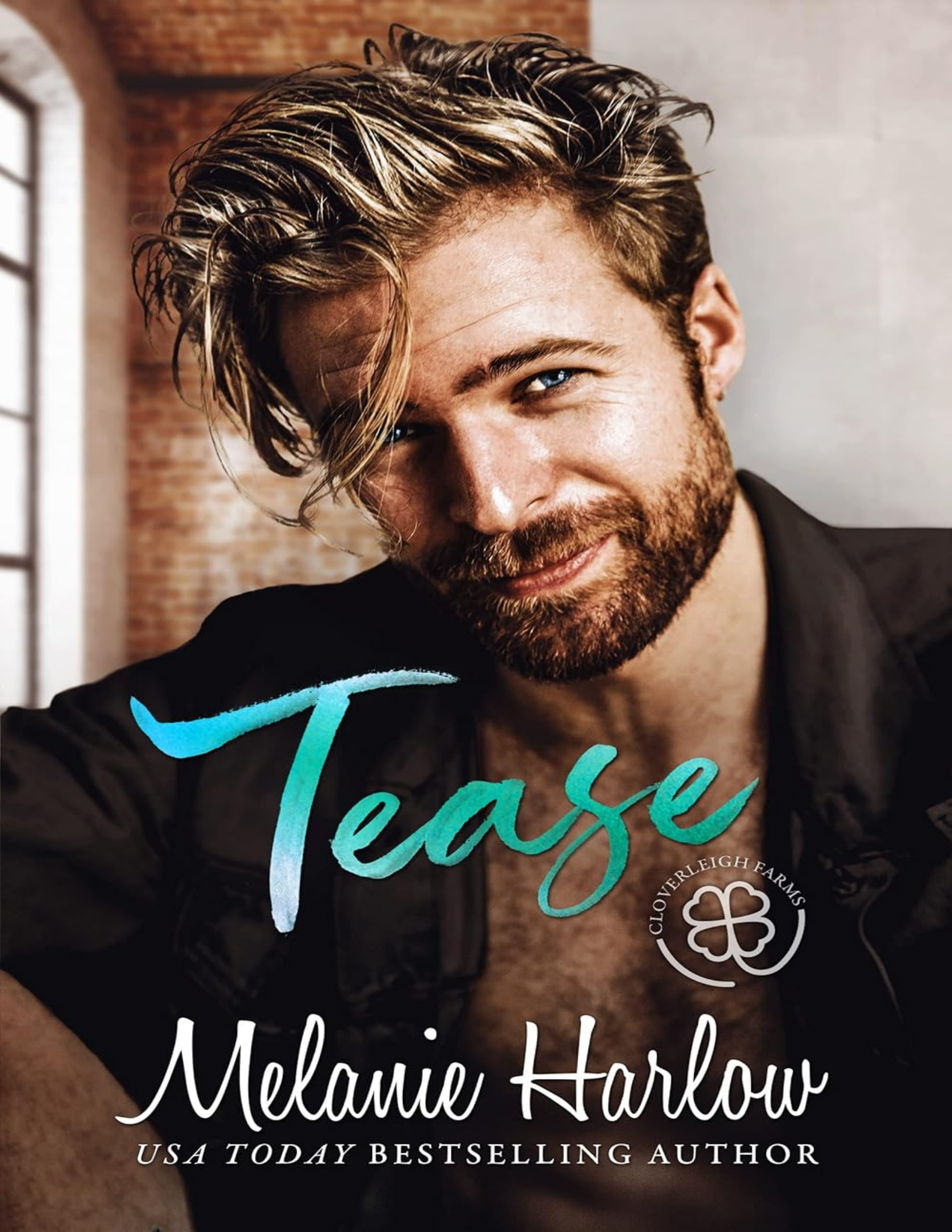




Tease



Melanie Harlow

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TEASE

MELANIE HARLOW

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*For Alice, Carrie, Heather, Helen, Laura, Lauren, Renee, and Tina, with
appreciation and gratitude*

“You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.”

A.A. MILNE

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ONE



FELICITY

It was a bad day even before I picked up the scissors.

Not that I realized it. In fact, I was feeling pretty good that morning.

Sure, I'd just turned twenty-eight and was back home living with my parents, but that was only temporary. Tonight at my ten-year high school reunion, when people asked what I was doing with my life, I had a response all ready.

