



Even

After

This

SHelter & SKY

DEBORAH CLACK

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2026 by Deborah Clack

Published by Haven
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
HavenFiction.com

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-8007-4694-0 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-8007-4740-4 (casebound)
ISBN 978-1-4934-5141-8 (ebook)

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Cover illustration by Nate Eidenberger
Cover design and type by Laura Klynstra
Interior design by William Overbeeke

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26 27 28 29 30 31 32 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mother.

Who did that thing that moms do when they know their kids better than their kids know themselves, and who quietly, non-chalantly, and so unassumingly that I didn't bristle at the idea suggested, "You should be a writer someday." She gave me so much freedom in her simple statement that ten years later when it was time for me to write, I was ready.

Because she was my mom. And she knew.

I miss you, Mom. You were a gift.

Please don't tell my thirteen-year-old self, but I wish you were here to correct the grammar in my stories.



THE ELEVATOR DOORS SLIDE OPEN to the exquisite Penrose Room, and for the first time in four years, I question if I'm some kind of masochist widow. My colossal baby step out of hiding no longer seems like a good idea.

Mustering shaky confidence as a party of one, I press my shoulders back and enter one of the most romantic restaurants in the country. My smile threatens to falter at the sight of couples adorned in sparkling cocktail attire swinging around the parquet dance floor, their faces radiating delight.

I clutch my sequined mulberry-colored purse, wishing my anxiety was snapped tight inside. My matching dress is a simple knee-length A-line with long sleeves and a boat neck, paired with nude, patent leather platform shoes. It's been so long since I dressed up like this, I didn't realize people were wearing the 1970s monstrosities again until I shopped at the mall last week.

"Hello," I say to the *maitre d'*. "My name is Meredith Harper, and my reservation is for seven o'clock."

"Hello, Ms. Harper." The kind smile complements the grandfatherly appeal of the stout older gentleman. He types into his

workstation and stares at the screen. For a moment he appears puzzled, then masks his reaction and pulls on the cuff of his tuxedo. He shoots a compassionate glance at me, pauses, and returns his focus to his monitor.

While eating alone in the Colorado Springs AAA Five Diamond restaurant must be rare, I can't imagine I'm the first. Confusion joins my jittery nerves, and I shift from my left foot to my right.

"Let me check on your table," he finally says.

Just as he turns to leave his stand, a woman bursts into the lobby from the kitchen, bringing with her the sound of clanging pots and the piquant aroma of gourmet cuisine. "Will you please check to see if the Wilsons have arrived?" she asks the maître d'. The second her gaze hits mine, she halts midstep.

The navy pantsuit tells me she doesn't work for the Broadmoor Hotel, but her clipboard and sharp hand gestures show she's a woman of authority. Who is she?

The maître d' shifts so his back is to me, blocking my view of the fierce woman. My proximity only allows me to decipher pieces of their discussion.

I hear the words "VIP" and "special circumstance" in his low voice.

"That will not work" is her reply. She darts an icy glance in my direction.

Are they talking about me?

My aching feet match my insecurity in uncomfortableness. I lift my right foot out of its shoe to relieve the pressure on my toes. These new heels are supposed to be part of tonight's leap off the comfort zone of my couch. Now I want to throw on my running shoes and hightail it back to Texas to sink into the safety of my pedestrian life.

A tall, well-built man saunters in from the dining room and steps close to the woman. "Penelope, I found Drew Wilson and

got him squared away with tonight's schedule. Everything else okay?"

Decked out in a fitted charcoal suit and an azure dress shirt with two buttons undone and no tie, he oozes masculinity. No skinny pants for this guy. The tousled dark toffee hair and matching rich eyes are entirely too mesmerizing.

Why does he look so familiar?

I comb through the Rolodex in my brain while the three talk in hushed tones. Every so often, one of them peeks over at me.

Despite my irritation that I geared up for tonight's emotional challenge, I should tell them I can reschedule.

