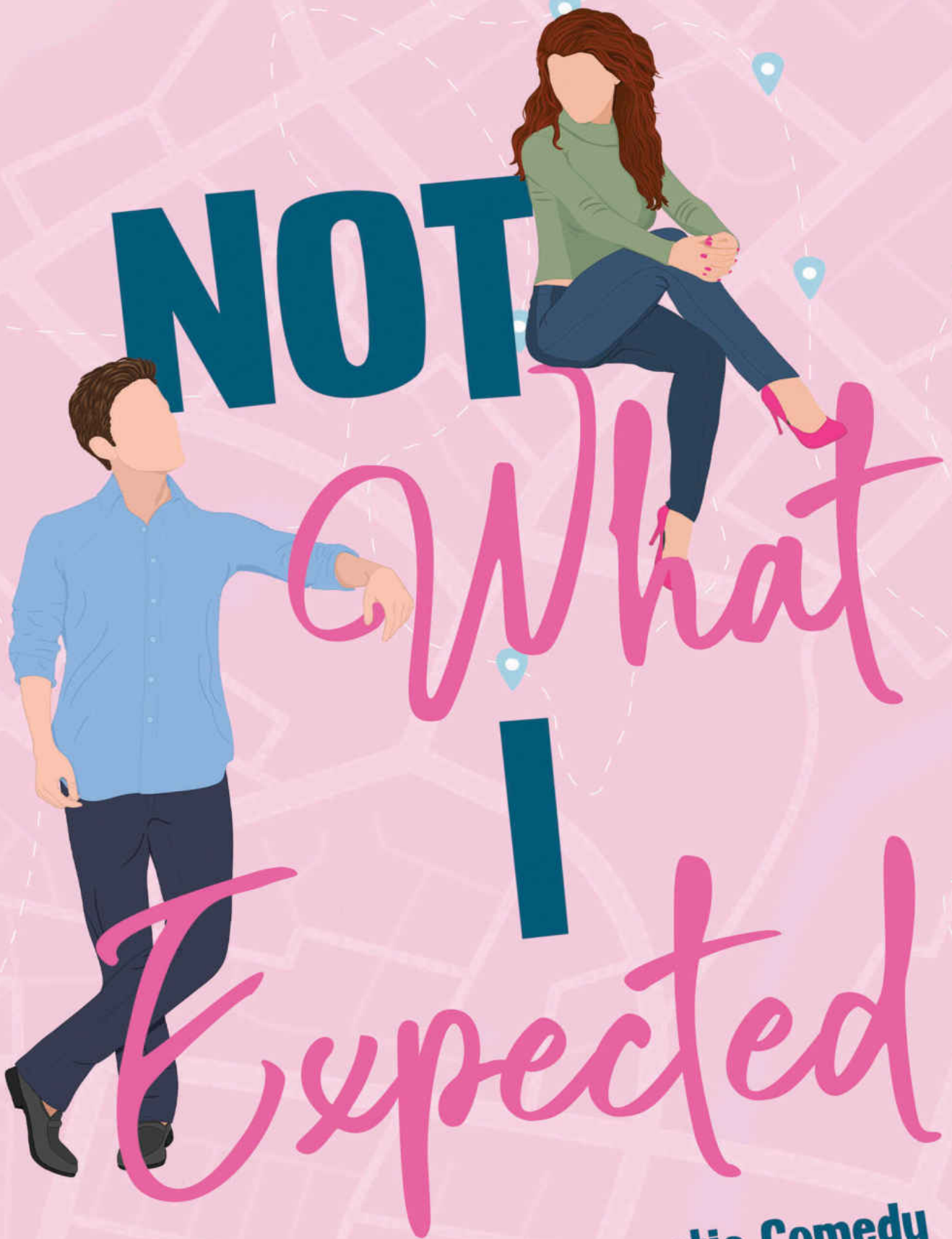


LIZZY BARLOW



A Romantic Comedy

NOT
What
|
Expected

A Romantic Comedy

LIZZY BARLOW

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Sometimes the grass isn't always greener...

I found the perfect guy. His name is Brett. He's smart, funny, charming, very good looking, and a great kisser. He gets me. And I get him. Oh, did I mention that he's my ex? And did I mention that I just dumped him for a total dud? Yeah, not what I expected...at all.

However, I'm fully prepared to eat crow if it means getting Brett back. But there's one problem...Brett recently got hired at my workplace, and my boss has a strict policy against inter-office dating. So, getting back together? Not happening. I worked hard for my job and I'm not about to lose it—not even for love.

I can totally work alongside Brett and ignore my feelings. No problem. But when we're asked to narrate a steamy romance novel together in a tight, cramped audio booth, I can't take it any longer. I have to have him back. With everything I've worked for on the line, I'm forced to ask myself—is love worth the risk?

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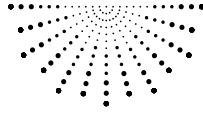
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CHAPTER ONE



They say the first step in solving a problem is admitting you have one.

Confession time: My name is Fern Davis, and I have a problem.

There. That wasn't so bad. It was actually pretty easy to admit that.

Although to be fair, this problem of mine isn't *always* bad. (Look at me, justifying it already.)

In fact, in some cases, this particular problem of mine has actually helped me out. It's gotten me out of some really crappy jobs. It's set me on my current career path, which I love. It's gotten me out of some bad friendships and even worse relationships.

But this problem has also made some trouble for me too. Like the time I left that amazing marketing job for a sales job that seemed too good to be true. Spoiler alert: It was too good to be true.

Then there was the time I abandoned a group of friends for some new friends. *They seemed really nice!* When that backfired, I tried to go back to the old friends, and they had written me off.

And I can't forget the time I changed my major in college because all my friends were becoming teachers. But after a semester, I changed it back. *I was never good with kids.*

Do you see a trend here?

I do.

So, what's my problem?

My problem is that I'm very much a grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side kind of person. And that's a problem for me because right now, I'm thinking of ending a relationship—and I don't even have a good reason for it.

I know. I don't like it either.

My boyfriend, Brett, has been nothing short of amazing. He's sexy, funny, charming, and everything I could ever want. Why on earth would I leave that?

It's because of my problem. I can't seem to recognize a good thing when I have it.

Really though, I'm leaving Brett because it's the right thing to do. There's been someone else on my mind, and I haven't been giving him my full attention lately. He deserves better.

So...who is on my mind if it's not Brett? The mystery man's name is Tanner, and he's someone I met at a singles event several months ago. It's the type of event that people attend to find a potential mate. Well, I'd been going to those events for a different guy, Collin, and ended up meeting Tanner.

Tanner and I hit it off—like really hit it off. And at the end of the event, I got his phone number. I didn't pursue it though because I was too focused on Collin and couldn't see something good when it was literally staring me right in the face. (See above about my problem.)

Eventually, I did end up with Collin. But he turned out to be a total jerk and only wanted to be with me so he could check some box on his long list of sexual partners. Once I learned that, it was *goodbye, Collin* and *hello, Tanner*. Except my timing was terrible and by the time I had wised up, Tanner was already seeing someone else. He was the one that got away. After some time passed, I moved on as well and found Brett.

I really thought I was over Tanner, but ever since Julie, my roommate, mentioned that Tanner is single again, I can't get him out of my head. Not only that, but I keep seeing him everywhere. The other day, when Brett took me out to dinner, I looked across the table and swore it was Tanner sitting there and not Brett. I almost called out Tanner's name because the whole thing felt so real to me. Then I immediately felt guilty that I couldn't even enjoy a night out with my boyfriend because Tanner was in my thoughts the whole time.

All my attempts to put Tanner out of my mind haven't worked, and I can't keep stringing Brett along when my heart's not in it. It's not fair to him. So, after a lot of hemming and hawing, I've decided it's time for me to end this relationship.

I just hope I don't regret it.

My phone pings with an incoming text and I look down at it, thinking Brett has some kind of sixth sense where he can tell when I've been thinking about him.

But it's not Brett. It's Julie.

JULIE: Are you up for a chat?

ME: Sure

Julie is currently in Texas with her boyfriend, Dustin, who also happens to be Tanner's roommate. The whole time they've been gone, I've been getting daily updates from her about their trip. A few seconds pass, and then she's calling me.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hey, Fern. How are you?"

How am I? You could say I'm stressed, anxious, a nervous wreck because I'm about to break up with my boyfriend. But other than that... "I'm fine. How are you?" Now's not the time to bring up Brett anyway. I don't want to put a damper on Julie's vacation.

"We're great here," she says, her tone cheery. "We just got back from the Dallas Zoo, and we're supposed to have dinner at my mom's house later."

“That sounds nice.” Much better than the evening I’m about to have.

“What are you up to?”

“Oh, you know...just hanging out at home,” I say.

“By yourself? On a Saturday? I figured you’d be out with Brett, unless he’s over there now.”

A beat passes while I think of what to say without revealing too much. “He’s coming over later.” Not completely a lie. Brett probably will be coming over later, but not for the reason she suspects.

“Is everything okay? You’re normally more talkative than this. Usually, when I ask you how you are, you launch into great detail about your day.” She pauses for a few moments, then says, “Actually, now that I think about it, the last few days you’ve been a little distant.” The concern in her voice can’t be masked.

“I’m fine,” I say, probably a little too quickly. At least Julie isn’t here. I don’t have a good face for lying. My mom always said she could read me like a book.

“Are you sure? You’d tell me if something was going on, right?”

I should keep quiet. I should let Julie continue with her conversation while I try to listen like the good friend I am. I can fake enthusiasm for her trip. No problem. “I’m fine,” I say again. “Really, Jules, you shouldn’t worry about me. Things are all good here.”

“If you say so.” She waits, probably to see if I’m going to say anything else, and when I don’t, she continues. “I wanted to tell you I saw an animal that reminded me of you today. It was some kind of monkey with red fur that looked a lot like the shade of your hair.”

I let out a snort. “Oh, nice. You just compared me to a monkey. How flattering.”

“You should take that as a compliment. That monkey’s fur was gorgeous,” she says with a laugh. “So, what are you and

Brett going to do this evening? Anything fun?"

"I'm going to break up with him tonight."

I hear Julie suck in a breath on her end of the line. *Oh, my god.* Did I just say that out loud?

I did, didn't I? The silence on her end nearly confirms it. I guess there's no point in trying to deny it. That's not the kind of statement that's easy to take back. Although I could try and say, "Oh, silly me. I meant I'm going to make out with him tonight." But Julie's not stupid. She'd see right through it.

Whatever. She was going to find out anyway, and this way she can console me when it's over. She can't console me if she doesn't know.

"Oh my gosh. Why? What happened?" she says, her tone serious.