Me? Oh, I'm an entrepreneur, I'd say. I started a vegetarian catering company and food blog called The Veggie Vixen. I made some of the appetizers tonight. Have you tried the zucchini fritters?

I wasn't in the top echelon of lifestyle social media influencers or anything, and I still had a part-time job as a sous chef, but my follower count was growing steadily, and last night The Veggie Vixen had catered its first large-scale event: a wedding at Cloverleigh Farms.

My older sister Millie was the event planner at Cloverleigh, and even though the bride had been a bit difficult to work with during the planning—demanding a huge, high-end reception with all the frills on a bargain budget and asking why we couldn't "move a staircase" so she could make her entrance with the light hitting her a certain way—Millie and I had managed to put together a beautiful event for her, despite torrential summer rains that necessitated a last-minute switch to an indoor ceremony and cocktail hour. The bride and all her guests had raved about the food, flowers, and service all night.

So when I glanced at my phone and saw the notification from Dearly Beloved (the hottest wedding planning app out there) that I finally had my first review, I grabbed my glasses from my nightstand and eagerly tapped through to The Veggie Vixen's profile to see it.



YUCKY AND OVERPRICED!!!

Reviewed by He Put A Big A** Ring On It

I am not a vegetarian but I thought it would be cheaper to not serve meat at my wedding. I WAS WRONG. Everything was crazy expensive and tasted terrible. The cheese toasts were soggy and even the meatballs did not have meat. I did not want ugly gross boring vegetables at my wedding but that was exactly what I got. If I could, I would give no stars. Just ew. DO NOT RECOMMEND. I want a refund.

"Cheese toasts!" I shrieked. "My avocado, pomegranate, and chèvre crostini are *not* cheese toasts!"

I read it again and again, my entire body trembling with rage. Then I called Millie.

"Hello?" she said, her voice low and croaky, as if she'd been asleep.

"I did not serve anything soggy!" I shouted.

"What are you talking about? What time is it?"

"It's eight-thirty. The bride from last night left a shitty review on my Dearly Beloved page!"

"She did?" Millie sounded more alert.

"Yes! A totally horrible one-star review."

"Hang on. Let me grab my laptop."

I grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked on it, wondering if it was possible to get a bad review taken down. You couldn't just tell lies in a review, right? Wasn't that like libel or something?

"Oh, Jesus," Millie said. "This is bonkers. She told me when she left how happy she was with everything." My sister started to laugh. "Even the meatballs did not have meat?' They were vegetarian! What did she expect?"

"It's not funny, Mills." Throwing the covers aside, I got out of bed and went over to my dresser, where I began to rummage around in my makeup bag, looking for scissors. I needed scissors.

"You know what?" Millie said. "I have a notification that Cloverleigh Farms has a new Dearly Beloved review too." Then she groaned. "Looks like she was busy this morning. Why is she online posting bullshit reviews? Shouldn't she be packing for her honeymoon or something?"

"What does yours say?"

"It says, 'The peonies were wilted, the cheese toasts were soggy, the staff was rude, and the vodka was watered down. Everything was cheap cheap cheap even though I paid top dollar. I don't know how this place has so many great reviews, they ruined my wedding. My ceremony wasn't even in the place they'd promised me it would be. I want a refund.' That last sentence is in all caps, by the way."

My temper flared again, along with my nostrils. "Those. Were *not*. Cheese toasts!"

"Relax," Millie soothed. "It's obviously just an attempt at a money grab."

"But people on this app don't know that, Millie. They just see a one-star review and assume I serve bad food!"

"Who's really going to listen to a woman who refers to herself as 'He Put a Big Ass Ring On It?' Right there, it's obvious her taste is questionable."

"Easy for you to say." I gave up on my makeup bag and stormed across the hall into the bathroom, where I began opening drawers and foraging through them. "Cloverleigh Farms has been around forever, and its reputation is established. It has a bajillion great reviews on Dearly Beloved

already, but The Veggie Vixen is brand new—and now my only review says *yucky* and *just ew!*”

“If it bothers you that much, then respond to it. Apologize for her negative experience, say you always want your customers to be happy, and suggest she contact you directly. And if she really wants her money back, just give it to her.”

“I’m going to be broke forever,” I moaned, shoving cans of hair products around.

