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KRISTIN HANNAH

BETWEEN SISTERS

A NOVEL

“Hannah is superb at delving into her main characters’ psyches and delineating nuances of feeling.”

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BOOK WORLD

BETWEEN
SISTERS



KRISTIN
HANNAH

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*For my sister, Laura.
And for my father, Laurence.
And, as always, for Benjamin and Tucker.
I love you all.*

*“We do not see things as they are,
we see them as we are.”*

—ANAÏS NIN

“If love is the answer, could you please rephrase the question?”

—LILY TOMLIN

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CHAPTER ONE

DR. BLOOM WAITED PATIENTLY FOR AN ANSWER.

Meghann Dontess leaned back in her seat and studied her fingernails. It was time for a manicure. Past time. “I try not to feel too much, Harriet. You know that. I find it impedes my enjoyment of life.”

“Is that why you've seen me every week for four years? Because you enjoy your life so much?”

“I wouldn't point that out if I were you. It doesn't say much for your psychiatric skills. It's entirely possible, you know, that I was perfectly normal when I met you and you're actually *making* me crazy.”

“You're using humor as a shield again.”

“You're giving me too much credit. That wasn't funny.”

Harriet didn't smile. “I rarely think you're funny.”

“There goes my dream of doing stand-up.”

“Let's talk about the day you and Claire were separated.”

Meghann shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Just when she needed a smart-ass response, her mind went blank. She knew what Harriet was poking around for, and Harriet knew she knew. If Meghann didn't answer, the question would simply be asked again. “Separated. A nice, clean word. Detached. I like it, but that subject is closed.”

“It's interesting that you maintain a relationship with your mother while distancing yourself from your sister.”

Meghann shrugged. “Mama's an actress. I'm a lawyer. We're comfortable with make-believe.”

“Meaning?”

“Have you ever read one of her interviews?”

“No.”

“She tells everyone that we lived this poor, pathetic-but-loving existence. We pretend it's the truth.”

“You were living in Bakersfield when the pathetic-but-loving pretense ended, right?”

Meghann remained silent. Harriet had maneuvered her back to the painful subject like a rat through a maze.

Harriet went on, “Claire was nine years old. She was missing several teeth, if I remember correctly, and she was having difficulties with math.”

“Don't,” Meghann curled her fingers around the chair's sleek wooden arms.

Harriet stared at her. Beneath the unruly black ledge of her eyebrows, her gaze was steady. Small round glasses magnified her eyes. “Don't back away, Meg. We're making progress.”

“Any more progress and I'll need an aid car. We should talk about my practice. That's why I come to you, you know. It's a pressure cooker down in Family Court these days. Yesterday, I had a deadbeat dad drive up in a Ferrari and then swear he was flat broke. The shithead. Didn't want to pay for his daughter's tuition. Too bad for him I videotaped his arrival.”

“Why do you keep paying me if you don't want to discuss the root of your problems?”

“I have issues, not problems. And there's no point in poking around in the past. I was sixteen when all that happened. Now, I'm a whopping forty-two. It's time to move on. I did the right thing. It doesn't matter anymore.”

“Then why do you still have the nightmare?”

She fiddled with the silver David Yurman bracelet on her wrist. “I have nightmares about spiders who wear Oakley sunglasses, too. But you never ask about that. Oh, and last week, I dreamed I was trapped in a glass room that had a floor made of bacon. I could hear people crying, but I couldn't find the key. You want to talk about that one?”

“A feeling of isolation. An awareness that people are upset by your actions, or missing you. Okay, let's talk about that dream. Who was crying?”

“Shit.” Meghann should have seen that. After all, she had an undergraduate degree in psychology. Not to mention the fact that she'd once been called a child prodigy.

She glanced down at her platinum-and-gold watch. “Too bad, Harriet. Time's up. I guess we'll have to solve my pesky neuroses next week.” She stood up, smoothed the pant legs of her navy Armani suit. Not that there was a wrinkle to be found.

Harriet slowly removed her glasses.

Meghann crossed her arms in an instinctive gesture of self-protection. “This should be good.”

“Do you like your life, Meghann?”

That wasn't what she'd expected. “What's not to like? I'm the best divorce attorney in the state. I live—”

“—alone—”

“—in a kick-ass condo above the Public Market and drive a brand-new Porsche.”

“Friends?”

“I talk to Elizabeth every Thursday night.”

“Family?”

Maybe it was time to get a new therapist. Harriet had ferreted out all of Meghann's weak points. “My mom stayed with me for a week last year. If I'm

lucky, she'll come back for another visit just in time to watch the colonization of Mars on MTV."

"And Claire?"

