all the way to Haley's place, my knuckles white on the steering wheel.

I had no idea what had happened, but my gut told me it was about Jess. Had she done or said something to hurt Haley?

The thought made me want to Hulk out.

I'd meant everything I said to Haley the other day about feeling sorry for Jess. Intellectually, I knew she had problems that drove her to do shitty things, but I was going to find it really hard to hang onto that notion if she'd wounded Haley in some way.

Finally, I hit Colebury, and two minutes later I was pulling up to her apartment. I parked behind her little hatchback and jumped out of the van, stopping in my tracks when I saw Haley sitting behind the steering wheel, her head bowed.

I rushed forward and pulled open her door. "Haley. What happened?"

She lifted her face, and I saw the hurt and confusion in her eyes and the tears on her cheeks and my heart ached for her.

"They... They sent me away," she said, her voice small. "They said if I couldn't do it I should stay away."

I had no idea what she was talking about, all I knew was that she was hurting. I crouched down and leaned into the car, pulling her into my arms. She clung to me, her body wracked with sobs, and I pressed my hand to the back of her head and waited for the storm to pass.

After a couple of minutes she hiccuped and sniffed, pulling away from me.

"I think I got snot on your shoulder," she said.

“Like I give a shit. Come on, let’s go inside.”

I helped her gather her things from the car and then guided her into her apartment.

I went straight to the living room and pointed to the couch. “Sit.”

Then I went into the kitchen and made her some tea. Haley was blowing her nose when I returned, her face blotchy from crying. She gave me a sheepish look when I passed her the mug.

“Thanks. Sorry for blubbering all over you.”

“What happened?” I asked bluntly. “Who told you to stay away?”

Her eyes filled with tears again and she inhaled sharply and stared at the ceiling, blinking like crazy.

“My parents. My mom, specifically, but my dad seemed to be on board, too. They’re super worried about Jess. Beck, they even searched her luggage, thinking she might have some pills she could hurt herself with. Then they told me they didn’t think Jess was up to hearing about you and me and asked me to cool things off with you until she calmed down.”

“Drink some of your tea,” I instructed, because she was looking far too pale.

She took a slurp of tea obediently, wrapping her hands around the warm ceramic. “How much sugar did you put in this?”

“Enough. What did you say to them?” I asked.

“I told them I didn’t want to do that. That you were important to me. They told me you would understand, so I told them about what Jess tried to do with Larry.” She frowned. “It was like it didn’t even register with them. They’re so used to making excuses for her. Then my mother told me she didn’t think they were asking so much of me, and all I could think of was all the things they’ve asked me to put up with over the years, them and Jess.”

She took another mouthful of tea, then looked up at me, her gaze intense.

“It’s like those things we found hidden in Jess’s bedroom. Deep in my heart, I always knew she’d taken them, but I accepted it, because that was just the way it was. She was *so much*. She’s always been so much, and I could see how big a toll it took on my parents, so I always tried to be good. To do the right thing.”

“That’s because you’re a good person, Haley, with a huge heart,” I said, because it seemed to me she needed to hear that right now.

She returned her focus to the mug, tightening her grip. “I couldn’t say no to what they were asking, and I couldn’t say yes. So I just sat there, paralyzed. Then my mom said, ‘If you don’t think you can do this, then maybe you need to stay away for a while.’”

Haley’s voice quivered on the final words, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Haley,” I said, heartbroken and angry for her in equal measures.

I took the mug and put it safely on the coffee table, then I pulled her onto my lap and enveloped her in my arms.

“You know how you sometimes have this sort of gut-level knowledge about something but you never quite put it into words or look it in the eye because you really, really don’t want to have to deal with it? I feel like I just looked. It’s always been about Jess for my parents. I’ve always been the second-string daughter. The afterthought.”

“No,” I said. “Never believe that, Haley. You’re the best person I know.”

She smiled sadly, her lashes spiky with tears. “You might be a little biased.”

“Because I’m in love with you? Guilty as charged. But it’s still true.”

She blinked with surprise. Then her mouth curved into a watery smile. “I love you, too,” she said. “So much it scares me a little.”

“Don’t be scared.”

I kissed her, because I couldn’t not, then I tucked her head under my chin and held her close for a few minutes while I gathered my thoughts.

“Here are the things I know about you,” I said. “You’re smart, and you’re talented. You’re tenacious as hell. You know how to work hard, and you’re not afraid to go for what you want. And you’re funny, and so, so generous, and really good in bed.”

She laughed and snuggled closer.

“But wait, there’s more,” I said. “You’re loyal and selfless and sensitive and kind. You’re a great sister and an amazing daughter. What happened tonight is about your parents, not you. None of it was about you.”

I felt her nod against my chest. She was still digesting what had happened, and I didn’t want to push too hard, but I was really fucking proud of her for standing up for herself and her own happiness, even though she’d spent a lifetime being conditioned to do the opposite.

I was also really fucking angry with her parents for putting her in that position in the first place. But this was not the time or place for me to get into any of that.

I wracked my brain, trying to think of something I could do to comfort her. Then I remembered the claw-foot tub in her bathroom.

“I’m going to run us a bath,” I said. “Then we’re going to have wine and pizza for dinner, and then I’m going to take you to bed and make you scream in a good way. How does that sound? You up for all of that?”

“Sounds pretty good,” she said, and when I glanced down at her there was a little more color in her cheeks.

“This is about them, Haley. Not you,” I repeated.

She nodded, and I decided to leave it at that for now.

“Give me ten minutes,” I said, easing her off my lap.

Then I went to run my sweetheart a bath.

HALEY

As I sat on the couch listening to water run into the bathtub, it occurred to me that in all of my twenty-six years on the planet I had never had a serious fight with my parents. Jess had had plenty, more than enough for both of us, but I had never pushed back against them, and they'd never felt the need to push back against me.