“No, you won’t. You started a business. That means costs up front, but you’re good, Felicity. You’ll make money. What’s all that noise?”

I slammed a drawer. “I’m in the bathroom looking for something.”

“Not the scissors, I hope.”

“You deal with stress your way, I deal with it mine.”

“Felicity MacAllister, do *not* cut your hair. It’s just one app.”

“But it’s the most important one for getting catering gigs and you know it. Engagement parties, showers, bridal luncheons—all those are booked through Dearly Beloved. Even people planning non-wedding events use that app.”

I headed out of the bathroom and down the stairs. I was still in my pajamas—an oversized T-shirt I’d had forever that said, *Come to the nerd side. We have Pi*—but no one was home anyway. My dad was obsessive about his Saturday morning golf game, my stepmom, Frannie, ran a bakery downtown and was always out of the house before dawn, and my seventeen-year-old twin sisters Emmeline and Audrey were lifeguards at the public beach this summer. On Saturdays they had to report by eight a.m.

I had a fourth sister, Winifred, who was twenty-four—Millie, Winnie, and I were from our dad’s first marriage—but Winnie lived in a downtown condo, right next door to her boyfriend, Dex, a firefighter and single dad.

Everybody was out there having a better life than me.

“You’ve got like two thousand followers on your Instagram,” said Millie, ever the optimist. “That’s a lot.”

“Not really. And that’s not the same as a review.” Down in the kitchen, I opened the junk drawer. Spying a pair of scissors, I smiled gleefully. Then I picked them up, opening and closing them several times, my blood rushing faster. “Reviews are what bring in new business. I’ve been working my ass off to gain traction, and this just set me back at the starting line—no, it’s worse than that! At least when I started out, I was on neutral ground. Now I’m on soggy ground. I’m sinking!”

“You’re fine. Do you need me to come over?”

“I’m not fine. I’m humiliated and penniless, I’ll never be able to move out of Dad and Frannie’s house, and I can kiss the idea of getting a cookbook deal goodbye. I have *failed* at my dreams, Millicent. But at least I found the scissors.”

“Don’t do anything rash!”

I set my phone on the counter, grabbed a hank of hair in front of my face, and chopped some off. “Too late.”

“No! Stop cutting your hair!” Millie shouted loud enough so I could hear her.

“Relax, I’m just giving myself a little trim.” Enjoying the surge of adrenaline, I cut some more, right across the bridge of my nose. “Bangs are in.”

“Not bangs! Anything but bangs!”

“I gotta go. I need a mirror.” I hung up on her and took the scissors into the first-floor bathroom, where I haphazardly hacked off more of my long dark hair. I stuck to the front at first, but once my heart was really pumping, I decided to take some off the back too. I hadn’t done this in *so long*—I’d forgotten how freeing it was.

Gathering it together in one hand, I positioned the scissors carefully. The blades came together again and again, severing the strands with a satisfying metallic *slice*.

Slice. Slice. Slice.

SEVERAL MINUTES LATER, the rush faded as I stared at my reflection. Sad clumps of hair littered the sink. “Oh, shit.”

I tried to even out the bangs but only succeeded in making them shorter and more blunt. “Shit!”

The worst thing was that I should have known better. I’d been stress-cutting my hair since I was six, since the night I overheard the horrible thing, and it never ended well.

It felt empowering for a couple minutes, but it was never worth the trouble I got in once grownups saw what I’d done. Although, after my dad and Frannie got married, she’d sometimes sneak me over to the salon so a professional could attempt to mitigate the damage before my dad saw it, and she never got mad at me. She always understood.

But once I was a teenager, I refused her help—it was my stress, my hair, my problem. I wanted to handle it on my own, and it wasn’t like I was a beauty queen in the first place. A funny haircut wasn’t going to make much difference to my social status—the kids in the marching band and Chemistry Club weren’t too judgmental about outward appearances—and my bloody noses were more embarrassing than my uneven bangs anyway.

But this put a *major* crimp in my plan to surprise everyone at the reunion tonight with my elegance and sophistication.

Maybe I could wear a hat. A jaunty beret, something that said ‘I am still quirky, but I have more confidence now, and I don’t care what you think of me.’ Something that would force mean girls like Mimi Pepper-Peabody to remark, “Wow. You’ve come a long way since high school.”

God, I wanted that to be true.