My wobbly ankles make walking with mettle in these trendy shoes difficult, but I make an approach. "Excuse me. Is everything all right?"

The group's full attention is intimidating. The maître d' offers a pity-filled smile. Blue Suit Lady squints at me. I don't dare look at Handsome Man.

"My apologies, Ms. Harper." The maître d' bows his head. "The hotel made an unfortunate error. The restaurant is booked for a private event this evening. At the same time, my computer also shows your VIP reservation."

"VIP?" I ask.

Blue Suit Lady taps a fingernail on her clipboard. "A memo—"

"Everyone at the Broadmoor is a VIP." The maître d' raises his voice the appropriate amount to regain command of the conversation. But I want to know what she was going to say.

What is she talking about, a memo? Something's not adding up here. I glance at each person in the group. This crew could be cousins of the Seven Dwarfs. Regretful, Seething, and Charming all wait for my reply.

"I'm sorry. I made the reservation a while ago, but I can come back another time. I'm here for five days." *Bracing for tonight was difficult enough. Please don't make me come back.*

“Thank you for the offer.” Blue Suit Lady dismisses me with a sharp nod.

Handsome Man places his hand on her arm. “Penelope, it’s fine.”

He must possess superpowers because the vein in her forehead disappears and her face transitions to resignation.

Handsome Man shifts to me. “Penelope did an excellent job planning our event for this weekend. The good news is we can spare a table for you tonight.” He sweeps his arm toward the room. “Please stay and enjoy dinner.”

“Really? Oh, goodness. Thank you.” My sigh of relief is louder than I intend. If I stay, I get this social experiment over with now. If I go, I’ll have to do all of this over again.

Worse, I’ll have to find another outfit.

“Thank you so much. I promise, you won’t even notice I’m here.”

Penelope returns my peace offering with a blank face.

Once the *maitre d’* settles me into my high-backed booth, I gaze over the Penrose Room. My view of the live band and dance floor is unhindered. The open semicircle seats allow guests to sit next to their dining partners instead of across from them. But my solitary status places me at the center of the plush leather cushion. I recall previous trips to this historic hotel and the familiar burgundy, royal blue, and golden hues that cover the room in luxury.

As if it remembers I’m returning to the restaurant, this time without my husband, the opulent booth welcomes me back into the safety of its cove.

But sitting alone isn’t for sissies. I can almost feel curious stares aimed in my direction.

When I lean forward to unravel my swan napkin, I catch someone approaching the table in my peripheral vision.

“I owe you an apology.” Handsome Man, wearing a sheepish smile, moves to stand in front of my table.

“You didn’t need to accommodate me. My schedule is flexible

this week. I could have come back.” I try to hold his stare, but it feels like I could drown in those beautiful deep brown eyes, and I’m not sure I want to go swimming yet.

“Our group is a little high-maintenance.” Handsome Man shrugs, but instead of making him appear boyish, the gesture exudes calm confidence. “I didn’t want to ask the hotel to make one more exception for us.”

“Yeah, but double-booking is their mistake.”

“Agreed. However, I’m confident you can behave yourself.”

I ignore the gleam in his eye and nod to where Penelope stands, her clipboard hugged to her chest as she surveys the room. “Your friend might not agree with you.”

Handsome Man glances over his shoulder. “Penelope? Her heart’s in the right place. She’s my assistant, and the details for tonight kind of fell in her lap. I told her a bad joke and made her laugh, so that should help.”

“A bad joke?” My tone feigns offense, but I add with a smile, “Is that how you always deal with women?”

What am I doing? My attempt at flirting was not only rusty but a complete surprise to me. I want to disappear.

The man’s eyes flash, and he breaks out a roguish grin. “No. Sometimes I ask them to dance.”

Wait. What?

Does he mean me?

“I’m sorry.” I tilt my head. “I didn’t catch your name?”