Maybe that was why I was feeling so numb right now. And like my chest was suddenly hollow.

Or maybe it was because my mother had made it very clear that my happiness was much less important to her than Jess's. Thinking back on it, her first response to hearing about me and Beck being together had been to worry about Jess, too. There had been no happiness for me, no questions about how we'd met. We'd just rushed straight to concern about how Jess would handle it.

I stirred, then scrubbed my face with my hands. The sound of running water had ceased in the bathroom, and when I went to investigate, I found Beck lighting the scented candle someone had given me for a birthday a couple of years ago.

"Bath and a smelly candle. Now I'm really feeling spoiled," I joked.

Beck smiled, but his eyes were serious, and I knew he was worried about me.

"I'm okay," I said. "I think I was just shocked. But it's fine. I'll just lie low for a while, like they asked, and they can do whatever they need to do for Jess. I'm sure we'll work it out sometime."

Even I could hear the wobble in my voice, and I rolled my eyes. "God, I'm such a sucky actress."

“You don’t have to be brave with me,” Beck said. “Your parents just let you down, big time. You’ve got every right to feel sad about that.”

“Yeah, but I’m twenty-six. Not a baby.”

“Every kid wants their parents’ love and approval. Even when their parents are assholes.”

I glanced at the bath. “Are you getting in with me?”

“That’s my cunning plan.”

“Sure there will be room for us both?” I asked, eyeing him then the tub dubiously.

“We’ll make it work.”

We both stripped off our clothes, then Beck maneuvered his ridiculously brawny body into the tub, easing his back against the sloped side away from the faucet. He patted the water in front of him.

“Come on in, the water’s fine.”

I climbed in and sank into the steamy heat, settling back against his body, his legs twin mountains rising from the water on either side of me. It was a snug fit, but doable.

“See? Perfect. Like it was made for us.” Beck folded his arms around me.

I rested my head against his chest and tried to let go of the tight feeling in my chest and belly, but I kept seeing my mother’s face, the hard, implacable light in her eyes. As though I was the enemy suddenly, because I’d stopped singing from the family hymn book.

Then I remembered the way her hands had been shaking when she searched Jess’s luggage for anything Jess might use to hurt herself, and how she’d urged my father to make sure that the pills they’d found weren’t dangerous.

“They’re the ones who found Jess that night, you know,” I said.

There was a small silence.

“That must have been tough.”

“She waited till I had a sleepover at a friend’s place to do it. Mom and Dad went to a movie, and Jess was supposed to be going out with some kids from school. That’s what she told us, anyway. She’d stolen my Dad’s back-pain meds. They came home and found her passed out on the floor. She’d thrown up and hit her head on something. Dad had to give her CPR while Mom called for help.”

I fell silent as I thought about what my parents must have endured that night, finding Jess on the brink of death. How fearful they must have been, literally forcing air into their daughter's lungs and then, later, sitting by her bed through the long night, hoping against hope that she'd recover.

They must have blamed themselves for not seeing the warning signals. For not keeping Jess safe from her own destructive impulses. They must have made all sorts of promises and bargains with themselves and Jess and the universe that night.

"I don't think they've ever gotten over it," I said, articulating something I'd always known in my gut but never put into words. "They've been so vigilant ever since. So attentive. We all have, orbiting around her, keeping tabs on her, doing everything we can to keep her stable."

"I know Jess is resistant to therapy, but surely your parents must have tried to get her help?" Beck asked.

"She had to talk with a therapist in the hospital before they'd let her come home, but the moment she was out she dug her heels in. Wouldn't take the pills they'd prescribed, wouldn't see her therapist. There were so many fights and threats, Mom and Dad finally gave in. I think they figured that therapy wasn't going to help her much if she wasn't a willing participant. Instead, they wrapped her in love, and after a while Jess got better. And she's never made another attempt again."

There had still been multiple crises over the years, though. And now this, with Jess home, back in the family fold, my parents doing their damndest to keep her safe from herself.

Even if that meant asking me to give up the best thing in my life and then pushing me away when I refused.

"I wish they'd stood their ground," I said after a long silence. "I wish they'd found a way to get Jess the help she needs. Living in fear is no way to live. For any of us."

"No."

Beck reached for the soap and started gliding it slowly over my shoulder. Then my collarbone. Finally, down over my breasts. A slow smile curved my lips as I watched his hands work.

"You've been very patient," I said.

"You have no idea," he said. "Your tits are so pretty."

He dropped the soap, cupping me in his hands. I closed my eyes and let go of all the misery and sadness for a few minutes, allowing myself to get

swept away on sensation as he teased and soothed and teased me again. Then he slipped a hand between my legs and did it all over again until my heart was racing and I was moving restlessly in the water, unable to keep still.

“Let it go, baby,” Beck whispered in my ear, and I did, my head falling back against his shoulder as pleasure rushed through my body.

Beck ran some more hot water into the bath afterward as I lay sleepily in his arms, and when the water cooled a second time we climbed out and ordered pizza. We sat on my bed drinking red wine and eating pizza, talking about anything and everything except for my family.

I’d reached my limit, burned out on worry and grief, and Beck obviously sensed it.

He cleaned up afterward and then we snuggled in bed, his chest the perfect pillow for my head. I was just about to slip into sleep when a thought hit me.

“Larry!” I said, my eyes popping open. “What about Larry?”

“Relax. I texted Sam ages ago. He’s got her for the night. Probably feeding her too many scraps and making her fat.”

“Oh. Good.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Thanks for worrying about her, though.”

“She’s such a good girl,” I said drowsily, already slipping off again.

“Love you, Haley,” Beck said.

“I love you, too.”