I mean, I was practically going on thirty. Weren’t you supposed to have your shit together by this age? At twenty-eight, my dad had two kids and was serving his country as a Marine. Frannie was running a pastry shop and planning her wedding. Even Winnie, four years younger than me, had a solid handle on her life, including a job she loved and a sexy firefighter boyfriend. Millie was four years older, but she was established in her career and owned a house. Even the twins had jobs, boyfriends, and normal haircuts.

I felt like the last MacAllister standing. It brought back memories of being the last kid picked for teams in gym class. I could still feel the rest of the kids looking at me and the other non-athletes from their side of the gym. The cool side. The chosen side.

Would tonight be the same thing all over again?

Resignedly, I cleaned up all the hair in the bathroom and swept the kitchen floor. Then I made myself a cup of coffee and checked my phone—Millie had called twice and left several text messages in all caps.

STOP CUTTING.

THIS IS NOT WORTH IT.

YOU DON'T NEED BANGS, YOU NEED CAFFEINE.

MAYBE A SHOT OF WHISKEY.

I called her back. "Hey."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"Your reunion is tonight, right?"

I sighed and took a sip. "Yes."

"Why don't I pick you up and we'll go downtown, grab some coffee, and beg a salon to fit you in for an emergency appointment?"

"It's not really an *emergency*," I countered, although the mirror might disagree.

"Is it better or worse than Dad and Frannie's wedding day?"

"Worse," I admitted. "But better than the night before the SATs."

"Send me a pic," she said in her bossy big sister voice.

I winced. "That's probably not a good idea."

"*Send me a pic.*"

"Fine, but be nice." I moved closer to the window, like better lighting might help. After snapping a selfie, I sent it to Millie.

My sister gasped. "Sweet Jesus."

"I said be nice!"

"Okay. Don't panic. What are you wearing tonight?" Millie had gone into executive event planner mode, and her tone was no-nonsense.

“I don’t know.” Fashion was not my area of expertise. “Got any advice?”

“Wear a fabulous short dress with a great pair of heels. Show off your legs. That will distract from your hair.”

“I don’t own fabulous dresses. I’ve spent almost every night for the last five years in a kitchen. Can I borrow something from you?”

She laughed. “Felicity, my dresses are not going to fit you.”

“I could stuff my bra.”

“You’d have to stuff a lot more than that,” she said wryly.

I sighed, envious as always of Millie’s full, feminine shape. My body was mostly angles and edges, while hers was all soft, sexy curves. “I wish I had a date tonight. That would make it easier.”

“I’ve got another wedding here, but maybe Winnie would go with you.”

“Show up with my little sister?” I almost choked on my coffee. “That’s worse than going alone.”

“What about Hutton?”

My heart skittered a little at his name. “He said absolutely not the first time I asked. But I guess I could ask him again.”

Hutton French had been my best friend in high school, a socially awkward math nerd like me who preferred books to people, played in the marching band, and could have lettered in fidgeting if it was a Varsity sport. (Actually, we both lettered in cross country—running is the one sporty thing I am decent at, probably because it does not involve balls, nets, or hand-eye coordination.) The one big difference between Hutton and me was that when I got nervous, I blurted odd things, and when he got anxious, he clammed up.

But he never made fun of my bad haircuts or bloody noses, and I never minded his aversion to social events or occasional panic attacks in crowded places. I learned to read the signs and knew how to look out for him. Together we co-captained the Mathletes Team and co-founded the Chemistry Club, and on Friday nights, he’d sometimes come over and sit at the kitchen counter while I baked, and then we’d watch sci-fi movies, polishing off whatever I’d made.

We even had our own secret code, which was really just a pigpen cipher used centuries ago during the Crusades by the Knights Templar. For a while, we passed encrypted notes to each other during classes just for fun, and we thought it was hilarious when kids grabbed them and threatened to read our “love notes” out loud. It felt like we were pulling one over on them when they couldn’t decipher the text, although I’m not sure it did anything for our social status.

(And frankly, even if someone had cracked our code, what we mostly passed back and forth were quotes from Star Trek.)

My family was always convinced we were secretly in love and teased me endlessly, but our relationship was one hundred percent platonic. Honestly, I’d been shocked when he asked me to go to the senior prom—to this day, I have a hunch his mother bribed him with a fancy telescope or something—but we ended up having a good time, and he looked *so cute* in his suit and tie. We even danced once, and when the song was over, he said, “That wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.” I think we shook hands at the end of the night.