He studies me for a beat, and his grin shifts into a blinding smile. “I’m Harlan Holcombe.”

Oh no. I cover my face with my hands and start rocking back and forth, shaking my head. Invisibility seems impossible at this point. Can I will myself into spontaneous combustion? “No, no, no.”

“You’re going to be fine.” His playful tone belies the seriousness of the situation.

I rub my temples. “You’re Hercules.”

“No, I’m not.” His words break through a chuckle.

“Yes, you are.” I snap my head up. “I saw it.” Hyperventilating is a real threat at this moment. Of *course* he looked familiar.

Harlan Holcombe, the Hercules of Hollywood’s silver screen. Which is bad enough.

But he’s also Harlan Holcombe, the Hercules of hometown heroes.

Two weeks ago, he saved a teenage girl from drowning in a river. A bystander posted the event on YouTube, and it went viral within two hours. His celebrity status took on a superpower of its own and skyrocketed through Social Media Bizarro World and straight to Planet Infamy.

My teenybopper niece wore her “Vote for Hercules” shirt the last time we were together. I’ve done my best to avoid Harlan’s rescue video, but it’s impossible to go to the grocery store without seeing this man’s face plastered across the magazine aisle.

I place my elbows on the table and rest my forehead on my fingertips. My brow is sweating.

Is thirty-six too young to get the vapors?

He puts his weight on his hands and leans into the table. “Are you okay?”

Cringing, I look to him and whisper, “I’m not allowed to talk to famous people.”

The confession earns me a deep, barking laugh. “I’m not that famous.”

“Really?” I rub my sweaty palms on my dress. “Various social media outlets continue to spread a nationwide petition for you to be *People* magazine’s Sexiest Man Alive.”

“Magazines get recycled to line the bottom of cat litter boxes.” He flashes the same grin I saw splashed across the airport bookstore stands earlier today. “And why aren’t you allowed to talk to famous people?”

My shoulders slump as scenes of my most embarrassing mo-

ment flash through my mind. “It’s a long story involving a book-signing event.”

He shakes his head and chuckles. “Meredith? Is that right?”

“Yes.” I exhale.

“I tell you what, Meredith. I’m going to order you a drink. All right?”

Dabbing my forehead with my napkin, I peek up at him. “Can you make it a double, but nonalcoholic? Sugar is my preferred coping mechanism.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He raps his knuckles on the table twice. “Then get ready for that dance.”

I blink. “What?”

But Harlan Holcombe is already walking toward the bar.

The server approaches and sets a crystal goblet of water on the table. I don’t even try to disguise my bewilderment. Heat drains from my face, and I imagine my color turning from teenager crimson red to hotel-sheet white because in about twenty minutes, I need to remember how to waltz. With a bona fide celebrity.

“Ma’am?” The server points to my clutch. “I think your phone is ringing.”

The tone breaks through the calm dinner atmosphere. It feels almost as embarrassing as if my phone was going off in a movie theater.

“Oh, sorry.” I scoot out of the booth. No way am I answering a call in a fancy restaurant. Digging through my purse, I reach past my small, worn accordion folder for my cell. As I pull it out, my big sister’s name flashes on the screen.

Of course.

I scurry down the hall to the bathroom to take her fifth call of the day in privacy.

With floor-to-ceiling dark wood doors, lush padded fabric walls, and a full stock of velvety toilet paper, the decor insists I forget I’m in a room with a commode. The ceilings are high

enough that, with a few changes, they could add lavender-scented rock climbing to the restroom amenities.

“Hello?” I tromp to the last stall.

“How’s your trip?” The voice at the other end is too chirpy for this annoying call.

“Molly. This is my night at the Penrose Room.”

“That’s why I’m checking on you. How’s it going?”