And despite the fact that it had been a deeply, deeply shitty day, I fell asleep with a smile on my lips.

BECK

Haley's breath was soft against my skin as she slept the sleep of the emotionally exhausted. I was pleased for her sake that she'd been able to find some peace.

I was pretty sure it was going to be harder for me to let go of the day's events, however.

I'd put up with a lot from Jess. It had messed me up, but making the choice to be with Haley had helped me reach a place in my life where I could start to let go of my anger at what Jess had done and begin to feel sorry for her.

I couldn't forgive what Haley's parents had done to her tonight, though.

It made my blood boil, thinking of them showing her the door because she'd dared to fight for her own happiness. I was so glad she had me to fight in her corner now. I would never not do that for her, because she deserved all the love and care and consideration in the world. She deserved to be honored for the big-hearted, warm, brilliant person she was.

The way I was feeling right now, I'd be happy if she never saw her parents or sister again. Fuck 'em. They were so focused on themselves they had neglected Haley in a thousand different ways over the years. The hijacked birthday, the shitty, short-straw bedroom, and no doubt there were many, many more examples of how Haley had been relegated to second place in the family hierarchy, all because Jess was the squeaky, volatile wheel who demanded all the attention.

Haley loved them, though. She was invested in her sister's happiness and wellbeing, and her parents were a big part of her life. She'd suffer if she lost them. If they didn't take steps to put things right.

But it was on them to fix this, not Haley. That much was very clear in my mind. They needed to do the heavy lifting to heal things with the good, sweet daughter who had stood on the sidelines all her life, waiting patiently for them to notice her.

I wasn't confident they had it in them, though. They were smart people, but after hearing Haley talk about how they'd discovered Jess and fought to save her life, I wasn't confident they could see the forest for the trees. It was so obvious they were still swimming around in the fallout from that night, too fucked up to see that by pouring all their energy into one daughter they were hurting the other.

If they couldn't see it for themselves, they obviously needed someone to show them. I was willing to take on that role. Or at least try to, for Haley's sake. It wasn't going to be pretty, but that wasn't going to stop me. They needed their eyes opened. Big time.

I lay there stewing and making plans for a while before I finally fell asleep. The next morning Haley and I both woke to the electronic chime of the alarm on her phone.

"Work. Ugh," Haley said, her voice muffled by my shoulder.

"You could take the day off," I said, but I already knew Haley wouldn't do that to Zara and Audrey.

She'd have to break an arm or leg before she'd let them down.

"I'll go. I'd rather be busy, anyway." She sat up in bed, her hair flat on one side, her eyes still a little puffy from crying. "Thank you for last night."

"Any time. Especially the part where I got to wash you in the tub."

"Pretty sure there wasn't a lot of washing going on," she said, her mouth curving into a lopsided smile.

"You say potato. There was soap involved."

"There was, indeed."

She kissed my chest over my heart and then rolled out of bed. Twenty minutes later, I followed her out the door. I dropped her off at the Bean, then headed home.

Since I was up so early, I used the extra time to dig through the boxes in the storeroom adjacent to my living space in the barn. They were full of stuff I didn't quite know what to do with—old photos and school stuff Mom had foisted on me when she'd cleaned out the attic, postcards from long dead grandparents—along with things I needed to keep but didn't want

cluttering up my living space. I found my old phone in the bottom of the second box and took it to the apartment to charge.

By the time Sam arrived, I was hard at work, eager to make it up to him after dropping everything for Haley yesterday afternoon.

“Hey, man. How’s Haley?” Sam asked as he came through the front door with Larry.

My furry girl did her happy dance when she saw me and we spent a couple of seconds reminding each other that we were best buds. Then I straightened and focused on my brother.

“She’s doing okay. But I’m gonna need another hour or so to take care of something this morning, if you’re okay with holding the fort solo again?”

“I owe you about a million hours, given all the overtime you’ve done around this place. Go for it,” Sam said easily.

I took a moment to appreciate that I had lucked out in the sibling stakes. Sam might get on my last nerve occasionally, but he had never been a source of unhappiness for me. The opposite, in fact.

“Thanks for having my back,” I said, stepping forward to hook an arm around his neck and bring him close.

Sam gave me a look when I let him go. “You got cancer or something?”

“Don’t be a dick,” I said mildly. “I was having a moment. You don’t need to shit on it from a great height.”

“Keeping it real is part of my job description.”

I snorted and shook my head, turning away.

“Samesies, by the way,” Sam said.

I glanced at him over my shoulder.

“You’re a good dude,” Sam said, shrugging as though just saying the words out loud hurt something deep inside him.

I laughed. “Thanks, man.”

I waited until we’d turned off the roasters for the morning before checking my old phone. The battery had sucked up enough juice for my needs, so I told Sam I’d be back in an hour and hit the road.

Haley had mentioned in passing that her parents had taken a few days off work to support Jess in her first week home, which made my task much easier. I parked the van in front of their house, then walked up to the door and rang the doorbell.

I heard footsteps inside, then a telltale silence as someone checked the peephole. Seconds later the door opened a crack and Lois Elliot stared at

me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you and Chris.”

“Well, you can’t be here. Jess is still in bed but she could be up any moment now.”

“Then I guess we’d better do this quickly,” I said calmly.

She sighed. “Look, I’m sure you think you’re riding to Haley’s rescue right now, but the best thing for you to do is to take a big step backward.”

“I’m not here to rescue Haley. Haley’s awesome, a superstar. She doesn’t need my help. I’m here to save you and your husband from fucking up even more than you already have.” I pointed to the garage. “I’m happy to talk in there, so we can be private. But if you want to do it here, that’s okay, too.”

I planted my feet, letting her know I was the immovable object she was about to slam into if she didn’t change her strategy.