"That's just it—nothing happened. Brett's been great. I know I'm probably making a dumb move here, but I can't stop thinking about Tanner. And every time I think about him, I feel so terrible about it. I'm never going to get Tanner out of my head unless I break up with Brett first."

"I'm sorry I ever mentioned Tanner being single to you. I feel somewhat responsible here," she says.

It was a comment she'd made in passing, but one that changed the course of everything for me. "It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who can't seem to realize what a good thing I have here."

"I'm sure you already know what my thoughts are, so I'm not going to try and talk you out of it. It seems like your mind is made up anyway."

"It is," I say definitively. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about it and I always seem to come back to the same answer."

"Then I hope you'll call me when it's over so I can be your shoulder to cry on even though I'm not there."

"I don't want to ruin your evening," I say.

"You won't. Give me a call, no matter the time."

When I hang up with Julie, it's still early in the day, which gives me plenty of time to pull together some kind of meeting with Brett. It has to happen tonight. I've finally worked up the courage to do it and if I put it off for another day, I'm only delaying the inevitable.

I send Brett a quick text about meeting up tonight and his response comes only a few moments later. Yes. He can make it tonight.

Now that he's for sure coming over, that leaves me with figuring out how I'm going to break up with him. Should I make him dinner first? Should I do it right when he gets here so I don't have to sit with my stomach in knots all night?

This isn't my first breakup—far from it. But, in all my thirty-two years, it's the first time I've broken up with someone when I really don't have a good reason to. My past boyfriends have always made things easy for me. There was the boyfriend I dumped after I caught him stealing my underwear. He seemed to favor my most expensive pairs—and I never did get any of them back. I dumped another boyfriend after he asked a server for her number...while I was sitting at the table...on a date with him. And I can't forget the boyfriend who had our whole lives mapped out, including our future children's names, by the second date. At the time, I thought he was joking. But one month later, he was on one knee proposing marriage. *Hard pass.*

With no ideas on how to break up with Brett, I do what any normal person my age would do—consult Google. I type in the search bar: *how to break up with a guy*. I get tons of results, all detailing different methods of how to do it, but none of the options seem like things I would actually want to do. In fact, they're all kind of horrible and mean. I'm not going to ghost him. I'm not going to break up via text. I'm certainly not going to cheat on him to try and get rid of him. I already feel like I'm emotionally cheating on him by thinking about Tanner all the time.

I continue to scroll until I come across an article with some sensible suggestions about how the conversation should go, and what kind of reactions to expect. I read through it even

though I have a feeling that nothing from this article is actually going to stick in my brain. I'm sure as soon as I start talking, I'll forget everything and go completely off the rails.

But from this article I've gathered that making us dinner for tonight isn't the best option. I need to keep things short and to the point, so I don't prolong things for either of us.

With several hours until Brett is due to be here, I take that time to preheat the oven for some cookies I know I'm going to need later. I pull out some pre-portioned raw chocolate chip cookie dough that Julie usually keeps stashed in the freezer and place them on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Once the oven is preheated, I place the pan in the oven and wait the ten minutes it takes for them to bake. While I'm waiting, I tidy up the dishes in the sink so Brett doesn't think I'm some kind of slob for having a sink full of dishes. With Julie gone, the dishes have been piling up because I'm not used to having to wash them. Usually, I'd leave them in the sink with every intention of coming back to load them in the dishwasher. But Julie can't stand a messy kitchen, so she always puts them in the dishwasher for me. As far as roommate quirks go, it's one I don't mind one bit. And we tend to balance each other out since I'm always folding up her laundry that she likes to leave in the dryer.

When the oven timer goes off, I pull the pan out and leave the cookies on a hot pad on the counter. While they're cooling, I head back to my bathroom to get ready for this evening. I decide that a shower is in order, mostly because I need to kill some time. Instead of rushing through a shower like normal, I take my time shampooing my hair, shaving my legs, and don't get out until my skin has turned pink with the heat of the water.

While my body is wrapped in a towel, I apply some makeup over my freckled skin, but don't go too heavy in case I end up crying tonight. Then a quick blow dry, and it's time for me to choose an outfit. Comfy clothes are necessary tonight, and I choose a pair of leggings and a loose-fitting T-shirt.

Brett arrives shortly after seven, and when I answer the door, he looks every bit as amazing as I expected. He's wearing a pair of khaki pants paired with a casual white button-down shirt and has the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His coffee-colored hair is styled in an untamed, but purposeful sort of way, and his brown eyes have a sort of twinkle to them. There's a five o'clock shadow on his face which immediately makes me want to kiss his cheek to feel the roughness against my lips. He flashes me the mischievous little grin he usually sports.

I hate this.

I knew he was going to look sexy tonight and knowing what I'm about to do makes it hurt all the more. But this is a pain I deserve since I'm the idiot who wants to end things.

Brett leans in for a kiss and I allow him one, but when he tries to lean in for another, I pull away. I don't want either of us to get carried away because then I'll forget my sole mission—and that's to break up.

"It's good to see you," he says.

"It's good to see you too," I say, trying like hell to keep my facial expressions in check. I cannot have my face give me away today. "Have a seat on the couch." I step aside to allow him room to come in.

He takes a seat at one end of the couch. I take a seat at the other end, putting some distance between us. I don't know how he's going to react to the news I'm about to give. I don't think he'll be violent, so no worries there. I just don't want to be close enough to see if there's any pain or anguish in his features.

He smooths down his shirt in the front and shifts toward me. "I'm sorry I didn't contact you earlier. I got busy today with some family things. My dad wanted me to come over to his place to help him rotate his tires. And we watched the Mariners' game for a little bit."

"It's okay. I was busy here too." A lie. My mind was the only thing that was busy today. Other than that, I haven't done

much around the house.

There's a pause between us and to keep my legs from bouncing nervously, I tuck them underneath me.

"Did you have dinner yet? We could go out and get something to eat," he offers.

"No thanks," I say, then begin chewing on my bottom lip—a nervous habit.

"Do you want to go out for a walk?" He takes in the blank look on my face. "Or we could stay in and watch a movie."

I don't say anything. Dinner, a walk, then a movie sounds lovely. And a part of me wants to do all of those things with him. But I need to ignore that part because doing those things doesn't get me closer to my end goal here.

Brett tilts his head and his brow creases. "Are you all right, Fern? You don't seem like yourself tonight."

Geez. Is it really that obvious? There's no easy way to say what I'm about to say, so I think it's best to just come out with it. "I asked you over here tonight because I have something I need to talk to you about. The past few months have been really fun for me, but I don't know that my heart is fully into this relationship." I pause, making sure his eyes are fully on mine. I don't want to have to repeat myself. It's already uncomfortable enough just saying it once. "And because you deserve to be with someone who's fully committed, I think it's time we break up."

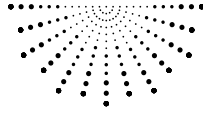
He sits back on the couch and runs a hand through his hair. He's quiet for several moments, which makes me think he's upset. But his face doesn't look it. He looks so...so...*normal*, like I could've asked him about the weather, or told him that chicken breasts are on sale this week at the grocery store. Which they are, by the way. Only \$1.99 per pound.

What could be going on in his mind? The length of time he's taking to speak is making me uncomfortable, and I shift around on the couch, then pick at a piece of lint on my shirt.

Brett starts nodding his head, like he's mulling something over, then turns toward me. "Oh. Well, that's going to make

things awkward.”

CHAPTER TWO



Awkward?

Out of all the reactions I thought I was going to get; I certainly didn't expect that. I thought maybe I'd get something like, "How could you do this to me, Fern?" or "I love you, Fern. Just give me another chance." I had prepared myself for reactions like those. But *awkward*? I don't know what to do with that.

"What do you mean it's going to make things awkward?" I say.

He takes a deep breath. "Remember when you told me about the job opening at your company?"

I nod in response. Of course I remember. I told Brett about a month ago because the guy who left the company was an asshole and I couldn't wait to be rid of him.

Brett fidgets with his shirt sleeve, unrolling it, then rolling it back up to his elbow. "I applied for that job. And I'm supposed to have my final interview this week."

"Can't you cancel?" I blurt out, then think better of it. "Shit. I'm sorry. Don't cancel. It would be a great opportunity, and I hope you get it."

I hope he doesn't get it because I don't know that I can work alongside an ex—again. I've had to do that before and it wasn't pleasant. My ex would come up to me in the break room or seek me out when I'd be leaving for the day and make rude comments in my ear. He'd tell me all about who he was going out with that night and how much better so-and-so was

than me in bed. As if I cared. In the end, I ended up being the one to leave because I couldn't stand it anymore. Too bad. That job was one of the good ones too.

I don't think Brett would stoop so low, but I can't be sure about that. After all, I never expected that my ex Kyle was capable of all those things.

"You know what?" he says, his words cutting through the silence between us. "Maybe I shouldn't take that interview this week. I don't want things to be weird at work. It's already tough enough starting out at a new place, and I don't want to add any additional strain."

I shake my head. "Don't be silly!" I say, my voice raising an octave. "It wouldn't be weird. You should totally take that interview. I think it's a great fit for you. Mirrormont Media is a fantastic company and you'd be an incredible asset." I'm doing my best to keep my face cheery and bright because inside, all I can think about is my perfect work environment quickly turning imperfect.

I love my job. I really do. When I started working for Mirrormont Media, it was like a match made in career heaven. For the first time in my life, I could finally say that I enjoyed going to work on a daily basis. Most of the time, what I do there doesn't actually feel like work.

But if I have to work alongside Brett, I fear that I'll dread going to work and I can't have that. I went through a lot of shitty jobs to find this one.

"Really? You're sure about that?" he asks, his brow creasing together.

"Absolutely. Don't cancel. With your skills, I think you'd do well there."

"Okay, good," he says with a smile. "I'm really excited about the opportunity. I think it'll be a good fit too." He gets up off the couch and looks into my eyes. "Are we okay here?" He gestures between the two of us.

"I'm okay. Are you okay?" I ask.

He's weirdly calm about this whole thing. I mean, it's like the past few months didn't mean anything to him. Maybe breaking up with him was the right thing to do after all. Maybe he wasn't as serious about me as I thought he was.

He nods. "I'm okay. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm going to miss our time spent together. I had a lot of fun with you, Fern. But to be honest, I had a feeling something like this was coming. You haven't been yourself for a while now. Is there anything going on in your life that you want to talk about?"

I smile, despite myself. Brett is too good for me. He's always been very considerate and even in a breakup, he wants to make sure I'm okay before he leaves. "No, there's nothing going on. Thanks for checking."

"I guess I'll be seeing you then. My interview is on Tuesday, so maybe I'll see you there."

"Maybe," I say, then make a move to get up off the couch.