“Something’s not right.” Using my free hand, I scrunch my hair on top of my head. “The restaurant was booked for a private event, but the maître d’ made an exception for me to dine here tonight. Someone mentioned a memo and I—”

Details of the day shutter through my head like I’m watching an old movie reel. An eerie understanding clicks into place. This isn’t the only abnormal exception the Broadmoor made for me today.

“Molly, I don’t understand what’s going on, and you’re the only one who knows I’m at the Penrose Room tonight.” I drop my hair and press my palm flat against the door. “What did you do?”

Silence causes me to pull the cell down and confirm the timer is ticking off the live call.

When I put the phone back to my ear, my sister’s demanding voice says, “Promise me you’ll be open-minded about this.”

“Spill it.”

“I called the Broadmoor last week and talked to a manager. Since you wouldn’t let me go on this trip to be your buffer, I asked them to take care of you and to be your advocate.”

In the dictionary, under the word “vigilant,” it says “See Molly.”

Frustration surges through me for not anticipating this move. Trying to keep my voice level, I ask, “What did you tell them?”

“When you check in with their dining rooms, the spa, or your realtor, anyone who assists you views a memo requesting sensitivity to your situation.” Her words spew out in rapid succession.

The conversation comes to a standstill while tears prick the back of my eyes. “I just want to be normal, Molly.” My voice

sounds garbled, and I lean my weight into my forehead, now pressed to the fabric wall. I'm hoping my waterproof mascara serves me well.

To others I will always be That Woman. The Widow. The One Who Lost Everything. I can't blame them. Horrible things happened. And I am That Person.

However, four years later I'm starting to breathe again. And for the first time since the accident, I wonder if I could become another person.

"I think this will help." Molly forges forward. "Didn't you once say telling new people is always difficult because you end up emotionally managing their reaction? Now they'll already know, and you can skip the hard part and talk about the weather."

Tears stream down my cheeks.

Molly's loud sigh breaks the silence. "Are you there, Meredith?"

"Yes." I grab some of the impossibly soft toilet paper to use as a tissue.

"I could still come to Colorado. A flight from Dallas will only take a few hours. I don't think you should be by yourself."

"Please don't. I need to do this." I close the lid of the toilet to create a place to sit. One hand holds the cell to my ear while the other presses the wrinkled toilet tissue to my cheek. "If I fall apart, I'll come home in a week, and you can say you told me so. But I need to try to do something different with my life." A stray tear falls to the marble tile. "There has to be more for me in this life than being alone, doing volunteer work, and living out a sad story."

"Okay." The voice coming through the phone is thick. "But call me every day."

"I love you. I'll call you when I can."

Stepping out of my stall, I glance at the mirror and recognize a familiar reflection. Not tonight, I vow as I pull my makeup bag from my purse. I won't wear the face of grief. Tonight is about the comfort of an old place that might kindle a new beginning.

Tears are allowed, but they don't get to rule the evening.

While I blend concealer under my eyes, two beautiful women walk into the room. No, beautiful isn't accurate. Exquisite? Glamorous? Otherworldly? Or, just wow.

I've missed some movies over the last four years, but not enough not to recognize these women as actors. One is the leading lady of a rom-com, the other a longtime lead for a television drama, now turned movie star.

Oh man. I'm at a real live Hollywood party, and the hotel handed my life tragedy on a silver platter to one of the most famous men in the country.

As I wrap up my eye makeup repair, I know what I must do.

Shoulders squared and chin up, making great effort not to hobble in these silly shoes, I enter the dining area and place my purse at my booth. Turning on my heel in platforms proves to be more difficult than I anticipated, and I twist and fall into the arms of a wall. A hard, well-defined wall of muscle. Strong hands grip my biceps to steady me. I draw my eyes up, and up, and find a second chiseled Greek god staring down at me. Only this one is young. Jailbait young.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" The dimples. His dimples are speaking louder to me than his question.

"Nice catch, Charlie." Harlan Holcombe's words pull me out of my drooling stupor as he claps the man-child on the shoulder.