She chewed on my offer for a few seconds then jerked her chin toward the garage. “Go on. I’ll go find Chris.”

I nodded, then made my way through the open garage door.

Less than a minute later Chris and Lois Elliot entered via the house, both of them wearing sour expressions.

“We don’t appreciate being leveraged like this, Daniel,” Chris said, all puffed up with big daddy energy.

“I don’t appreciate having to come over and have this conversation, so I guess we’re even,” I said, pulling my old phone out of my back pocket.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Lois said, glancing over her shoulder toward the door, Jess clearly on her mind.

As always.

“I’m not here about the shitty things you said to Haley last night. I’m sure you’re fully aware of how awful it must have been to hear her own parents telling her she wasn’t welcome anymore if she wasn’t prepared to put her own happiness aside for her sister.”

“That’s not what I said,” Lois said, chin high, arms crossed over her chest.

“Bullshit. But like I said, that’s not what I’m here to talk about. I’m here to talk about your other daughter, because I figure that’s where all this shit started.”

I hit the home button to bring my phone to life.

“This is my old phone, from when I was living in New York City. I stored some stuff on here so I could remind myself of the truth if I needed to without it being in my face all the time. As I’m sure you know, the truth becomes a very valuable commodity when you’re living with someone who lies as easily as breathing.”

“If this is a character assassination, I’m not interested,” Lois said, holding up a hand.

I found the text message I was looking for and started reading, ignoring her.

“You’re a pathetic piece of shit and I wish I’d never met you. Everything that has gone wrong since we got here is on you. You’re so fucking big and stupid you can’t even get a decent job. Do you know how many guys would love to fuck me? All I have to do is click my fingers and they’d be lining up around the block.”

I looked up and caught Haley’s parents exchanging glances.

“She sent me this when I told her we couldn’t afford to go to the Hamptons for the weekend.” I found another text. *“If you leave me I’ll ruin you. I’ll tell everyone you’re doing drugs. I’ll call your parents and tell them you’re sucking dick to pay the rent and—”*

“Okay. I think we get the message,” Chris said, his face pale.

I hit the screen to bring up a photo folder. “This is a screen shot of the Facebook post she made claiming she needed to urgently rehome my dog. This was after I told her I was leaving and left the apartment to avoid another screaming match. I was only gone for a few hours, but it was long enough. When I got back she told me I’d left the door open and Larry had escaped and then got killed by a car.”

To their credit, both Chris and Lois were looking shocked by what I was telling them and showing them, just as Haley had been shocked. I guessed that while Jess had acted out a lot with them over the years, she’d always kept within certain limits. But she’d been anchorless in New York, away from everything familiar, and there had been nothing and no one to hold her back when she became unstable.

They’d never seen what she was capable of when she was at her lowest ebb with no boundaries to constrain her.

“Your daughter has a personality disorder,” I said. “And, yeah, obviously I’m not a qualified professional, but even I know that this is not the behavior of a well-adjusted, balanced person. She needs help.”

Lois inhaled noisily, her nostrils flaring. “Do you think we haven’t tried that? She won’t go.”

“Try again. Do whatever it takes to save your family. Because you’re going to lose Haley if you keep treating her like an afterthought. Your gorgeous, lovable, sweet, dutiful, selfless daughter who has never asked for anything for herself, who has taken a backseat to Jess her whole life.”

“That’s not true. Haley knows we love her,” Lois said, clearly stung by my observation.

“Does she? Pretty sure she’s grappling with some serious doubts on that subject after you told her to disappear if she wasn’t prepared to toe the party line last night.”

“That’s not what we said,” Chris said, bristling.

“Haley spent half of last night trying to justify your behavior to herself. Explaining how you’d been wrecked to find Jess after her suicide attempt. How you never talked about it, but she knew that you were determined for it to never happen again.”

“That’s right. That’s exactly right,” Lois said.

“So get help. Stop pretending she’ll grow out of it. She might, who fucking knows? But in the meantime she’s going to keep hurting herself and others. Get help so that Haley can stop being her sister’s keeper, and you guys can stop lying awake at night worrying about Jess hurting herself again. Get help so the next ten years of your lives—all of your lives—don’t look like the last ten.”

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

“You don’t understand,” Lois finally said, lifting her hand to squeeze the bridge of her nose. Desperately trying not to lose it, if I was any judge. “She said if we made her go back she’d hurt herself again. And this time she’d make sure.”

“Jess makes a lot of threats,” I said. “Talk to the experts. Find a way through this that doesn’t mean Haley has to keep paying the price.”

I’d had my say, so I handed my phone to Chris. “There’s plenty more here if you need more evidence.”

Chris looked at the screen, then handed it back to me. “I think we’ve both heard enough.”

Lois was red-eyed, her face tight with some emotion I couldn’t identify. Anger? Grief? Fear?

Maybe all three.

“I need to go check on Jess,” she said, then slipped into the house.

I eyed Haley’s father. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure Haley has a happy life,” I said. “Don’t make me do that despite you guys. She loves you like crazy.”

I left, walking down the driveway to the street. I hoped I’d gotten through to Haley’s parents, but I wasn’t entirely sure how much had sunk in. They’d been busy chafing at being called on their shit.

I just hoped they had the balls to think about what I’d said once they’d gotten over themselves.

In the meantime, I would not be mentioning this visit to Haley. She didn’t need yet another reason to feel let down by her parents if they failed to act.

HALEY

The Bean was jumping all morning, a major blessing because I didn't want or need the time to let my thoughts get away from me. Beck and I had hashed out my concerns about my family last night, but my internal worry hamster kept churning its wheel.

I tried hard to be my normal cheery self, but Audrey checked in on me twice to see how I was doing, clearly sensing something was up. I reassured her, telling her I'd simply had a bad night's sleep.