"You don't have to get up. I can see myself out."

And the next thing I know, I'm by myself, stuck in the same place on the couch, trying to sort my feelings out. But I don't want to decipher my feelings on my own. Now's a good time to call Julie back.

"How did it go?" she says by way of greeting.

"It was..." I don't even know how to describe what went down between Brett and me. "...weird."

"What do you mean by weird?"

"He was so calm about the whole thing. And he said I haven't been myself for a while, so he was almost expecting it to happen."

"Then I think you can call this breakup a success," she says without any hesitancy.

"You think so? I guess I would've liked to see some sort of reaction. I certainly didn't expect him to get down on his knees and beg me to take him back, but I could've used a little

emotion. All he said was it was going to make things awkward.”

“Do you want me to tell you what I think or what is going to make you feel better?” Julie says.

“Be honest. I can take it,” I say, even though I have a feeling I’m not going to like what comes out of her mouth. Julie has a penchant for being blunt.

“I think it’s wrong of you to expect some sort of emotion from him. I think you only want that so you can feel a bit of satisfaction that he cared enough about you to make a show of it.” *Ouch. Tell me how you really feel.* I can tell she’s not done with me yet, and I brace myself for what’s to come. “I think if he took it as well as you say he did, that’s a good thing, and I think you should be happy about that. I know you wouldn’t want him to agonize over it.” When I don’t respond, she adds, “Right? Tell me you care about him enough to not want to see him miserable.”

I let out a sigh. “You’re right. I think my ego was a bit wounded tonight that he didn’t seem the least bit bothered by our breakup. But it’s definitely a good thing. I think I’d feel worse if he was really upset about it.”

“Good. Now what did you mean when you said he mentioned that it would make things awkward?”

“Brett applied for a job at my company, and he has his final interview this week.”

“Oh.” There’s a long pause between us. “I guess that *would* make things a bit awkward.”

“I know, right?” I say, my voice coming out almost like a whine. “I’m not looking forward to it. You know how much I love my job, and it’s been really great so far.”

“I don’t think you need to stress out about anything yet. There’s probably a chance he might not get the job. Usually, a final interview means there’s also at least one or more candidates they’re considering.”

“I didn’t even think about that. I was so taken aback by the thought of working at the same place as Brett, I didn’t even

consider that he might not get the job.” I can feel my mood improving already as that thought registers in my mind.

“See? You have nothing to worry about. Just keep calm and continue on like everything is normal.”

Keep calm. I can do that. “When are you and Dustin coming back?” I can’t believe I’m going to admit this, but I miss having Julie around the house. Not only do I miss talking to her in person, but she’s a better cook than I am, and she’s certainly better at keeping the kitchen clean.

“We should be back in town by next Sunday. We have a few things we need to finish up next week, then we’ll start driving back.”

“The house hasn’t been the same without you. It’s very empty here.”

“Don’t get all sentimental on me,” Julie says with a chuckle. “We’ll be back before you know it, and then you’ll be wishing to have your quiet house back.” She’s probably right about that. “Hey, it’s getting late here, and Dustin and I are going to head back to our hotel room for the evening. In the meantime, if you need anything or have any other questions, you know where to find me.”

“I’ll keep in touch. Also, send me some pictures from your trip. You’ve only sent me two pictures so far and I’d like to see more.”

“Okay, I’ll send you one right now,” she says.

Within a few seconds, a text message with a photo pops up on my screen. I belt out a laugh at the image in front of me. It’s a monkey with red fur that looks like a lion’s mane. “Is this the monkey that has the hair color like mine?”

“That’s the one.”

The monkey’s shade of fur is sort of a reddish-orange like mine is. But the monkey’s fur is straight, whereas my hair is only straight when I take the time to take a flat iron to it. “I don’t know, Julie. I think I see more of you in the monkey than me. Look at its face. It’s grumpy just like you!”

“Ha ha. Very funny. Good night, Fern,” she says, then hangs up.

After I set my phone down, I head to the kitchen for a couple of those cookies I made earlier. I put two on a small plate, then stash the rest in a container and leave it on the counter. When I get back to the couch, with cookies in hand, I pull out my laptop which was sitting on the coffee table.

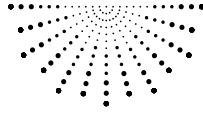
I need something to look forward to. Julie’s not going to be back for another week, I can’t even get excited about going to work now that I know Brett will be there at some point, and I’m currently single—again. Which I know is my fault, and I have no room to complain.

But still...

It’s back to the dating pool for me, but there’s only one fish I’m interested in catching. I’ve been keeping tabs on Tanner ever since Julie mentioned he was single, so I know he’s still organizing those singles events. There’s even an Instagram page for those events and like clockwork, I’ve been checking the photos posted after each one. In each and every picture, Tanner looks like he’s still single and if there was any change there, I would’ve heard about it from Julie by now. She’s spent enough time at Dustin and Tanner’s place that she would’ve seen if another girl was going out with Tanner.

I locate the webpage for the singles events and right on the front page is a notification about today’s event at the local aquarium. Dang it. Am I going to have to wait weeks before I can see Tanner again? I keep scrolling until I see a calendar for the month all the way toward the bottom of the page. I click on the calendar which brings me to a page that lists all the events for the month. I breathe a sigh of relief because there’s a brewery tour listed for next week’s event. Beer? Tanner? Could be a lot of fun. I add my name to the signup form, then turn the TV on and, because I don’t want to see happy couples right now, find a scary movie to zone out to.

CHAPTER THREE



I'm sitting at my desk on Tuesday when the chatter in the office can't be ignored anymore.

"Did you see him, Fern?" my colleague asks, nudging me in the arm.

I turn in my chair to face the intrusion. "See who?"

"The guy they're interviewing. I hope he gets the job here. He's super hot. I wouldn't mind looking at him all day."

It's times like these when I wish our workspace was not designed the way it is. We're all sitting at these long tables with our monitors in front of us. There's about five of us to each table, but everything is so open, I can see all the way across the room. That means I can see when Derek picks his nose for the umpteenth time, when Casey chews off yet another one of her fingernails, or when Grady gets up from his desk to chat with Brooke across the room. Really, he does it so he can look down her shirt. Brooke knows this, but she lets him do it anyway.

This open-concept arrangement is meant to increase collaboration and productivity between us. Most days, I'd rather hole up in one of our conference rooms and do my work because so many of my coworkers can be distracting. Like Lindsay right beside me who's still waiting on me to answer.

"No, I haven't seen him yet. What does he look like?" I ask.

A smile spreads across Lindsay's face as she tucks a lock of her blond hair behind her ear, like she does at least a

hundred times a day. Ask me how I know. “He has brown hair, and he’s tall. Nice body.” She whips her head to the side. “Oh, look! There he is now.”

I glance up to where she’s facing and see none other than Brett walking out of Reed’s office. Shit. I was so wrapped up in the video I was editing, I forgot all about his interview today.

This is fine.

It’s totally fine.

We’re all adults here and like Julie said, there’s the possibility he won’t get the job. But...I know that look on Reed’s face. The smug smile gives him away. Reed only gives this kind of look when he feels like he’s done something great. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s giving himself a mental fist pump right now. I don’t even need to wait for the staff memo to go out. I already know Brett got the job based on Reed’s expression.

Mirrmont Media is a company that produces content for social media as well as content for our own webpage. Our company covers a wide range of topics, but it wasn’t always that way. When I started here, we focused mainly on sports, but have since branched out to include pop culture and celebrity ramblings. Two years ago, podcasts were thrown into the mix, and here lately, we’ve even started doing some audiobook narration.

Basically, if there’s money to be made somewhere in the digital world, Mirrmont Media is probably going to do it. I don’t blame them for diversifying. People’s interests vary widely, and any way they can get people to consume our content means a win for the company.

My particular interest is baseball, and I write articles as well as edit videos for our website. A small group of people, including myself, cover the Mariners, and the vacancy that Brett applied for...that’s my group.

Damn me for opening my mouth.

I look again to see where the two of them went. Reed is ushering Brett out of this space and toward the front of the building where the entrance is. Brett scans the room with his gaze, and then it lands squarely on me. Double shit. The corner of his mouth twists up and I return his smile with one of my own.

I can do this. I can be professional here. I can totally work alongside Brett with no issues whatsoever.

Brett lets Reed usher him out of the building, and then the office goes back to normal. Except not really, because Lindsay is staring straight at me with her mouth practically hanging open.

“He smiled at you. That guy smiled at you. He hasn’t even started yet and he’s totally into you,” she says with a smirk on her face. “You’d better not let Reed see you two making eyes at one another. He might move you to a different group.”

She’s referring to Reed’s policy on inter-office dating. Let’s just say he’s not a fan. It’s not explicitly banned. In fact, as long as the two people aren’t working in the same group, he tolerates it. But when it’s within the same group? Forget about it. Reed feels that when two employees are working in such close proximity to one another while dating, it can lead to a lot of distraction.

That’s not to say it hasn’t happened. It has. Many times. But as soon as the secret gets out, those employees can kiss their current roles goodbye. That’s how Lindsay ended up in my group. She was originally working over in podcasts with another colleague, Mitchell, but the two of them couldn’t keep their relationship under wraps. Reed made them choose who would stay in podcasts and who would leave.

I wish it would’ve been Mitchell who left podcasts to come over to my group. Then I could be working alongside him instead of Lindsay. Mitchell is quiet and he certainly wouldn’t be grilling me about Brett right now.

“There are tons of other people in this office he could’ve been smiling at. There’s no way it was me,” I say, plastering on my best give-me-a-break expression.

She shakes her head. “It was definitely you. And you smiled back, so nice try with your lie. If you like your job, you should stay away.”

“Why would I have to be the one to leave? I’ve been here longer.”

She gives me a shrug in response. “No reason. I’m just saying be careful. You know what Reed is like.”

“Don’t worry. Nothing’s going to happen there,” I say, sounding pretty damn sure of myself. Because nothing is going to happen there. Brett and I are over. Done. Finito.

“If you say so,” she says, then turns her attention back toward her monitor. Finally.

I return to the video I was editing and later that afternoon, the memo I knew would come arrives in my inbox. I open it, even though I have a hunch what it says. Quickly, I scan through it and my suspicions are confirmed—Brett is hired. He starts next week.

When I get home that evening, I’m barely across the front door’s threshold when I whip out my cell phone and dial Julie’s number.

“Hey, Fern. How are you?” she asks when the call connects.

“He got hired. Brett came in today for his final interview and got the job,” I say in a rush. I’ve been waiting to get that out ever since I saw the staff memo.

“Dang it. I was holding out hope that he wouldn’t get it. Sorry, Fern. That really sucks.”