Charlie releases my arms, and his crystal-blue eyes dance from Harlan to me.

"Meredith, this is Charlie Boyd. He's an up-and-coming prodigy. If he stays focused, you'll be seeing his work headlined on the big screen one day."

Charlie slips his hands in his pants pockets and shrugs in an endearing aw-shucks manner. "He mentors a couple of us newbies. We're all glad he's back and hope he rubs off on us somehow."

"Charlie, this is Meredith." Harlan nods to me, his dark eyes

gripping my attention with their intensity. “She’s about to make me grateful my mother forced me to attend cotillion.”

These two are like a testosterone commercial, and I pray my deodorant is holding up to its advertised standards.

“What kind of event is this?” I ask, looking around the room and spotting a few more familiar beautiful faces. “Is this a fundraiser? Or did they move the Golden Globes to Colorado Springs?” I gasp. “Is there a secret famous people convention at the hotel? I won’t be able to handle that.”

Charlie grins. “We’re all on a movie set together close by.”

“It’s been a brutal schedule,” Harlan adds. “And something went wrong behind the scenes that delayed filming. The studio gave us the weekend for some R and R while they work out the details.”

“Harlan set it up for all of us to come here. And he paid!”

Harlan glares at Charlie. “That’s enough. I’ll take it from here.”

“You paid for all of this for them?” I ask, not knowing how to filter that information but not being able to ignore how moved I am at his generosity.

Instead of explaining, he wraps my arm around his elbow.

We walk the plank toward the dance floor.

Everything about him is overwhelming. His solid presence, his masculine scent, his confidence. If I’m unable to form coherent thoughts, how do I pull out of this?

As we reach the edge of the inlaid hardwood, I tug on him to stop our forward movement. I bow my head and study my toes.

Harlan’s body angles toward mine, appearing almost protective. “Meredith?”

I lick my lips, tasting overpriced lip gloss and a hint of insecurity. Staring at the safety of my shoes, I ask my question. “Be honest with me. Did you let me stay and dine with your group because you found out about the memo?”

“No. Yes.” His laugh fractures, and he gentles his voice. “Maybe.”

I nod at the floor.

“But I asked you to dance with me in *spite* of the memo.”

Any other answer would have driven me straight back to my table. However, this one robs me of the frequent-flier excuses I use to insulate my widowed, risk-averse life.

Harlan leans in. “What do you say? Dance with me?”

The low timbre of his voice coaxes me to respond. I lift my head and stare at him. Can he see the stars swirling in my eyes? He doesn’t need *People* magazine to affirm his looks. This man would make anyone forget how to speak.

Four years. No doubt I’ve been in the presence of attractive single men over the course of the last four years, but this feels like the first time I’ve noticed one. I just can’t believe the one my body chose to notice. How can anyone converse with someone so beautiful?

“I could be a complete nightmare, you know,” I say.

His broad shoulders, still shielding me from the room, shake with his light laughter. “You aren’t. In my entire life, I’ve only misjudged one person.” His eyes seem to dim a touch, though it’s almost indiscernible. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Famous last words. But if you’re willing to risk it, so am I.”

He doesn’t waste a moment ushering me to the dance floor, allowing me no time to ask the obvious.

I place my right hand in his left, then set my other one on his shoulder. When his palm hits my waist, I shudder. The surprise of his touch clashes with the memory of the last time I danced with a man in this room.

“You okay?”

After gulping down my uncertainty, I offer him one curt nod. I can do this.

The piano, saxophone, and upright bass play the opening notes, and as the first words of “The Way You Look Tonight” roll out, I start to understand that we have actually made a mistake of epic proportions.

Clunky doesn’t begin to describe our movement.

Unsurprisingly, Harlan leads well. Yet he is about a quarter of a beat off every fourth step.

Our feet are dancing on different planets.

I lower my head and stare at our disastrous strides, unable to figure out how to fix this. We knock each other's toes, our arms sway off-kilter, and if our proximity narrows, one or both of us will be in danger of a concussion.