"My sister and I have problems, I'll admit it. But nothing major. We're just too busy to get together." When Harriet didn't speak, Meghann rushed in to fill the silence. "Okay, she makes me crazy, the way she's throwing her life away. She's smart enough to do anything, but she stays tied to that loser campground they call a resort."

"With her father."

"I don't want to discuss my sister. And I *definitely* don't want to discuss her father."

Harriet tapped her pen on the table. "Okay, how about this: When was the last time you slept with the same man twice?"

"You're the only one who thinks that's a *bad* thing. I like variety."

"The way you like younger men, right? Men who have no desire to settle down. You get rid of them before they can get rid of you."

"Again, sleeping with younger, sexy men who don't want to settle down is not a bad thing. I don't want a house with a picket fence in suburbia. I'm not interested in family life, but I like sex."

"And the loneliness, do you like that?"

"I'm not lonely," she said stubbornly. "I'm independent. Men don't like a strong woman."

“Strong men do.”

“Then I better start hanging out in gyms instead of bars.”

“And strong women face their fears. They talk about the painful choices they've made in their lives.”

Meghann actually flinched. “Sorry, Harriet, I need to scoot. See you next week.”

She left the office.

Outside, it was a gloriously bright June day. Early in the so-called summer. Everywhere else in the country, people were swimming and barbecuing and organizing poolside picnics. Here, in good ole Seattle, people were methodically checking their calendars and muttering that it was *June, damn it*.

Only a few tourists were around this morning; out-of-towners recognizable by the umbrellas tucked under their arms.

Meghann finally released her breath as she crossed the busy street and stepped up onto the grassy lawn of the waterfront park. A towering totem pole greeted her. Behind it, a dozen seagulls dived for bits of discarded food.

She walked past a park bench where a man lay huddled beneath a blanket of yellowed newspapers. In front of her, the deep blue Sound stretched along the pale horizon. She wished she could take comfort from that view; often, she could. But today, her mind was caught in the net of another time and place.

If she closed her eyes—which she definitely dared not do—she'd remember it all: the dialing of the telephone number, the stilted, desperate conversation with a man she didn't know, the long, silent drive to that shit-ass little town up north. And worst of all, the tears she'd wiped from her little sister's flushed cheeks when she said, *I'm leaving you, Claire*.

Her fingers tightened around the railing. Dr. Bloom was wrong. Talking about Meghann's painful choice and the lonely years that had followed it wouldn't help.

Her past wasn't a collection of memories to be worked through; it was like an oversize Samsonite with a bum wheel. Meghann had learned that a long time ago. All she could do was drag it along behind her.

Each November, the mighty Skykomish River strained against its muddy banks. The threat of flooding was a yearly event. In a dance as old as time itself, the people who lived in the tiny towns along the river watched and waited, sandbags at the ready. Their memory went back for generations. Everyone had a story to tell about the time the water rose to the second floor of so-and-so's house . . . to the top of the doorways at the grange hall . . . to the corner of Spring and Azalea Streets. People who lived in flatter, safer places watched the nightly news and shook their heads, clucking about the ridiculousness of farmers who lived on the flood plain.

When the river finally began to lower, a collective sigh of relief ran through town. It usually started with Emmett Mulvaney, the pharmacist who religiously watched The Weather Channel on Hayden's only big-screen television. He would notice some tiny tidbit of information, something even those hotshot meteorologists in Seattle had missed. He'd pass his assessment on to Sheriff Dick Parks, who told his secretary, Martha. In less time than it

took to drive from one end of town to the other, the word spread: *This year is going to be okay. The danger has passed.* Sure enough, twenty-four hours after Emmett's prediction, the meteorologists agreed.

This year had been no exception, but now, on this beautiful early summer's day, it was easy to forget those dangerous months in which rainfall made everyone crazy.

Claire Cavanaugh stood on the bank of the river, her work boots almost ankle-deep in the soft brown mud. Beside her, an out-of-gas Weed Eater lay on its side.

She smiled, wiped a gloved hand across her sweaty brow. The amount of manual labor it took to get the resort ready for summer was unbelievable.

Resort.

That was what her dad called these sixteen acres. Sam Cavanaugh had come across this acreage almost forty years ago, back when Hayden had been nothing more than a gas station stop on the rise up Stevens Pass. He'd bought the parcel for a song and settled into the decrepit farmhouse that came with it. He'd named his place River's Edge Resort and begun to dream of a life that didn't include hard hats and earplugs and night shifts at the paper plant in Everett.