“I know,” I say, leaning my head against door. I press my eyes closed and pretend, just for a moment, that the events of today never happened. But it’s no use. They definitely did happen, and I have to accept that my job is going to get very weird very soon. “It’s my fault for telling him about the job. I never thought he would actually apply for it,” I say, my eyelids snapping open. “I only mentioned it in passing, you know? Sort of a casual, ‘My turd of a coworker finally left the

company today and now I can get someone new in my group.’ I never expected that someone to be Brett!”

“Would it be better or worse if you were still dating?” she asks.

I step away from the front door and plop down on the couch. I take the blanket that’s on the couch and spread it across my lap. It’s warm and comforting, and that’s exactly what I need right now.

“I don’t know,” I say with a shrug even though Julie’s not here to see it. “On the one hand, my boss hates it when employees date. Especially when they’re working together in the same group. But I don’t think it would be difficult for us to conceal our relationship. Right now, there’s just this general weirdness between us, even though my job is more secure this way.”

“It’s a tough spot to be in, and I don’t envy you there. Pretty soon though, you’ll be with Tanner and Brett will be history. I mean, that’s why you broke up with him in the first place, right? So you could focus on Tanner?”

Yes, that’s what I need to do. I just need to focus on Tanner and forget that this whole Brett thing has happened. “That’s the plan. I’m going to a brewery tour on Saturday to meet up with him.” Which is silly for me to wait that long, since I already have Tanner’s phone number. But this way I can play it off like I’m just casually running into him at the singles event instead of seeking him out directly.

“When I get back on Sunday, you can tell me all about it,” she says.

“Sounds good,” I say, then check the time on my phone. “Sorry to cut this short, but I need to get ready to go to my parents’. I’m having dinner over there tonight.”

“Oohh...what’s Mama Davis making?”

“Beef stew with homemade rolls,” I say, my stomach grumbling at the thought of it.

“That sounds so good. Your mom is such a good cook. I don’t know how none of that rubbed off on you,” Julie says

with a chuckle.

“Not sure. I was never interested in learning, I guess.”

Julie’s right. I come from a long line of great cooks, and then things sort of died with me. At some point, I really should sit down with my mother and have her teach me some of the family recipes. My grandma always said she would teach me, but life got in the way, and she passed on before I was able to learn from her.

“Make sure to get her recipe for me. I’d love to try it out and put it on my blog. And tell her I said hello.”

“I will. Have a good evening.”

After I hang up, I walk back to my bedroom and change out of my work clothes into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. My parents are expecting me for dinner soon, so that leaves me time for little else. My mother doesn’t tolerate lateness which stems from my grandpa’s time in the military. In my mother’s mind, if you’re not fifteen minutes early, then you’re late. It’s something that actually has rubbed off on me—I hate being late.

I grab my purse off the sofa table and lock the door to the house. I head down the steps to where my Subaru is parked on the street. Roughly twenty-five minutes later, I’m at my parents’ house in the Woodridge neighborhood of Bellevue.

My parents’ house is a nothing-special, single-story home on a quiet residential street in a decent mid-sized neighborhood where almost none of the people I grew up with still live. Bellevue is a city that’s in a constant state of flux and at times, it feels like my parents are the only ones who stuck around.

After I park in the driveway, I get out and something down the street catches my eye. Another “for sale” sign. I swear every time I come over here, there’s a new one in someone’s yard. I’m sure my mother has already seen it because it’s a sore spot with her. This house was never supposed to be long-term, but then my younger sister came along, housing prices

kept increasing, and pretty soon, they couldn't afford anything else. So they stuck with the house they could afford.

With how expensive home prices in this area have become, my parents could sell this house and find somewhere else to live that's much cheaper than Bellevue, paying for their next place with the proceeds. But then they wouldn't be close to my sister and me, and that's more important for them.

Speaking of my sister, she's already here. Her little Honda hatchback is parked on the street right in front of the house.

I walk up the front sidewalk, past my mother's hydrangeas, whose blooms are starting to wilt, and don't bother to knock on the front door. As soon as I walk in, the smell of beef stew wafts right to my nostrils. There's also a faint yeasty scent in the air from the fresh rolls my mother made for our dinner.

"Hello!" I holler to announce my presence.

My dad pokes his head around the corner. "Hey, honey, how are you?" he says, engulfing me in a hug. My dad has always been a thin man, despite the home-cooked, calorie-laden meals my mother serves on a daily basis. And he can't say his height is the reason for his thinness since he's not even six feet tall. He just has a fast metabolism, which I inherited along with his red hair and pale skin.

"I'm fine, Dad. How are you?"

"Oh, you know me. Just trying to keep busy. All those years I worked toward this time, and now I find myself wishing to go back to work for something to do." My father retired recently and hasn't quite figured out what he wants to do with all his spare time. There's only so much golf he can tolerate.

"I'm sure you'll find a hobby. Or you could always volunteer somewhere."

"I'm going to have to find something. Your mother is getting tired of me being around the house," he says with a grin.

Down the hall, my sister, Dahlia, exits from one of the bedrooms. While Dahlia might not have been the coolest name

for her to have, at least she got to be named after a flower. I'm sure the torment she got growing up was far less than what I got. It's great having all your classmates point to a random fern on the playground and say, "Hey, Fern! Look! It's you!" It's not funny after the eleventy-billionth time.

Dahlia's wearing a pair of sweatpants and a ratty old T-shirt. Her reddish-brown hair is pulled up into a messy bun, which is...odd. Normally when I come over for dinner, she's more put together than this. "Hey, Fern," she says, barely lifting her gaze.

She passes by me and doesn't even give me a chance to respond. I throw my dad a look. "What's going on with her?" I ask.

He waves me off. "Don't worry about her. She got into a huge fight with her roommates and moved out. I think she's upset to be back home."

I nod in understanding. My younger sister only moved out of our parents' house last year after struggling to find a job that paid well enough, and roommates to help shoulder the cost of housing around here. "At least she has a place to fall back on, even if she doesn't appreciate it."

"Come on," he says, nodding toward the kitchen. "Your mother is waiting, and you know how she gets when she has to hold up dinner." He ushers me into the kitchen where my mother is at the stove, spooning the stew into bowls.

Other than a few appliance replacements over the years, this kitchen still looks the same as it did when I was growing up. Which is another sore spot with my mother. She always said that if she couldn't move out of this house, then she at least wanted a remodel. For years she talked about it.

And it never happened.

My father has always been very frugal and adheres to the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" motto. Back when I was getting ready to graduate college, my mother decided to stand her ground. She told my father that she wouldn't cook in this kitchen anymore until he agreed to a remodel. But after a

month of take-out, my mother gave in and returned to her kitchen.

In the kitchen, my short, curvaceous mother turns toward me and holds out her arms. “Thanks for coming over,” she says, giving me a brief hug and then returning to her task. She’s had a haircut recently because the last time I was here, her light brown hair was about to her shoulders, and now it’s up to her chin.

I flash her a grin. “Well, Julie’s gone, so I have to get my dinner elsewhere.”

“One of these days I need to get you in the kitchen so you can learn how to cook for yourself. Here,” she says, handing me a bowl, “take this to the table.”

I do as I’m told, then return for another bowl, and another until the table is set. I grab the basket of rolls off the counter and place it on the table. Dahlia is already sitting down with a look on her face like she’d rather be anywhere else but here.

My dad takes his seat at the table, and then we all take our respective seats, the same ones we kept while I was still living at home.

My mother’s eyes narrow from across the table. I can see it in her face over there, the face only a mother can give when she’s trying to puzzle something out. It’s like she knows I’m holding something back—I just have to wait for her to come out with it. “No Brett this week, Fern? I wish you would’ve told me. Then I wouldn’t have made extra.”

And there it is.

Brett came over for dinner a month ago, and she’s been asking after him ever since. It was only one time (one time!), but she acts like he was a regular at this table. Every family dinner we’ve had since, she makes a big fuss about making extra. I’ve told her time and time again that if he was going to be over for dinner, I’d let her know ahead of time. But she doesn’t listen to me because she doesn’t trust that I’ll actually remember to let her know. “No, Mom, he couldn’t make it.”

“Why not?” she asks, her eyes narrowing to slits.

It's safe to say my mother loved Brett. Not in a romantic way, but more like "the son I never had" kind of way. I'm almost sad I have to mention our breakup to her because I know she's going to take it hard. I pluck one of the rolls from the breadbasket, pull off a piece, and pop it in my mouth. It's soft and tender, but it's sticking in my mouth like glue. Every second I make my mother wait, intensifies her glare. "We broke up," I finally say.

A silence collects around the room and even Dahlia's gaze lifts from her bowl. She's smiling. My sister loves it when I'm in the hot seat. Dahlia was the type to blame me for everything because she knew she could get away with it—and it took the attention off her and whatever bad thing she was doing at the time. She's six years younger than me and was definitely the baby of the family in every sense of the word—still is.

My mother's mouth gapes open and her spoon clatters against her bowl. "You what?"

"They broke up, Mom. It wasn't that difficult to hear," Dahlia says with a smirk on her face that makes me want to slap it off.

My father comes to my rescue and shoots Dahlia a look. "I'm sure there was a perfectly good reason for it," he says.

He would have to go there, wouldn't he? I cast my gaze back down to my bowl in a look that I hope conveys how much I don't want to talk about it. Let them think Brett was horrible to me. I can straighten them out later when Dahlia's not around to revel in my failings as a person. "Can we drop it?" I ask, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

My mother shoots me a glance. I know she's already read my facial expression and probably has everything worked out in her mind. Thankfully, she keeps quiet and dinner passes without issue.

After dinner, Dahlia retreats to her room, leaving me alone with our parents. My father clears off the table, I put the food away, and my mother works on getting the dishes loaded in the dishwasher. Just when I think I might be able to escape my mother's questioning, my father leaves and heads to the family

room. Great. Now it's just me and my mother. There's nowhere for me to hide now.

"Okay, Fern. Come out with it. I know you're holding something back about Brett. What happened there?" she asks, while scrubbing the beef stew remnants out of the Dutch oven.

"What do you mean?" Playing dumb has never worked for me before, so I'm not sure why I'm bothering.

"I can see it in your face. You look guilty. What happened?"

How the hell can she see all that in my face? What exactly does a guilty person look like? I'd like to know so the next time I do something bad, I can try to hide it better.

I let out a sigh, like I'm extremely bothered by this line of questioning. Because I am. What goes on in my relationships really isn't any of her concern. That's what I get for bringing a boyfriend over here in the first place. "He didn't do anything to me, okay? Brett never did anything wrong." My mother nods like she knew that all along. "I just have someone else on my mind, and I broke up with Brett because I can't get this other person out of my head."

