

heard a low “sonuva—”

“What?” Halle stopped in her tracks just out of reach of her glass.

She wracked her brain for what the problem could be. Maybe she’d had one too many glasses of wine. No, wait; she did a mental count. She’d only been on glass number two when whoever this was walked in and made her spill half of her new glass.

“No. Not you.” He pocketed his phone and looked at her. “Family issues.”

“Family, huh? They’ll getcha.” *Yeah, that was clearly the best thing to say. Oh well, he’s nice to look at.* She let her gaze wander down his nicely fitted jeans to his cowboy boots, and back up. After all, it was the holidays; everyone deserved a little happiness, right? Even her.

Blake Ellison continued to watch the woman. *Can't I have a moment of peace? I can't even Christmas shop without... This gal has the right idea, drinking in the afternoon. That's my kind of day.* He wished it was just because of the holidays, but lately his life was complicated with unfair obligations that made him want to drink – a lot... a whole lot.

Blake assessed the friendly sales gal. Her blonde hair was tied back in a messy ponytail that was weirdly sensual. Her fresh face was a welcome relief from the overly made up women he usually encountered.

“I’m Blake by the way.” He offered his hand.

“Halle, nice to meet you.” She slipped her hand in his firmly. *Strong. Good.* Limp fish handshakes were the worst.

“You don’t happen to have another glass or bottle of beer hiding back there, do ya?” He raised an eyebrow again.

Halle laughed and her green eyes danced. He

grinned, getting swept up in the moment.

“Tsk, tsk.” She crinkled her nose. “Isn’t it a little early?”

“Well, you made it look so fun.” He cocked his head toward the counter where she’d spilled what smelled like a Zinfandel.

“You, my new friend, are in luck. I happen to have a glass and, better yet, a new bottle.”

She knelt down to fish under the counter and Blake leaned over to check out the view his higher perch now afforded him. *Sexy*. Halle popped back up and his startled eyes found hers. She fetched a decorated glass off the shelf and wagged it in her hand.

“Convenient.” He nodded toward the spot she’d just made vacant.

“Perk of being the owner.” She winked and headed to the back of her store.

Blake wasn’t sure what do to, but he followed because she had wine. *She owns this place? Huh*. He couldn’t keep his eyes from

roaming. *Nice ass.*

Halle motioned to a couple of high backed, brightly patterned green and pink chairs. A sitting area had been set up in the middle of the store, complete with an end table between the chairs and a rug. They sat and she poured.

“Cheers.”

They clinked glasses.

“So, Blake, what drives you to drink in the middle of the day?” Halle crossed her legs and shifted to look at him.

*Too long to explain, Halle.* He took a long swig and swirled the remaining liquid. Where did he start to explain his grandpa’s recent death, and how his dad was using it to railroad him to stay in the banking business to someone he’d known for all of five minutes. Or should he start with how he wanted to run his family’s ranch and not let his dad sell it? Better yet, he could lead with all the questions about his dating life that increased around Christmas and

the set ups that inevitably followed. It was the worst time of year to be single.

“Does there have to be a reason?” he asked.

“Nope. But, then I think that crosses the line from fun to you have a problem.”

He didn't look, but he knew she was smiling as she razed him.

“My reason... hmm... pressure.” He thought about another pull but decided to pace himself. *I wish this was beer.*

He surveyed the store to continue avoiding her, pretending interest in the candle display, the clothes, the Western knickknacks, and the contemporary furniture. Blake's defenses were down and he didn't feel like building a mental wall right now. He just wanted to sit in the middle of the small, eclectic shop and drink. *There's probably something wrong with this, but... eh, I don't care.*

“Wow. No wonder you need a drink. Those pressures.”