Bam.

"Whoa. Sorry there, bud." Harlan offers a chin lift to fellow A-list dancers caught in our path.

Pow.

"Nope. Not that way." Harlan pulls me into him and scoots us around a tall couple, offering a dashing, apologetic smile as we pass.

Schmack.

I now fear we look like Batman and Robin participating in hand-to-hand combat.

"Harlan." I lean toward him in laughter. "We're terrible at this."

Harlan bites his lower lip in concentration, looking over my shoulder. "Nah."

Glancing around, I note we are now being given a wide berth. I catch the eye of a blond with hair big enough to rival the women of Texas. She smiles at me with a cross between sympathy and amusement. Her dance partner winks.

Wow, these people know he's terrible. And it appears they choose to love him through it anyway.

The second I think we're safe from another disastrous collision, my ankle falters.

In Harlan's only smooth move of the night, he steadies me against his chest. "Gotcha." He locks his eyes with mine. "Your hair smells amazing."

"The lady at the salon said I needed a dash of vanilla in my milk-chocolate hair." I close my eyes, lamenting my brilliant response. When I look back to him, he's still staring so I keep saying

words. “She used a lot of food items to describe my coloring and makeup. Strawberry-shortcake cheeks. Red-apple lips. This only made me hungry.” *Oh my gosh. Someone make me stop talking.* “When she mentioned my eyes being the color of Twinkies, I asked for a snack break.”

Yes. Yes, I did just say that.

The left side of Harlan’s mouth twitches. “Your eyes seem more of a golden hazel to me than Twinkie yellow.”

The last few bars of Frank Sinatra’s song decrescendo, and, God help us, Harlan moves to dip me.

Jumping out of an airplane can’t be as terrifying.

After surviving the plunge, I pat my hair back down from the stratosphere and attempt an escape to my table. However, he doesn’t loosen his grip. His grin sends me a silent invitation for a second whirl around the floor. At least his abysmal dancing skills help me relax, causing me to almost forget his celebrity status.

But will I survive another go-around?

During the first few measures of “Come Away with Me,” I’m relieved at the musical choice of a straightforward waltz. However, as each set of three beats pass, it’s clear Harlan prefers to count to four.

The slower pace is in the best interest of crowd safety, but this new category of awkwardness makes me yearn for the earlier slam dancing.

“What brought you to Colorado Springs?” he asks.

Interesting that he thinks he can handle talking and dancing at the same time.

“I’m looking at properties in the area. A realtor from the Broadmoor sent me some options. I’m supposed to meet with her tomorrow.”

His dark eyes light up in what appears to be recognition. “Prissy? Prissy Prestidge?”

I smile my affirmation. Can there be another person in the world named Prissy Prestidge?

We continue to sway to the music in Harlan's head. That is to say, I'm clueless when each movement will happen. But we're dancing without violence, which I count as a victory.

"How do you know Prissy?" I ask.

His shoes scuff the edges of mine. "I grew up outside of Colorado Springs. Prissy's one of my mom's best friends. You're in good hands. She's a legend in the real estate world."

Harlan continues to drop breadcrumb details of his life. But I don't know if they lead to a safe home or to a mean lady who wants to eat me alive.

He uses gentle pressure on my waist to guide me sideways in a motion resembling quintessential awkward junior high dance moves. "Why are you looking for property here?"

What I want to say is I fell in love with this place the first time my husband and I visited. But what's the protocol for talking about your dead spouse to someone you're dancing with? "I guess I thought it would be a good place to start."

Harlan stills our movement, pulls back, and stares down at me. "A good place to start what?"

"I don't know, exactly. Start over." Shifting my gaze to his shoulder, I swallow. In the safe corner of a small dance floor in the heart of Colorado, I ask a complete stranger, "Do you ever wonder if there might be more to your life? A purpose? Something you're missing, but it might be obtainable if you search hard enough?"