I was clearing a four-top, my arms laden with dishes, when I turned and spotted my mother waiting by the register. Her face was pinched and pale, and for the first time I noticed how thin and tired she looked. She was only in her midforties, but the last few years had taken a toll on her.

I guess they'd taken a toll on all of us, really.

Our gazes met across the crowded shop, and I steadied the plates in my hands and headed for the counter.

"Mom. Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes. I was hoping you and I could talk when you get off your shift at twelve," she said, her hands pressed tightly together in front of her. It took me a second to understand she was nervous.

"I don't get off till one," I said, not entirely sure I was ready to talk to her yet.

I was still feeling pretty raw. But on the other hand, she was here. Reaching out. Or maybe not reaching out, depending on the reason for her visit.

I expected her to suggest I come by the house afterward, but she gave a quick nod. "That's okay, I'll wait."

And that's what she did. She went outside and sat in her car, and every time I glanced out the front door or went to check on the patio tables she was there, sitting patiently. Waiting.

I got more and more tense as it got closer to one, the hamster wheel churning with gusto. Had something else come up with Jess? Was she here to try to convince me, once again, to put my relationship with Beck on hold?

I really hoped not.

Finally, my shift ended and I handed things over to Zara. My mother must have seen me winding things up because she was standing by her car when I exited the Bean.

"Why don't we walk down to the river?" she suggested.

I handed her the muffin I'd bought for her. "You missed lunch."

She looked startled, then she closed her eyes for a long beat. When she opened them again, her eyes were watery with unshed tears.

"Oh, Haley." She managed to get a grip on herself and gestured for us to start walking.

For a few seconds the only sound was the crunch of gravel underfoot and the cries of children playing tag on the patio.

"Daniel came to see us this morning," Mom said.

"Beck?" I asked, startled.

"He was very insistent about filling your father and me in on what had happened between him and Jess in New York."

I frowned. "That must have been hard to hear."

"It was."

We reached the bench overlooking the river and we both sat, our gazes fixed on the fast-moving water below.

"I think I've been very naive," my mother said after a short silence. "I imagined that our phone calls and visits were managing to keep Jess grounded. Stable. But she was just telling us what she wanted us to hear."

"She's always been a great liar," I said.

"Yes. She has. I want to apologize for not listening to what you tried to tell us last night. I was so focused on Jess—but you know that already, because that's the way it always is, isn't it?"

I shot my mother a look, surprised by the admission.

"Your father and I had a big talk after Daniel left." My mother sighed and reached up to wipe away a tear. "I promised myself I wasn't going to

cry.”

“Go for it,” I said. “I probably will.”

She huffed out a little laugh and gave me a warmly appreciative look. “You’ve always had a good sense of humor.”

“Have I?”

“You used to laugh in your crib, just playing with your mobile. It was such a *relief* having such a happy baby, because Jess had been a handful. Colic, and trouble sleeping, and teething issues. It was almost as though you sensed we already had more than we could handle and you were just...calm. And so easily pleased. You’ve never really changed, no matter what life has thrown at you. You just keep on keeping on. I think that’s why it was so easy for us to concentrate on your sister.” My mother caught herself, shaking her head. “That makes it sound like I’m making excuses, and I promised myself I wouldn’t do that. I should have been more aware of things. Both your father and I should have.”

“Jess was a lot of work,” I said, because I’d been there, too.

“She was. She still is. But that’s no excuse. We should have gotten Jess help long ago, when she was in her teens. It was obvious then that she found the world overwhelming at times. I kept hoping that she’d mature and grow out of it, but she didn’t. She got worse.” My mother stared down at her hands, twisting her wedding ring back and forth. “When Daniel read us the text messages she’d sent him when they were living together... I was so appalled, Haley. So embarrassed that she could be so savage and intent on hurting someone she claimed to love. And what she tried to do with his dog... It makes me ill to think of it.”

This was what I’d wanted to hear from her last night and it emboldened me to challenge her.

Why not? I didn’t feel as though I had anything to lose right now.

“So what are we going to do about it?” I asked.

My mother smiled faintly. “If that’s not classic Haley, stepping up to the plate to shoulder some of the burden. What *your father and I* are going to do is find someone who can help us. I’ve asked the guidance counselor at work to recommend someone locally who specializes in personality disorders, and we’ve got an appointment with her next week. Jess will be resistant, but we’re not going to let it drop this time. We’ll go on our own if we have to and try to work out some strategies to get Jess to accept help.

We've let things slide long enough. It's time to shine some light in the dark corners."

"I think that's great," I said honestly. "Really, really great."

"The other thing we'll be doing this afternoon is sitting down with Jess to tell her about you and Daniel." My mother shifted on the bench to face me, her eyes swimming again. "I should never have said those things to you last night, Haley. I should never have asked you to put your own happiness at risk so we could spare Jess, and I should never have told you to stay away. You're entitled to your life, to your happiness. And we want you to be happy more than anything. I know that might be hard to believe after the way I behaved last night, but it's true. I spent all of last night feeling sick to my stomach about what I said to you. Hearing that won't mean much to you, given how awful I was, but I want you to know that your father and I are committed to facing things head on, and to making sure that you know how much we love and appreciate you. Because we do. So much."

She was crying in earnest now and I slipped my arm around her shoulders, even though she tried to shrug me off.

"No, don't comfort me, I'm supposed to be making you feel better," she wailed.

"We can make each other feel better," I said, and she finally relaxed against me.

"I'm so sorry, Haley," she said, misery thinning her voice. "I was speaking out of pure fear and exhaustion last night. When we got to New York your sister hadn't showered in days. Her clothes stank, and she'd been drinking. Honestly, it's a wonder her friend let her stay. And the state of the apartment when we finally convinced Jonny to let us in to pack her things... Just awful. There's not a doubt in my mind that he's got issues, too. He'd have to in order to be living like that."