My mother tsks me. "When are you going to learn that sometimes the best thing is what's right in front of you?"

"Would you rather I stay with Brett even though I'd spend the whole time wishing he was someone else? I didn't think that would be fair to him. So I thought I was doing the right thing by ending it."

She stops her scrubbing and stares ahead, probably coming to the conclusion that what I did might've actually been the correct course of action. "I see your point. That's too bad though," she says, her expression softening. "I really liked Brett. He was very kind and seemed like a perfect fit for you." I hand her a few stray dishes that were left on the counter. She scrubs them and places them in the dishwasher. "How's work?"

About to get weird. "It's fine." She gives me another look, waiting for me to tell her the truth. *Dammit.* "Brett got hired at

my company and he'll be taking Todd's old place in my group. He starts next week."

"Oh," my mother says. A slow, wide grin spreads across her face.

"What? What does that look mean?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says, but her grin says otherwise. It continues to grow.

I narrow my eyes. "That look isn't nothing. What is it?" All those times she grilled me tonight, it's only fair if she gives a little.

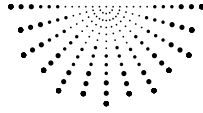
"I was just thinking that maybe with you two working in such close proximity..."

"No. It's not happening," I say, shaking my head. I know she's envisioning a happy ever after between Brett and me. Not on my watch. "I've already got someone else lined up and we're going out this weekend." Not completely the truth, but close enough.

My mother shrugs. "If you say so."

And I do.

CHAPTER FOUR



After what felt like the longest week at work, Saturday finally arrives and with that comes the brewery tour.

I've been looking forward to this evening ever since my breakup with Brett and spent most of the afternoon getting ready for it. My hair has been straightened, my toenails painted so I could wear my cute sandals, and I even shaved my legs even though I'm wearing jeans. I don't expect anyone to see my legs tonight, but you just never know. Better to be prepared than caught off guard.

I arrive at the brewery, a place that looks more like a warehouse than anything, shortly before seven and glance around at the cars that are in the parking lot. There are so few, I'm wondering if anyone is even here for the event yet. It could be that all these cars here are the employees' and I'm the dork that got here before everyone else.

Instead of sitting in my car, waiting to see if anyone else shows up, I get out and make my way to the front of the building. The glass front door swings open and none other than the man I'm looking for greets me with a smile. His smile is contagious, and I can't help the way my lips turn up into a grin. Tanner's eyes light up when he takes in my outfit. Nice to see that someone else appreciates the time I put into getting ready. And he should too. These jeans are so tight, they're practically a second skin, and this blouse dips low enough to see down it, but only if you get close enough to look. Which I'm hoping he will.

“I was beginning to think no one was going to show up,” he says to me. He’s wearing nothing more than a casual T-shirt and jeans with sneakers. But for some reason, it looks so good on him. Maybe it’s because I’ve had this reunion between us planned out in my head for so long that nothing, not even his mundane outfit, is going to let me down tonight. The rest of his appearance is far from boring. His hair is gelled nicely, his facial hair is trimmed to perfection, and his brown eyes have that little glow in them that I remember so fondly.

“Were there not many signups for this?” I ask. The last time I checked there weren’t, but these things never fill up right away. Usually, people wait until the last minute, until they’re sure they’re not going to have a date for the weekend, and then sign up.

“Yours is the only one that matters,” he says with a wink.

Ohhh... he’s being charming. I can already tell this evening is going to go well. I flash him a smile and touch his arm, just to make extra clear that I’m very much into him. “You flatter me. What’s your endgame here?”

His gaze does a long, slow perusal over my body. “I can’t give away all my secrets.”

I walk into the lobby of the place, my nose getting hit with a sort of fruity, yeasty scent. Glancing around the area, I notice that it’s empty. I thought maybe Tanner was exaggerating when he said he was wondering if anyone else was going to show up. But no, that was no exaggeration—there’s literally no one else here.

“How long are you going to wait for other people to show up?”

He checks his phone. “I’ll give it a few more minutes.”

“So how are you coping without your roommate?” I ask, since we have a bit of time while we wait for more people to show up.

“It’s been okay at our place. Dustin and I didn’t see much of one another during the week as it was, and now with Julie

in the picture, most of his spare time is spent with her. What about you? Are you missing your roommate?"

"Actually, yes," I say with a nod. "Not only do I miss Julie's cooking and baking, but I miss talking with her in person. The house is very empty without her."

"For what it's worth, Julie speaks very highly of you," he says with a smile. "She doesn't just refer to you as a roommate; she considers you a friend."

"That's sweet to hear. It took us some time to get to the point where we could call each other friends, but I definitely consider her one too."

Around us, a few people enter the lobby and Tanner peels off to greet them. A few minutes later, he finally comes to the conclusion that this is it for our group tonight. What a sad crowd. Only four other people show up besides Tanner and me. I guess I shouldn't be too mad about it because there are fewer distractions this way. But Tanner seems less than thrilled with the turnout tonight. In fact, the jubilant guy I saw when I walked in now has a scowl on his face.

He stands near me once more and leans close to my ear. "I swear, I don't know why I even bother to plan these things anymore. Do you have any idea how hard it is to come up with unique places to go to?" he whispers.

I lean in closer, bringing my face so close, it wouldn't take much to give him a peck on the cheek. "Maybe it's time to pass the torch and find someone else to take over. Besides, I don't think it's right for you to plan these events when you're not single." I know I'm coming on super strong here, but now's not the time to be timid. I am not letting him slip through my fingers again. I don't care how desperate or needy I look. He needs to know that he's the only one I'm interested in, and tonight is just the beginning for us.

Tanner's scowl smooths into a flat line, then that grin he was wearing earlier reappears as my words register in his mind. He gets it. He definitely gets it. "I guess you're right. It's definitely time for me to pass these duties on. I'd rather focus that attention on you."

Good boy. That's exactly what I want.

Finally, the tour guide arrives, and Tanner and I right ourselves and put a more respectable distance between us. Now that I've made myself clear and Tanner has shown me he's on board, I don't have to spend the whole evening sending out signals to show my intent.

Our tour around the facility begins with a discussion of the ingredients that go into making beer. Then we get to see the brewing and fermentation process, while our enthusiastic tour guide educates our small little group on the different types of beer they make here and how they differ from each other. We even get to sample the varieties.

I hope there's not a quiz at the end of all this because other than sampling the beer, I'm not paying attention to any of it. I'm more concerned with the looks Tanner keeps giving me and the little touches on my arms and shoulders throughout this tour.

The tour concludes with the guide sending us to the expansive wooden bar so we can place an order. I order a hazy IPA with grapefruit undertones and Tanner orders an orange pale ale. Once we receive our order, Tanner glances over at the other four members of our group who have already paired off and found their own respective seats.

"Want to stay in here or go outside and get some food?" he asks.

"Let's go outside." Not that I think it'll be more private out there, but at least we can talk more openly than I feel we can in here. The other members of the group are such a quiet bunch, I feel like everything Tanner and I say to one another will be broadcast for all to hear.

Tanner holds the door open for me and we make our way over to the food truck that's parked in the corner of the lot. There are a few round tables placed in the parking lot, and one of them is already taken by a group of three twenty-something women who eyeball Tanner as we approach.

Back off, ladies. This one is mine.

A few other small groups are clustered around in the parking lot, but they look to be just out here to drink a few beers and socialize. We position ourselves at one of the empty tables and place our beers down, essentially staking our claim to it.

Tanner leans in, his arm brushing against mine. “What can I get for you to eat?”

That’s a hard one for me to answer. This particular food truck is serving sandwiches, which could be a recipe for disaster. I need to find something that isn’t going to give me onion breath, also something that’s not going to end up on my blouse, and something that’s not going to get in my teeth. So I go for the neatest thing I can think of. “I’ll just have their smoked turkey sandwich, please.”

He nods and leaves me to sip my beer. While I’m standing there, the three women glance over at me, and shoot me a look. I know what they’re thinking. They’re wondering why Tanner is with me when he could be with someone like any one of them. It’s fine. Let them think they’re better than me. I know they’re not competition and as soon as they leave here, I’m sure they’ll forget all about Tanner.

The three women giggle together and send one of their own to the line right behind where Tanner is standing. The brave volunteer looks back at the other two in her group and they’re silently cheering her on. I’m watching all of this from my table to the right of them. The volunteer places her hand on Tanner’s shoulder to get his attention. He turns back toward her with a don’t-touch-me look on his face, which gives me an immense sense of satisfaction. The woman giggles and apologizes, then touches his arm again. She says something to him which I can’t hear. If he does give an answer, it’s not much of one because he’s already turned back toward the food truck.

The desperation of these women is appalling. I’ve flirted with plenty of men before, I’m no saint there, but I’ve never flirted with anyone when it’s very clear they’re with someone else.

Tanner is next in line and steps up to place his order. The woman sidles up next to him, so close that their arms are practically touching. Tanner looks back at me and nods toward the food truck. I know what he's asking me to do.

I leave our beers at the table and head over to where Tanner is standing. It's a rescue mission now, and I have to save him from this awful woman.

He looks relieved to see me. "Hey, thanks for coming over here to give me a hand with this food," he says, handing me my sandwich. He doesn't say anything else but rolls his eyes and I know we're thinking the same thing—that woman is a real piece of work.

I flash a smirk at the woman who's now to the left of us, waiting on her food to be ready. "No problem. I'm happy to help." I make sure to get super close to Tanner, just because I can.

The woman scowls in response. If she were bold enough to say anything, she'd probably give me the old "fuck you" right about now. At least we're on the same page there since I'd love to say it right back to her.

When we get back to our table, Tanner dives right into his sandwich while I figure out how to attack mine without getting it all over my face. This sandwich is pretty substantial and princess bites aren't an option. It's too tall for that. In the end, I just go for it and take a bite, makeup be damned. That's what napkins are for.

"Do you have any idea what time Julie and Dustin are supposed to be getting back tomorrow?" he asks me in between bites. "I haven't really talked to Dustin much since they left Texas."

"I talked to Julie for a little bit this morning and she said they should get back early evening. But it all depends on traffic and the length of any stops they make. I plan on having dinner ready for the two of them though, and I've told her this, so she knows not to get dinner along the way. You're welcome to come over and join us if you want."

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that. I’m supposed to meet up with my older brother tomorrow afternoon to help him with a few things around his house, so unless that runs over for some reason, I’ll be able to make it.”

“Well, I’m making burrito bowls for dinner, in case that sways you any,” I say, as though my burrito bowls are some world-renowned recipe. Really, it’s one of the only things I can make reasonably well.

He flashes me a smile. “You make a very convincing argument for me to come. I’ll see what I can do.”