The squeeze he gives my waist feels like a reflex. "Most days."

His gravelly words draw my eyes to his, and I search the face of the man in front of me. "Charlie mentioned he's glad you're back," I say. "What did he mean?"

"I guess I got a little off course."

His words don't make sense to me. "You saved someone's life. You couldn't be that far off course."

In spite of our close proximity, the shadow in his eyes makes him look far away. He clenches his jaw. "I guess being a hometown hero isn't all it's cracked up to be. We can get a little off course too."

I tip my head. “Is that what you’re doing now? Getting your life back on track?”

He takes a sidelong glance across the room. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “I guess it is.”

His confession moves something inside me, but I don’t have time to reply because he schools his face into a charming smile. “But for now, I need an outlet to show off my mad dancing skills.” With dramatic flair, he swoops us back to the center of the dance floor to finish the waiting waltz.

We dive back into the anti-Fred-and-Ginger show, concentration imperative so as not to send anyone around us to the emergency room.

Once the song ends, Harlan takes my hand and leads me to my table.

I might be wrong, but I think I detect a collective sigh of relief from the other dancers when we exit the dance floor.

As I scoot into my booth, the adrenaline rush from the precarious waltz drains from my body, and I’m stumped as to what to say to this man who stands before me, larger than life.

“Thank you for the dance, Meredith.” Harlan bows his head, his glittering eyes never leaving my gaze. “Maybe I’ll see you around the hotel this weekend. But if not, enjoy your time in Colorado. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

He turns to leave before I can respond with anything resembling the English language.

Trying to process the wide pendulum swing of the last thirty minutes, I bring the edge of my glass to my lips. A shocking thought occurs to me, and I almost spill the drink.

The most surprising detail of the evening isn’t the botched dinner reservation, my sister’s scheme, or the handsome man with two left feet and a broken metronome in his head. No, the most surprising part of the evening is, by far, my desire to know what it is Harlan Holcombe is looking for.

Or maybe *who* it is Harlan Holcombe is looking for.

It's unexpected and uncomfortable to be drawn to someone for the first time in four years.

But not altogether unwelcome.

A one-hour time change from Dallas, a five-course meal, and two life-threatening dances have zapped me of all energy. I enter my room hoping to drop into bed as soon as possible, but my phone buzzes with a text.

MOLLY

Did you survive your night?

I roll my eyes. The woman has a husband, a ten-year-old, and a fourteen-year-old. Surely she had something better to do tonight than to wait for my call.

Yes.

As I sit down to soothe my ankles, I come to the disturbing realization these shoes might be easier to walk in than remove.

I worried about you all night when I didn't hear from you again.

If she only knew. Risking injury on the dance floor worried me too.

Even though she can't hear me chuckle, my lack of answer must have stressed her out because my phone vibrates with another text.

Are you drunk? You should remember that your typical half glass of wine is more potent in the altitude of the mountains.

"No, I'm not drunk." I grunt as I pry off the right high heel. The left shoe removal requires the same unfeminine sounds. I roll my ankles in the air, and once circulation returns to my feet, I text my answer.

Not drunk. Impeccable service, amazing food, and I danced with Harlan Holcombe.

That should get a good reaction.

Dress still on my body, I crawl into bed, pull up the covers, and enjoy my smug moment.

Harlan Holcombe?

You are drunk.

Sleep it off. Proud of you.

My life hasn't afforded me many secrets over the last four years. I revel in keeping my death-defying dance with Hercules the Hometown Hero just for me.

Eyes drooping, breathing slowed, I glance at the new message.

Can you imagine? The thought of you meeting him is disastrous. You're on Famous People Probation.

Snuggling into my pillow, hands nestled under my chin, I close my eyes and grin like an idiot. I am. I am one hundred percent on Famous People Probation.

Which is perfect because I won't see him again.