At first he'd worked after hours and weekends. With a chain saw, a pickup truck, and a plan drawn out on a cocktail napkin, he began. He hacked out campsites and cleaned out a hundred years' worth of underbrush and built each knotty pine riverfront cabin by hand. Now, River's Edge was a thriving family business. There were eight cabins in all, each with two pretty little bedrooms and a single bathroom and a deck that overlooked the river.

In the past few years, they'd added a swimming pool and a game room. Plans for a mini golf course and a Laundromat were in the works. It was the kind of place where the same families came back year after year to spend their precious vacation time.

Claire still remembered the first time she'd seen it. The towering trees and rushing silver river had seemed like paradise to a girl raised in a trailer that only stopped on the poor side of town. Her childhood memories before coming to River's Edge were gray: ugly towns that came and went; uglier apartments in run-down buildings. And Mama. Always on the run from something or other. Mama had been married repeatedly, but Claire couldn't remember a man ever being around for longer than a carton of milk. Meghann was the one Claire remembered. The older sister who took care of everything . . . and then walked away one day, leaving Claire behind.

Now, all these years later, their lives were connected by the thinnest of strands. Once every few months, she and Meg talked on the phone. On particularly bad days, they fell to talking about the weather. Then Meg would invariably "get another call" and hang up. Her sister loved to underscore how successful she was. Meghann could rattle on for ten minutes about how Claire had sold herself short. "Living on that silly little campground, cleaning up after people" was the usual wording. Every single Christmas she offered to pay for college.

As if reading *Beowulf* would improve Claire's life.

For years, Claire had longed to be friends as well as sisters, but Meghann didn't want that, and Meghann always got her way. They were what Meghann wanted them to be: polite strangers who shared a blood type and an ugly childhood.

Claire reached down for the Weed Eater. As she slogged across the spongy ground, she noticed a dozen things that needed to be done before opening day. Roses that needed to be trimmed, moss that needed to be scraped off the roofs, mildew that needed to be bleached off the porch railings. And there was the mowing. A long, wet winter had turned into a surprisingly bright spring, and the grass had grown as tall as Claire's knees. She made a mental note to ask George, their handyman, to scrub out the canoes and kayaks this afternoon.

She tossed the Weed Eater in the back of the pickup. It hit with a clanging thunk that rattled the rusted bed.

“Hey, sweetie. You goin' to town?”

She turned and saw her father standing on the porch of the registration building. He wore a ratty pair of overalls, stained brown down the bib from some long-forgotten oil change, and a flannel shirt.

He pulled a red bandanna out of his hip pocket and wiped his brow as he walked toward her. “I'm fixing that freezer, by the way. Don't you go pricing new ones.”

There wasn't an appliance made that he couldn't repair, but Claire was going to check out prices, just the same. “You need anything from town?”

“Smitty has a part for me. Could you pick it up?”

“You bet. And have George start on the canoes when he gets here, okay?”

“I'll put it on the list.”

“And have Rita bleach the bathroom ceiling in cabin six. It got mildewy this winter.” She closed the pickup's bed.

“You here for dinner?”

“Not tonight. Ali has a Tee Ball game at Riverfront Park, remember? Five o'clock.”

“Oh, yeah. I'll be there.”

Claire nodded, knowing that he would. He hadn't missed a single event in his granddaughter's life. “Bye, Dad.”

She wrenched the truck's door handle and yanked hard. The door screeched open. She grabbed the black steering wheel and climbed up into the seat.

Dad thumped the truck's door. “Drive safely. Watch the turn at milepost seven.”

She smiled. He'd been giving her that exact bit of advice for almost two decades. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too. Now, go get my granddaughter. If you hurry, we'll have time to watch *SpongeBob SquarePants* before the game.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE WEST SIDE OF THE OFFICE BUILDING FACED PUGET Sound. A wall of floor-to-ceiling windows framed the beautiful blue-washed view. In the distance lay the forested mound of Bainbridge Island. At night, a few lights could be seen amid all that black-and-green darkness; in the daylight, though, the island looked uninhabited. Only the white ferry, chugging into its dock every hour, indicated that people lived there.

Meghann sat alone at a long, kidney-shaped conference table. The glossy cherry and ebony wood surface bespoke elegance and money. Perhaps money most of all. A table like this had to be custom-made and individually designed; it was true of the suede chairs, too. When a person sat down at this table and looked at that view, the point was clear: Whoever owned this office was damn successful.

It was true. Meghann had achieved every goal she'd set for herself. When she'd started college as a scared, lonely teenager she'd dared to dream of a better life. Now, she had it. Her practice was among the most successful and most respected in the city. She owned an expensive condo in downtown Seattle (a far cry from the broken-down travel trailer that had been her childhood “home”), and no one depended on her.