"Poor Jess," I said, because despite everything, I understood that this was not the way my sister would choose to live her life if she had any real say in the matter.

"Yes. But she's not helpless. She's managed to live in New York for four years. She's had work; she's made friends. If we can just get her the help she needs to support her, surely we can find a way for her to function in a healthy way. A safe way."

I could hear the plea for reassurance behind my mother's words.

“We can only try,” I said. “But first we have to convince Jess to try, too.”

“I know.” My mother sighed heavily. Then she gave herself a shake. “This wasn’t supposed to be about Jess. I’m sorry. It’s such an ingrained habit to worry about her.”

“Can I make a suggestion? While you’re looking into this therapist for Jess, maybe it might help for you and Dad to talk to someone, too. About that night, and all the other stuff from over the years.”

My mother was still for a moment, then she nodded. “I think that’s a very good idea, Haley.”

I smiled and blinked away a sudden, hot rush of tears, because I could see how hard she was trying, how committed she was to changing.

“Good. What you two went through that night was huge and awful. It’s a lot to carry around with you.”

My mother’s focus was inward as she stared at the river. “The thing that always haunts me was what would have happened if I hadn’t gone in to say goodnight to her. I could have gone straight to bed. But it was only eleven, and I figured she would probably still be up. The light was on. I could see it under the door.”

My mother fell silent, and I knew she was lost in the old, painful memory.

“We’re all lucky you checked,” I said.

“I can’t bear to think about the alternative.”

We were both silent for a few beats, then my mother sat up a little straighter.

“Thank you for being open to this conversation, Haley. I know I probably deserve for you to ignore me for a couple of years after last night.”

“Don’t be silly. I love you guys like crazy.”

“We love you, too, darling. So, so much. You’ve always been our little star, shining brightly on everything. I don’t think I’ve ever told you how much I admire how tenacious and patient and determined you are. When you want something, you never give up, and it’s been a real privilege to watch you grow into such an amazing young woman.”

For some reason my mother’s words made me think of the Dumpster dive I’d taken in order to find the source of the Colebury Diner’s coffee boom.

“Not sure being determined is always my best feature,” I said, then I told my mom about my mission to get Beck to supply the Bean.

She smiled and laughed and screwed up her face in all the appropriate places, but when my tale was over, she became pensive again.

“He’s gone through a lot with Jess.”

“Yes.”

“He was quite the knight errant this morning. Although he told me he was riding to our rescue, not yours. He said he wanted to save us from fucking up even more than we had already.”

“He said that?” I choked back a shocked laugh.

Clearly, Beck hadn’t pulled his punches.

“It was hard to take, Haley, I have to admit. But when your father and I talked afterward, we both agreed that we would sleep better at night knowing you have someone who loves you so fiercely. That’s a precious, precious thing.”

I smiled. “I know. He’s amazing, and I love him so much.”

My mother’s gaze shifted over my shoulder and she smiled faintly.

“Well, look at that. Speak of the devil.”

I swiveled and spotted Beck standing outside the staff entrance, his gaze on us. He lifted his hand, and even though he wasn’t close enough for me to see the expression on his face, I knew he was wondering if I was okay. If I needed him.

My mother stood and dusted off the seat of her pants.

“I’m going to head home now and let Chris know you’re still talking to us,” she said with a self-deprecating smile. “I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than hang around with your mother.”

To my everlasting surprise, she winked at me. I was still laughing when she kissed my cheek and hugged me goodbye.

“I love you, Haley. With all my heart. Please never doubt that.”

Her arms were very tight around me, almost to the point of pain, but I didn’t mind. She let me go, then started up the slope toward the parking lot. Halfway there, she veered toward Beck as if she’d suddenly decided she had something to say to him. I watched as Beck listened to her. Whatever his reply was, it was short and sweet and my mother nodded and continued on her way, heading for her car.

Beck headed my way.

“I went to your place, but you weren’t there so I walked down, figuring I’d meet you halfway,” he explained when he reached me.

“Mom came to talk to me. I hear you’ve been busy this morning.”

“I would have told you, but I wasn’t one hundred percent sure they’d be able to actually hear what I had to say. I didn’t want you to be disappointed all over again.” His gaze was searching, and I guessed he was worried that maybe he’d overstepped.

“They heard. They’ve got an appointment with a therapist next week for Jess. And if she won’t go, they’re going on their own, and they’re going to keep trying until they get somewhere.”

“That’s good to hear. I was a little worried you might be pissed off at me for interfering.”

“Are you kidding? I’m blown away that you care enough to interfere. And grateful to have you on my side.”

“Hales, I’ll always be on your side. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

His words made me so happy. I smiled at him, blinking away a stupid rush of emotion.

“I’ll always be on your side, too.”

Beck moved closer, opening his arms, and I stepped into his embrace, lifting my face for his kiss. As always, it amazed me that a person could feel like home.

“I love you,” I said in between kisses. “I love you like crazy.”

“Love you, too. But we need to stop now or I’m going to get arrested for getting busy in a public place.”

I blinked, because for a moment I’d forgotten where we were. When I glanced toward the Bean, I saw Zara bussing the outdoor tables. She must have sensed my gaze because she looked up and gave me a little finger wave, and I knew she’d seen our kiss.

“Let’s go to my place,” I said.

“Love the way your mind works,” Beck said.

We grinned at each other and started walking. As we walked through the parking lot, my phone pinged with the special chime I’d chosen for messages from my Haley Made account, and I dug my phone from my bag and checked my inbox. Sure enough, I had an email with the subject: *Need to own a pair of your boots*. I laughed and glanced at the message.

“What’s funny?” Beck asked.