There *was* that one night in the library when I thought he might kiss me—and I’d wanted him to—but true to form, I’d blurted something stupid and the moment passed us by.

After high school, Hutton had gone to M.I.T. to study math and physics, and later he made a billion-dollar fortune thanks to some algorithm he’d created. In fact, he was the youngest self-made American billionaire ever. He lived in California for years, but he was in town for the summer, staying in a gorgeous cabin about twenty minutes from town.

“I’d call him up right now,” Millie said.

“He *hates* the phone.”

“Why?”

“Because it involves talking to people. He likes numbers more than words.”

Millie laughed. “Guess that’s why he’s a billionaire and we’re us. Somebody asked me the other day what he does—*everyone* is talking about

him—and I didn't even know what to say.”

“My answer is always, ‘He co-founded a cryptocurrency exchange called HFX.’ But don’t ask me to explain it.” I sipped my coffee. “Whenever he tries to tell me what it is, I get lost.”

“How can that be? You’re a math whiz too, Miss I Skipped First Grade. We all know you were doing complex algebraic equations when the rest of us were learning B says *buh*.”

I laughed, leaning back against the counter. “The kind of math Hutton does is way beyond algebra. You don’t get to be a billionaire solving for x.”

“Speaking of which, you’d think a billionaire would want to spend his summer vacation somewhere more ritzy than northern Michigan,” Millie said.

“Well, his family is here, and Hutton’s not really the ritzy type—although I assure you, the place he’s staying in is *not* your typical cabin in the woods,” I said with a laugh. “It’s got like four bedrooms, three decks, a gourmet kitchen, one of those indoor/outdoor fireplaces, cathedral ceilings, huge windows. When you look out, all you see are trees.”

“Nice.” Her tone grew playful. “Sounds like you’re there a lot.”

“We hang out a few times a week,” I said, trying to keep my tone neutral. Things between Hutton and me were still completely platonic, but there was something different about our chemistry this summer. Something simmering beneath the surface. Sometimes I thought about just going for it—kissing him to see what would happen.

But I always lost my nerve.

Hutton could have any woman in the world. I’d seen photos of him with actresses, supermodels, heiresses. Gorgeous, famous women I could never compete with. Why embarrass myself by trying?

“A few times a week, huh?” she teased. “That sounds like dating.”

“No dating, we just hang.” I rinsed out my coffee cup and put it in the dishwasher. “He doesn’t love going out in public, which was the case even before he was a celebrity, but now it’s even worse. People just stare with no shame. Women flirt outrageously. Guys ask for stock tips.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I laughed as I went up the stairs. “He runs in the park super early to avoid having to deal with people, but there’s this group of old ladies who gather in the park to do their Prancercise, who call themselves the Prancin’ Grannies, and they adore him. They prance right up to tell him all about their single granddaughters.”

Millie snorted. “Stop it.”

“His own mom is even worse.”

“Does she still have the shop downtown? The one that sells all the crystals and candles?”

“Yep. Mystic on Main. She’s constantly trying to set him up on dates with her customers.” I entered my room and flopped back onto my bed. The glow-in-the-dark stars I’d pasted on the ceiling were still there, as if my parents had known I’d be back. “Like she’ll call him and say she has a computer problem at the shop, or she can’t reach something on a high shelf, and when he shows up to help, there isn’t really a problem, but there’s a woman she wants to introduce him to. He gets so mad.”

Millie laughed. “Does he ever talk about Zlatka?”

I ignored the little bolt of jealousy that always shot through me when I thought about Hutton and Zlatka, a stunning Lithuanian supermodel and the latest Bond girl. They’d dated for a few months this past spring, and the media had eaten it up. “No.”

“I wonder if it’s true what she said about him.”

My belly cartwheeled. “I have no idea, and I’m not asking.”

Millie laughed. “No, I guess there’s no way you can be like, ‘Hey, I heard you like to tie women up and boss them around in the bedroom.’”

“People just like to talk.”

“Especially about that stuff,” Millie said. “Although if you see any whips, chains, or blindfolds in his closet, let me know. It seems so opposite his quiet personality, but you never know what people are like behind closed doors.”

I was curious about that closed door but needed to focus on my problem. “Anyway, what am I going to do about tonight?”