We finish our sandwiches, and Tanner and I both look at each other. I hope he’s thinking the same as me—I’m not ready for us to part ways yet.

As if reading my mind, he says, “Want to walk around for a bit?”

I don’t think the smile on my face could be any bigger. “That sounds great.”

Tanner takes our garbage over to the trash can, and when he returns to me, I link my arm through his. The three women are still chatting at their table, and the one who was in line narrows her eyes as she takes in my closeness to him.

She shouldn’t be upset since she never had a chance anyway. Maybe next time she’ll learn not to go after someone who isn’t single.

“So how are things at Mirrormont Media?” Tanner asks me while we’re walking down the sidewalk.

The corner of my lip lifts in a grin. “You remembered.” I’m impressed. It was a conversation we had what seems like forever ago when we first met each other at Discovery Park. I think we covered most everything that day because he was so easy to talk to, and we got along so well.

He returns my grin with one of his own. “I remembered. There’s not much about that day I’ve forgotten.”

Aww...could he be any sweeter? In fact, I’m so consumed with how nice he’s being, I can almost forget about Brett

starting on Monday. Of course, I'm not going to bring up Brett in front of Tanner. That would just lead to a lot of weirdness between us. I know the hell Julie went through when she found out Dustin's ex was still working with him, and I don't want Tanner to get the wrong idea.

Instead, I take the safe option and pray that my face doesn't spoil it for me. "Everything is great at work. Couldn't be better. The Mariners are making it pretty easy for me right now since they're on a winning streak. And bonus, things are looking good for the Wild Card race. It's a lot easier for me to write about the good parts when they're doing well instead of when they're losing. Then, I have to sift through a lot of bad parts to find the good points to write about."

"Do you ever write anything bad about them?"

"Sometimes. And there are a few people in my group who tend to point out a lot of the things the Mariners are doing wrong, but my articles aren't usually like that. Mine are more like, if so-and-so had a bad outing, instead of focusing on how many balls and walks he had, I focus more on how many strikes he got compared to the last outing. And even if that number isn't higher, there are other things I can point out to maybe explain why it didn't go so well. It's baseball, you know? No day is ever the same. But most of the time, when someone reads one of my articles, I want them to walk away with a positive outlook instead of a negative one."

"That makes sense," he says with a nod. "And I don't blame you for taking that approach. Do you have to watch every single game?"

"No, I don't watch every game. I love watching baseball and try to watch as many games as I can as a fan, but for my work, we rotate within the group which games we watch. The best ones are when the games are on during the day. Then I basically get paid to watch baseball."

Tanner's lips turn up in a grin. "I'm jealous. The tech company I work for isn't nearly as exciting. I mean, sure, we make some cool things and I've been involved in a lot of neat projects, but your job sounds a lot more fun."

As we walk down the street, a little shop with a range of very eclectic items on display in the front window catches my eye. “Mind if we go in?” The items are so weird, I have to check it out.

Tanner reaches up to grab the door handle and opens it for me. “After you,” he says, gesturing me inside.

The place is quiet, except for a man behind the counter who’s humming to himself. The man greets us, and when he asks if he can help us find anything, we politely decline. Tanner and I walk around the perimeter of the store, and I can’t make heads or tails of this place. There’s no cohesiveness to the items in here, and I have no idea what the purpose of this place is. Is it a furniture store? An antique store? A store for weirdos? I think all would apply.

There are some modern items along with some antique ones, so not totally an antique store. But the antiques are things that maybe you’d point to and laugh at because they’re so bizarre. Then you’d think to yourself, *who would buy this?* There’s a creepy painted family portrait, some kind of artistic display of pieces of fabric, a mannequin’s hand that’s been placed on a pedestal (I wish I was kidding), along with a bunch of other random things. It’s like the shop owner took all the discards from the various stores around and placed them artfully in this space hoping they’d sell. And since we’re the only people in this store, I have to wonder how that’s going for them.

When we reach a taxidermied rooster, Tanner leans in close and gets right near my ear. “I think we should probably leave before something happens to us.” He’s joking...sort of.

“I think you’re right,” I whisper back. “Don’t make any sudden movements, otherwise we might not make it out of here alive. Just act natural.”

We plaster smiles on our faces and make a beeline toward the door. The employee bids us farewell, and when we make it back out on the street, we both give an exaggerated sigh of relief. Tanner bursts out laughing first, and I can’t keep my giggles held in any longer.

“What the hell was that place?” he asks.

“I still can’t make sense of it. And maybe that’s exactly what it’s supposed to be—a place that doesn’t make sense.”

“Remind me never to go in there again.” Tanner looks down the sidewalk, away from the brewery, then back toward it. “Have you had enough walking, or do you still want to keep going?”

“I think we should probably call it quits for this evening. I don’t think anything else will top that store.”

“Better quit while we’re ahead, right?”

“Right.”

When we get back to my car, Tanner hesitates before saying anything. He’s doing this thing where he’s kind of pulling at the back of his neck, stuffing his hands in his pockets, and anything else to keep himself from fidgeting. I hope all this hesitation means he’s going to kiss me because I’m more than ready for it.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. I hope you had a good time.” he says with a little grin on his lips.

I smile back at him. “I think you know I enjoyed it.”

“So I’ll see you tomorrow, maybe?”

“I’d like that. Text me when you figure out your plans.”

“I’ll do that.” Tanner gets quiet and leans in toward my lips. I help him out by leaning forward, closing some of the distance between us. His hand gently cups my face, and he hesitates, building the tension between us. Just when I think he’s never going to get to it, his lips finally meet mine.

And it’s...it’s...not great.

I expected fireworks. I expected to feel this kiss all over my body. I expected it to give me chills. But all that’s coming to mind right now is a pair of floppy fish lips.

That’s right.

That's exactly what my brain has decided is good imagery for the kiss I'm sharing with Tanner. I plead with my mind to stop making me think of fish lips, but it's no use. The way he's kissing me is just...ugh. I pull away and before I know it, Tanner's face morphs into a full-blown fish face.

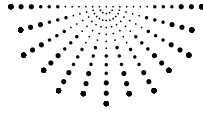
Why? Why does my brain have to do this to me right now? All this time I've been planning and thinking about this moment, and it's going straight down the toilet.

And I know I shouldn't be thinking this, but Brett never kissed me like that. Brett's lips were both firm and gentle at the same time. Sometimes he'd kiss me with such ferocity, it'd make my knees go weak. Seriously. And other times, he'd brush tender, featherlight kisses across my lips, my cheeks, and because I can't help my mind from going there, the inside of my thighs.

This is awful. Just awful.

But I can't let it show that his kiss didn't do it for me, so I give him one last peck. "Thanks again for tonight. I had a good time," I say with a smile that I hope reads as genuine. Before he can sneak another kiss, I get in my car and close the door.

CHAPTER FIVE



I walk around the house, making sure everything is in place for Julie's arrival in about an hour. All her clothes that I borrowed while she was gone have been washed and replaced. I vacuumed, dusted around the house, cleaned my bathroom in case someone needs to use it tonight, made sure the counters in the kitchen were wiped down, and all the dishes have been put away.

Between going to the store this morning, cleaning all afternoon, and now the meal that I have to whip together, I'm tired. Very tired. But I can't take time to relax because I want to have dinner ready for when they arrive.

While I was at the store, I even picked up a small bouquet of flowers and placed them in a vase on the table. I don't know why I'm going through this much trouble, and to be honest, I'm not even sure Julie would go through all of this for me, but I really miss having my friend around.

The peal of the timer I had going in the kitchen interrupts the silence, and I head in there to check on what I have in the oven. I grab the hot pads off the counter and after I open the oven door, I test the cake for doneness. The toothpick comes out clean, so I take the cake out and set it on the counter to cool.

Yes, I baked.

And I didn't even use one of Julie's recipes. Since I was making burrito bowls, I wanted to do a Mexican-themed dessert. I wasn't about to make churros, so I settled on a tres

leches cake. I found this particular recipe on the Internet, and it had good reviews, so I decided to go for it. A few steps into the recipe, I was cursing myself for not selecting something easier because I lost so many eggs while trying to separate the yolks from the whites. So many. But I carried on and through some miracle, ended up with a cake.

I just hope it tastes great.

While the cake cools, I get everything ready for the burrito bowls, which doesn't take much effort since I've done it so many times. By the time I'm finished with that, the cake has cooled off enough for me to pour the sweet milk mixture over it. Then I place the whole thing in the fridge.

A short while later, there's a knock on the front door. But the person on the other side doesn't wait for me to answer—and she doesn't have to. She lives here.

“Oh, my gosh! You made it! It's so good to see you!” I say, rushing up to hug her.

Julie is wearing a pair of jeans which accentuate her curvy figure, and a T-shirt with an outline of the state of Texas on it. She looks happy—really happy. And tan. I glance down at my own skin and realize I probably look like a ghost compared to her. Her blond hair looks brighter, and her face has a certain glow to it that wasn't there before.

I love seeing her this way. Julie hasn't always had the easiest time here in Seattle, but she looks refreshed, and I hope this vibrant energy of hers continues.

“It's good to see you too,” she says, releasing me from our hug. “It smells good in here. What did you make?”

“Burrito bowls. And there's a surprise in the fridge for you for dessert,” I say with a grin.

Her eyes widen. “You made dessert too? How did it go?”

I shrug. “It went okay. Only a few cuss words were uttered.”

The front door opens wider, and Dustin comes in with Julie's suitcase in hand. He sets it down on the floor and

smiles at me. “Hey, Fern. It’s good to see you again.” Dustin’s skin looks a touch darker too, even though he was never fair skinned.

“It’s good to see you too,” I reply.

“Want me to put this back in your bedroom?” Dustin asks Julie.

“Sure. Fern and I will follow you back there. We have some things we need to talk about,” she says.

A look passes between the two of them that I can’t quite make out. Dustin’s eyebrows raise a bit, and Julie shakes her head once. I may not be the brightest crayon in the box, but I can tell they’re keeping something from me.

I follow the two of them back to Julie’s bedroom, and after Dustin sets her suitcase down on her bed, she starts to go through her things.

“If you’re hungry, I put out some tortilla chips and salsa in the kitchen,” I say, wanting Julie alone so we can discuss whatever is on her mind.

“I’ll leave you two to it then,” he says, then exits the room.

“How was your trip?” I ask.

Julie stops rummaging through her suitcase and turns toward me. “No,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m not here to talk about my trip. Tell me everything. I haven’t spoken to you since yesterday, and I’m dying to know how things went with Tanner.”

I hesitate, not wanting to think about The Kiss. “You really want to know?”

Her nose wrinkles. “Was it bad?”

“No, it wasn’t bad. Things were going great...until he kissed me.”

“Uh, oh. What happened there?” she asks, her lips turning down into a frown.