“I think I just landed a new commission for some boots,” I said distractedly, busy reading. “Apparently they saw Georgia Trevi’s Insta post...”

I blinked when I saw who had sent the message and stopped in my tracks.

“No way,” I said stupidly.

Beck’s hand caught my elbow and he steered me out of the middle of the parking lot to safety.

“Sorry.” I handed him my phone. “I need you to read that and tell me I’m not hallucinating.”

Beck frowned then took my phone, quickly scanning the email.

“Holy shit,” he said when he got to the end. He looked as surprised as I felt.

“It’s really real? I’m not imagining it?” I double-checked.

“It’s real.” He grinned at me.

I shook my head, incredulous. “Delilah Spark wants me to make her a pair of boots,” I said. “Can you believe it? I’m going to make a pair of boots for *Delilah Spark*.”

“This is it, babe,” Beck crowed. “This is the start of everything.”

I laughed, delighted by his enthusiasm, even if I wasn’t quite ready to believe his prediction. Still... Delilah fucking Spark wanted a pair of my boots!

We resumed walking, Beck catching my hand in his as we tackled the hill.

“So, boots for a rock star,” he prompted. “No pressure, but what are you thinking?”

I laughed, my belly already full of butterflies as it started to sink in what a huge opportunity this could be. People noticed what famous people wore. People wanted to emulate them.

“I’ve got so many ideas already,” I said. “Probably too many. My favorite Delilah Spark songs is ‘Constellation You.’ I just love the imagery of all the shooting stars and rocket ships and all that stuff. But then there’s also ‘Power Play.’ It’s got those great jungle references, and I could do a lot with those, too. But she’s probably got ideas of her own, right? I should probably calm down and wait until I can have a consultation with her.”

I knew I was babbling, but what the hell. It’s not every day a girl gets a commission to make custom footwear for one of the country’s hottest pop

stars.

“This is just the beginning,” Beck said.

He was so triumphant for me, so thrilled, and it reminded me of how he’d put himself on the firing line when he’d faced my parents.

This man’s love was such a gift.

“I’m the luckiest woman in the world,” I said.

Beck grinned. “This isn’t luck, babe. This is pure talent.”

“I meant because I have you,” I clarified.

Beck’s grin became something softer. “We make a great team. I’m grateful every day that my awesome coffee-roasting skills lured you into my arms.”

“Is that the way it happened?”

“That’s what we’ll tell our grandkids,” he said firmly.

We’d reached the top of the hill and we started across the town green.

“Grandchildren?” I gave him some side-eye, even though my heart gave a leap.

I was crazy about this man, and he was talking about us having grandchildren. Where did I sign up?

“Grandchildren. I want it all. Don’t you?”

I didn’t hesitate, my answer coming from my soul. “Yes. All of it. Everything. And then a little extra. As long as it’s with you.”

Beck increased his speed, and I had to jog a little to keep up.

“Where’s the fire?” I asked, trying not to stumble.

“In my pants. I need to get you naked, now.”

“You’re insatiable.” I laughed.

“*You’re insatiable,*” he said.

“No, *you’re insatiable.*”

“I’ll race you for it,” Beck said as we reached my street. “First one to your front door is the horniest.”

He took off, and I let out a yelp and took off after him in pursuit. There was no way in the world I would ever be able to outpace him, especially when I was laughing so hard, but I had fun trying. Beck was waiting on my front porch when I jogged up the steps.

“You win. I guess you *are* the horniest,” I said.

“Unlock the door and put me out of my misery, woman.”

His eyes were bright with laughter as he crowded me against the door, his hands already sliding under my T-shirt to cup my breasts, his hips

nudging mine so I could feel how hard he was. Suddenly it was difficult to think straight as my body lit up with anticipation.

“Now who’s the horniest?” Beck whispered against my neck.

Somehow I got the key into the lock and the door open, and the next thing I knew I was on my bed, Beck covering my body with his.

“Maybe we need to call it a draw,” I said as his fingers worked open the button on my jeans.

“Sounds like a plan.” His cheeks were flushed, his beautiful eyes shining with lust and love.

And then he kissed me, and, as always, the world ground to a halt, and it was just him and me, together.

Just the way I liked it.

EPILOGUE

HALEY

6 months later . . .

“Careful. Don’t get trapped in there.” I barely stopped myself from darting forward to help Sam and Beck as they maneuvered my chunky, heavy old workbench into the corner of my new studio.

“We’ve got this, babe. Relax.” Beck managed to maneuver the table the final few inches and get out of the way at the same time.

“Amazing. You’re a genius.” I beamed at him.

He *was* a genius, because he was the one who had suggested I consider the storeroom attached to the Dark Horse barn for my new workspace, once it became clear I’d outgrown my old one. I was about to enjoy the benefits of more storage and more space, both of which would give me the capacity to take on staff when I needed to.

Which was going to be very soon, the way business was going.

Ever since Delilah Spark had worn her bespoke boots to the MTV Awards five months ago, my commissions had been *insane*. Off the charts insane, to the point where I’d lost sleep wondering how on earth I was going to keep up.

I’d been forced to quit my job at the Busy Bean within the space of a couple of weeks, I had so many commissions piling up. It had been a heart-wrenching goodbye, because the Bean crew had become a second family for me, but creating art full time had always been my dream.

A week into working full time on commissions, I was approached by a luxury goods online retailer who wanted me to make a limited run of one-of-a-kind boots for them to sell on their site. I had laughed out loud when they told me what they wanted to charge for them, but then I’d realized they were serious and that they thought I could command those kinds of prices for my work.

Turned out they were right.

Now I had a seasonal order for a limited run of off-the-shelf shoes and boots, *plus* a three-month waiting list for bespoke shoe and boot designs. And nobody appeared to give a fat rat’s caboose that they had to wait to

have a pair of Haley Made custom shoes. In fact, I think some of my customers got off on the exclusivity.

Go figure, huh?

“Did you decide where you wanted to put the leather rack?” my sister asked as she entered the room, staggering under the weight of a box full of colorful hides.

“Near the door, so just dump those here,” I said, indicating a spot.

Jess let the box fall with a thud and shook her hands out. “Won’t need to hit the gym for a while after this,” she said with a rueful smile.

She’d insisted on helping today, even though she’d only been home for a couple days. Last week, she’d finished four months of intensive therapy at a residential psychiatric treatment center. Her insistence on contributing to my big move was just one sign of the progress she’d made once she’d accepted that she needed help.

She now made a point to listen more carefully to other people, and several times I’d witnessed her talking openly about her fears. She’d put on weight, losing the angular, bony look that had been great for modeling but not so great for her general wellbeing. Best of all, I was beginning to sense a new, grounded center to her, a solidity that I could see every time I looked into her eyes. After months of sessions with a cognitive behavioral therapist, Jess had started to understand some important things about herself and the way she interacted with the world. Even though we all knew it wasn’t always going to be smooth sailing, I felt confident that Jess had genuinely turned a corner.

She was going to be okay, if she kept working at it. We all were.

My parents had taken my suggestion to talk to someone, and my mother had become the biggest advocate for therapy I’d ever met. *You should try it, you’d be amazed what you discover about yourself*, was now her catch phrase. I’d gone to a few sessions with them, as well as with Jess. Changing the dynamics of our family was probably going to be a lifetime project, but the really encouraging thing was that we all seemed to be on board for the challenge.

That meant a lot.

“There’s just one more of these boxes and then we’re almost done,” Jess said, turning to head back out the door.

“I’ll help you,” Sam offered, falling into step beside her.

I put my hands on my hips and considered the window to my left, then turned to study my workbench. I'd hoped that putting it along the longer wall in my new space would be the best place for it, but now I was wondering if I was robbing myself of natural light.

"Hales, all you have to do is say the word and we can move that sucker," Beck said, correctly interpreting my speculative look.

"I don't know. I really like this layout, but the light's definitely better over there."

"Nothing a bunch of new lighting wouldn't fix. We could hang a row of pendants above your bench." Beck swept his hand through the air, indicating where he thought the lights should go.

He looked so delicious, all bundled against the day's cold temps in a deep blue sweater I'd bought from a local knitter, his expression intent as he thought his proposition through. He'd let his beard grow a little since winter had hit, and I was *very* into his lumberjack look.

Let's face it, I was very into him, period.

Loving him had transformed so many aspects of my life. He'd helped me find the courage to stand my ground with my family, and his cheering from the sidelines had helped me find the confidence to say yes to all the wonderful opportunities the last six months had brought my way.

Watching him study the rafters overhead, trying to work out what my new lighting layout might look like, I was hit with a surge of love and liking and admiration that made my body flush all over. He really was the shiz. And he was mine.

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that might be possible when I'd first met him all those years ago.

Which reminded me...

"Hey, I never told you this, but I had a huge crush on you when you were going out with my sister," I confessed.

Beck's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Suddenly, I had his full attention. "Really?"

"Yep. I was so hot for you. Used to make me feel so dirty and guilty. You were the ultimate forbidden fruit."

"Tell me more." He moved closer, his blue-green eyes alight with interest. "How dirty are we talking?"

"*Very* dirty. I'd have these fantasies about you and me being together. They were pretty X-rated."

Desire flared in his eyes as he closed the final few feet between us. “I’m going to need a lot of details about these fantasies.”

“They’re very private,” I said coyly.

His arm slipped around my waist as he pulled me close. “I have ways of making you talk,” he growled.

He really did. He was a generous, creative lover. Frankly, so was I, but it wasn’t hard when you had such good material to work with.

“That was one of my fantasies, actually,” I admitted.

“How so?” he asked, cocking his head.

“You cornered me one day and told me you knew I was into you. And when I wouldn’t admit it, you said you’d make me confess.”

“I sound a little bossy in your fantasy,” Beck observed.

I shrugged a shoulder casually. “I mean...everything in moderation, right?”

“Noted. I’m liking this. Keep talking.”

The sound of footsteps approaching made him groan low in his throat, and I laughed, delighted to have tortured him a little. He’d get me back later, I was sure.

“You’re in so much trouble when I get you alone,” he said, confirming my guess.

“Can’t wait,” I said.

And I couldn’t, because the adventure of being with this man was endlessly fulfilling, exciting, challenging and rewarding.

Jess and Sam entered, Sam hefting the final box containing my leather supplies.

“I am fully capable of carrying that, you know,” Jess insisted. “I’m a lot stronger than I look. Aren’t I, Hales?”

She looked to me for confirmation, and it hit me that it was true. She *was* stronger than she looked. None of us had ever given her credit for that.

“My sister is a warrior,” I said, and Jess smiled at me, a brilliant, dazzling flash of teeth.

Beck’s hand landed on my shoulder, and I glanced up at him and saw understanding in his gaze. He knew how much it meant to me to see Jess doing so well. He’d never said so, but I think he got a lot out of it, too. He’d seen her at her worst, and he’d worried about her in the same way my parents and I had, even though she’d been such a toxic force in his life when they were together. But now we all had reason to hope.

And hope is what makes the world go round, right?

“It’s looking really good in here,” Jess said as she surveyed my new space. “You’re all set to go, Hales.”

I was, thanks in no small part to the man standing behind me. As if he sensed my thoughts, Beck wrapped his arms around me from behind. Standing there with his big body shielding mine, I felt like anything was possible.

Turns out love will do that to you.

T H E
E N D

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