“I don’t know!” I say, throwing my hands up. “Everything was all set up to be amazing. We had great chemistry, and our

conversation came easily. He felt like someone I'd known forever. Then we kissed, and it was like kissing a pair of floppy fish lips. Which doesn't make any sense, I know. But when he kissed me, bam! Floppy fish lips came to mind."

"Floppy fish lips? Gross. That doesn't sound pleasant at all," she says with a grimace.

I let out a sigh. "It wasn't."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I say with a shrug. "I think my problem was I had that kiss so hyped up in my mind, it had to be knock-me-off-my-feet amazing in order for me to be satisfied."

"Is he coming over tonight?"

I nod. "I texted him earlier this afternoon, and he said he could make it. So he should be here soon."

"Well, then maybe tonight will be better," she says, which catches me off guard. Normally, I'm the optimistic one.

"I hope so. If not, I don't know what I'll do."

"Don't give up on him yet. Maybe he was just nervous yesterday, and maybe he thinks the same as you—that his kiss wasn't the best. I'm sure he'll make it up to you tonight."

"Yeah," I say, because there's no point in arguing even though I doubt that's the case. From the expression on Tanner's face after he pulled away from our kiss, he seemed pretty sure of himself.

"Before you go and think too much about kissing Tanner, I have something for you. It's not much, because I couldn't figure out what to get you, but when I saw this, I couldn't resist."

My mind conjures up a few different ideas for what it could be. Maybe it's a giant coffee mug because everything really is bigger in Texas. Maybe it's a cookbook chock full of recipes from Texas, because she knows I need all the help I can get in that department. Or maybe it's some kind of food item that's unique to Texas.

But it's none of those things.

"Again, it's not much, but after I made such a fuss about this, I had to get you one of your own," she says, pulling a stuffed monkey out of her suitcase.

"Is this like the one you saw at the zoo?" I ask as she hands it over to me. When I check the tag on it, it says it's a golden lion tamarin.

I've never been one for stuffed animals. Growing up, my mother hated them because she said they were nothing but dust collectors. But this little monkey is the cutest thing I've ever seen.

"That's the one. Do you like it?" she asks, looking unsure of herself. "I'm sorry I didn't get you something better."

I shake my head. "I don't need anything better. This is perfect. And I know exactly where I'm going to put it."

"Why don't you go and find a home for it while I head to the kitchen to see if Dustin has eaten all the chips by now," she says.

I leave her bedroom and head to my own to put the monkey in the perfect spot, right on top of my dresser. As I'm approaching the front of the house, there's a knock on the door. This time, I actually have to answer it.

Tanner is on the other side wearing a pair of jeans, a pale blue polo shirt, and a pair of white sneakers. I'm not going to lie—he looks good. And I definitely appreciate that my mind isn't turning his face into that of a fish right now.

"Hey there. Glad you could make it," I say with a smile.

Tanner flashes me a grin, and it's just now that I notice the dimple on his cheek. How did I miss such an adorable feature? That definitely earns him some bonus points. "Thanks for inviting me. I take it they made it back okay since Dustin's Jeep is parked on the street," he asks.

"Yeah, they're in the kitchen if you want to go in there."

Tanner steps over the threshold and hesitates in front of me. He leans in like he's going to kiss me, and I can't have

that happen this early in the evening. What if it's like last night's kiss? Then I'll spend the whole night fretting about it and dreading the goodbye kiss I know we'll have.

Oh, God. He's leaning in farther and getting so close to me. I either have to lock lips and deal with the consequences or find a way to get out of it that won't hurt his feelings. I lean away, very awkwardly, and pretend to fix my sock. Not the most casual of ways to avoid a kiss, but with a split-second notice, it was all I could come up with.

"I'm sorry," I say, pulling at the sock and rubbing it against my ankle. "There was something in my sock that was poking my ankle and it was really annoying. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he says with a smile.

Phew. Crisis averted...for now.

I tug his shirt sleeve to show I'm not averse to touching him. "Come on. Let's go into the kitchen and see what they're up to."

We enter the kitchen and Tanner greets Julie first with a quick hello, then he and Dustin greet each other with some sort of bro hug, back-slap type thing. Julie and I step back and leave them to it while we finish getting dinner ready.

Together, we lay the fixings for the burrito bowls out on the table, and everyone assembles their own bowl. Our dinner isn't a sit-down kind of thing, even though I envisioned it would be. We're all kind of standing around the table, talking and catching up while eating. It's not the neatest, and sitting down would be a lot easier, but I'm enjoying the casual feel of it all. It's perfect for a dinner between friends.

When we're done eating, I load the dishes in the dishwasher while Julie grabs the cake from the fridge as well as the heavy whipping cream for the topping. She sets the heavy whipping cream down on the counter. "Where's the bowl you're going to use for this?" she asks me.

"It's in the freezer along with the beaters for the hand mixer," I say smugly, as though this is something I do all the time. Her brows raise, and I know she's impressed that I

thought to chill the bowl and beaters. I wish I could take credit for it. It was in the recipe's instructions.

She takes the bowl and beaters out of the freezer and sets them on the counter alongside the cake. I wait for the pouring of the cream into the bowl and the whir of the beaters, but those sounds never come.

"Aren't you going to get started?" I ask.

Julie shakes her head. "No, you are. You started this cake, now you get to finish it." When I pull a worried look, she adds, "You've done the hard part already. This next step is fairly easy. Just don't whip it too much, otherwise you'll have butter."

Sounds easy enough, although this time there's an audience. Before, when I was making the cake, it was just me to watch the screw ups...and there were plenty.

"Do you need help with anything over there?" Tanner asks from across the room.

"No thanks. I think we're good here," I say, pouring the cream into the bowl. My gaze drifts toward Julie whose face has taken on a whole new look. Oh, no. She would have to go there, wouldn't she?

Julie's making a fish face by sucking her cheeks in, moving her lips, and darting her eyes around. It's exactly like the fish face my classmates and I used to do in elementary school. But she doesn't include the fins as part of her fish face, so at least Tanner shouldn't notice if he looked over here. Not that he'd know what she was doing anyway.

Keep it together. I can totally keep my composure while my friend is making an ass (or should I say fish) out of herself.

I lift the beaters, which are turned off, out of the bowl and flash them at her. "Death by beaters. Want to make that a thing? You could be the first if you keep this up. Could be painful." I place the beaters back in the bowl and turn them on.

Julie keeps quiet and continues with her fish face, except now she's added the fins. She added the damn fins. My face is twitching so hard because I'm trying to keep it together. *Deep*

breaths. Deep breaths. I'm about to burst, and in a last-ditch effort to regain my composure, I give her a nice elbow to the side which finally gets her to quit.

"I'm sorry. I had to," Julie finally says at last.

"No, you're not sorry," I say shaking my head. "Don't pretend like you are." I throw her the best grumpy face I can manage, but she knows I'm not serious.

"Are you sure you missed all of this?" she says, gesturing to her body.

"I'm having second thoughts," I say with a laugh.

Finally, I get the whipped cream topping on the cake and Julie makes herself useful by cutting everyone a piece. Everyone takes their first bite, and I wait to take mine, wanting to gauge the reaction. I see a lot of smiles, and no one has spit out their bite. I think it's safe to call this one a success.

"Good job with the cake, Fern," Julie says. "I give it two fish fins up."

I glare at her from my spot across the table. Tanner and Dustin both cock their heads to the side like they have no idea what's going on, and I hope they never do. "It's an inside joke," I say, hoping that'll be the end of her torment.

And it is. The rest of the evening passes without Julie doing anything more to embarrass me.

Dustin leaves first, and he and Julie say their goodbyes outside where I'm sure he'll give her a kiss that'll make the one I'm going to get from Tanner pale in comparison.

When Julie comes back in with a smile on her face, it pretty much confirms it. The two of them are so cute together, I can't even be mad about it. Julie finally found someone worthy of her love after going through the hell her good-for-nothing ex put her through.

It's now Tanner's and my turn to say our goodbyes, and I've got a knot in my stomach the size of Mt. Rainier. I don't know why I'm so nervous about it. It's just a kiss. I just don't want it to be as bad as last time. Julie gives me a look as we

pass through the door, and I know we're both thinking the same thing—hopefully it'll go well.

Tanner leads the way down the steps, and we stand together on the sidewalk. "Thanks for making dinner tonight," he says. "One of these days I'm going to have to get you over to my place so I can make you my famous chili mac."

I hope he doesn't mean soon. "Oh, ha ha. There's no rush. Plenty of time for that."

He leans in and this time, my mind doesn't immediately go to places I don't want it to—thank goodness. His lips brush against mine, and I can sense some hesitation on his end. I place my hand on the back of his head, pulling him closer to me.

This kiss will be great if I have any say in it.

He wraps his arms around my waist and deepens the kiss, then grazes my bottom lip with his tongue. I press myself closer to him, and he gives me one more deep kiss, then pulls away, planting little kisses to my lips before righting himself.

That wasn't half bad. I mean, don't get me wrong, it wasn't as great as some of the kisses I've had. But it wasn't like last time, so I'm calling it a win. It gives me hope that maybe this thing with Tanner will work out after all.

"Thanks again for having me over. Let me know when you want to get together again," he says.

A grin spreads across my face. "I'll do that." We slowly split apart from one another, neither one of us wanting to close out the evening. I stay outside just long enough for Tanner to get in his car, then take that as my cue to head back inside. As soon as I enter, Julie's waiting for me at the door.

"So...how was it?" she asks.

"Better than last time," I say with a grin.

Her eyes brighten. "That's good. I'm so happy you got a decent kiss. And I want to apologize to you for tonight. When you mentioned Tanner and his fish lips, all I could imagine was Tanner's head as different kinds of fish. He started off as a

puffer fish, then morphed into a catfish, and last, became a blobfish.”

“A blobfish? I’ve never in my life heard of something like that.” She pulls out her phone to show me a picture which sends me into a fit of giggles. “That’s the ugliest fish I’ve ever seen.” It looks like a pink mass with a bulbous nose and a huge frowny face.

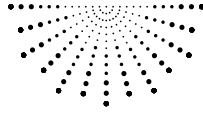
“I know. Apparently, that’s what it looks like when it gets pulled up from the water. Poor thing. Anyway, I’m sorry again for my antics tonight. I was being a brat.”

“It’s fine,” I say, waving her off. “I’ve missed your sense of humor around here. It was getting kind of boring being here by myself.”

“So things seem to be on the up and up with Tanner, which should help for when you go to work. Didn’t you say Brett starts tomorrow?”

“Oh, shit. I almost forgot.” My mind begins to head down the rabbit hole of dreadful thoughts, wondering what work tomorrow will look like, where Brett is going to sit, and if it’s going to be as weird as I think it is. But I quickly put a stop to all of it. I’m not going there tonight. “You know what? I’m not going to worry about it. I’ve got something better on my mind.”

CHAPTER SIX



“**H**ow’s it going this morning?” Julie asks as soon as I walk into the kitchen.

Today is a new day. It’s going to be okay. Things are not going to get weird because I won’t let them. I’ve been repeating this mantra to myself ever since I woke up to mentally prepare myself for work.

If only I could get myself to believe it.

Last night, it was easy to forget about Brett starting today because it seemed so far away. But this morning, it’s the only thing on my mind. “I’m fine,” I say with a smile that I hope is convincing.

Julie crosses her arms over her chest and stares, waiting for me to come out with the truth. It’s then that I notice the top she’s wearing. It’s new and it’s adorable. It’s a short-sleeved blouse that has a darling paisley pattern on it in pastel colors.

“Where did you get that top? I love it, and it looks cute on you.”

She looks down at her blouse and smooths it down, giving me enough time to escape her gaze. I head over to the coffee maker where I keep my back toward her and pour myself a cup.

“Oh, thanks. I bought it in Texas at some shop in downtown Dallas,” she says. “Actually, Dustin bought it for me since I’m still trying to pay off my debt.”

With my back still toward her, I grab the creamer out of the fridge and doctor my coffee the way I like it. I'm hoping by the time I turn around Julie will get the hint and move on to something else.

But I should know better. She's too smart to be fooled by one of my ruses. Her stare is relentless, and I know it won't ease up until I come out with the truth. "Okay, fine. I'm not fine. I've been trying to tell myself that things will be okay at work, but I know that's not true. Things are going to get weird and I'm just going to have to deal with it. I'm not going to quit my job, and I'm not going to transfer to another group, so there's really no way for me to avoid the discomfort."

"Well, at least you have someone else in your life now. I think it would be worse if you were single and then had to work alongside him."

I do nothing but nod. Yes, I have Tanner, but it's not exactly as if things are going swimmingly there. (No, that's not a fish pun.) I mean, the kiss last night *was* better, I'll give it that, but it didn't exactly knock my socks off. With Brett, nearly *all* of his kisses sent little shivers down my spine, and as soon as I see him, that's all I'm going to think about.

"I think once you get over the initial weirdness of today, things will get better. And I know Brett won't do anything to make you feel uncomfortable. He's not the type," she says, sounding completely sure of this.

No, Brett isn't the type to do that—but neither was my ex Kyle. And we all know how that turned out. "I'm just trying not to think about it too much," I say.

"Well, I'm sorry for bringing it up then. Before I leave, there's something else I bought for you. I found it while I was unpacking my suitcase last night." She holds up a giant Texas-shaped keychain. "Now you'll never lose your keys again," she says with a grin.

She places the keychain in my hand and it's huge, almost as big as my palm. My keys have a habit of sinking down to the depths of my purse, and it's always a struggle to pull them

out. Not with this thing. “Thank you. It’s a great gift, and perfect for me.”

“You’re welcome. But now I have to leave for work. I need to catch my boss before he leaves the office for a leadership seminar later this morning.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Anything bad?” It’s not like Julie to seek out her boss like that. Usually, she tries to avoid him at all costs.

She turns her face away and heads to the sink to rinse out her mug. “Nope. Nothing bad. Just a few things that need to be discussed.”

“It’s not Margot again, is it?”

I can just make out the corner of her lip twisting up in a grin, probably because she’s thinking back to the little tiff she had with her coworker. “No, it’s not Margot.” She grabs her lunch out of the fridge and turns toward me before heading out. “Try and have a good day. Feel free to text me if you need to vent.”

“I might take you up on that. See you later.”

Now that I’m alone, I try to think of a game plan for how things are going to go at the office. First of all, it’s imperative that Brett not sit in the open spot next to me. If I can get him to sit at the far end of the table, away from me, maybe it won’t be so bad. I’ve already got Lindsay on one side of me, and she’s distracting enough as it is. To ensure that the open seat doesn’t get taken, I’ll wear a jacket and take my ridiculously large handbag today. I’ll drape the jacket over the chair and put the handbag on the seat, so it’ll look like someone sits there. Brett won’t know any better.

I head back to my bedroom, taking my coffee with me to make sure my headphones are charged for the day. Headphones are pretty much the universal sign to be left alone, so as long as I have those on, I can just pretend he doesn’t exist.

As I sip my coffee, my outlook on this day improves drastically. I’m filled with hope that this might actually work.

When I get to work, I'm the first to arrive, which isn't unusual. I usually like to arrive before everyone else because there are fewer distractions that way. This way, by the time Lindsay arrives, I can already look like I'm super busy on a project so she'll leave me alone. Once, I made the mistake of getting here right as Lindsay arrived, and she acted like we'd been best friends forever and wouldn't stop talking to me. I'm serious. The whole day she talked to me about the shopping she'd done the night before, her most recent date with Mitchell, what she'd eaten for breakfast, what she was planning to have for lunch... All. Day. Long.

Never again.

At around eight thirty, Lindsay arrives, followed by Kevin, then Carrie, then Blake, and the rest of my group. It's not until close to nine that Brett shows up at our group's table. Dammit. When we were dating, I only saw him in some kind of work attire once. He looked delicious then, and he looks delicious now in his dress slacks and mint green button-down shirt. This might just be the hottest he's ever looked—because of course it would have to be this way. *Just ignore it.* Reed is also here, standing right next to Brett, talking to him about where he should sit.

There are people within the company that Reed could use to show Brett around and iron out first-day things, but Reed likes to do this with all new hires because he wants them to feel like he's an approachable person.

I remove my headphones so as not to be rude to my boss, then Reed introduces each one of us in turn. I glance up from my screen when Reed says my name, give a half-hearted smile, and pray that's the end of it. In his defense, Brett looks about as uncomfortable as I feel. Brett touches the back of the chair all the way at the end of the table, but then Reed ushers him farther down the table...right next to me.

“Here, Brett,” Reed says, pulling out the chair beside me. “You can sit next to Fern. She's been in this group the longest and knows the most out of everyone at this table. If you can't find something, or have issues with anything at all, just ask her. You don't mind, do you, Fern?”

“Not at all,” I say with a smile. “I’d be happy to help.” Reed vacates the area and I take my jacket and handbag off the chair so Brett can sit down.

After he sits, he leans over to me. “I’m sorry. I tried to sit at the end of the table. Maybe after I figure things out here, I can move.”

“It’s fine. Although, if you don’t mind, I’m going to put my headphones back on. If you need anything, just tap my arm,” I say, then put my headphones back on, shutting everything else out.

Close to lunchtime, Lee from the football group at Mirrormont comes right up between where Brett and I are sitting. This initially strikes me as odd, because Lee and I generally avoid each other at all costs. He and I had a little issue a few years back.

So, we have these office awards every year, right? Basically, it’s an award for the group that puts out the most interesting content, and it’s voted on by all the other employees and management. Football usually wins because football is more popular. You don’t get much for winning, except recognition, but you do get a plaque on the wall and a picture of your group gets posted next to the plaque. One year, my group finally won, and Lee was put in charge of taking our group’s picture. And on the day he took the picture, I happened to be out for my grandfather’s funeral. The bastard didn’t even wait on me to come back before taking the picture. He knew I was supposed to be in it and took it anyway, even though I was back the very next day. To make things worse, I wasn’t even listed in the caption as “not pictured.” It was like I didn’t even exist and when I confronted Lee, he just gave me a shrug and said it wasn’t his problem.

Don’t get me wrong—I love my job. I just don’t love all the people. In fact, save for a few assholes and bitches, the people are great here.

I look up from my screen, but Lee isn’t looking at me at all. He taps Brett on the shoulder. When Brett turns around,

the two of them start talking loudly in some kind of “dude” language.

“Hey, man. Glad to finally see you here.” Lee says to Brett. “When the staff memo went out last week, I couldn’t believe we’d be in the same workplace again. Welcome to Mirrormont.” Lee extends his hand for a handshake which Brett returns.

“I can’t believe I’m seeing you here either. When you left Speakman Media, you never said where you were going, so I’m just as surprised as you.”

Lee runs a hand through his slickly gelled dark hair. “So… what ended up driving you away from Speakman?”

The two of them continue to have a conversation about their old workplace when Marissa from podcasts comes over. Marissa should be in Lee’s group too, but they’re another casualty of Reed’s dating policy.

“Hey, is this the guy you were telling me about?” Marissa asks Lee.

“Yeah, this is Brett. We were good pals when we were at Speakman together.” Lee points toward the front of the office. “Marissa and I were getting ready to head out to lunch if you’d like to come along.”

What the actual fuck is going on here? I know workplaces aren’t supposed to have cliques—this isn’t high school. But our workplace totally does. Generally, I don’t let it bother me because I’ve never been interested in interacting with people who are the cliquey type. There are other people in this workplace I’d rather talk to.

But those bastards have never invited me out to lunch like that. I’ve been here for five years, and the only time Marissa has ever spoken to me was once when I was passing by her to get to the bathroom. She said hello to me, but it wasn’t a genuine hello. It was more like a *I’m just saying hi first so you won’t engage me in conversation* kind of hello. Brett has been here for all of what? A few hours? And he’s already well on his way to being Mr. Popular.

“Thanks for inviting me, but I think I’m going to stick around here today. There’s so much I have to learn yet. Maybe we’ll go out some other time,” Brett says.

“No problem. See you around,” Lee says, then walks off with Marissa on his arm.

Once they’re gone and out of earshot, Brett leans over to me and whispers, “That guy is such a dick. When he left Speakman, I was so happy to have him gone. I’m going to have to get really good at avoiding him.”

I can’t keep my smile held back any longer. “I can give you a few tips. I’ve been avoiding him for a couple of years now.”

Brett flashes me that mischievous grin I used to enjoy so much, which makes my stomach do a little flip-flop. I do my best to ignore it and celebrate the fact that he and I have something in common when it comes to Lee. I can’t let any sort of romantic feelings cloud my judgment here. I have Tanner, and that’s all that matters.

“Did you bring your lunch? Want to go get something to eat?” Brett asks, which makes Lindsay lean closer to me so she can overhear our conversation.

“I brought my lunch, thanks. I usually do, so it’s rare that I go out for lunch,” I say, shutting down any further attempts of him asking me out to lunch.

Brett stands up and looks down at me. “All right. I need to go out and get something then. Any recommendations?”

“I hear Hungry Bigfoot has some pretty good sandwiches.”

“With a name like that, how could you go wrong?” he says with a smile.

After Brett leaves, Lindsay leans over toward me. “I told you he likes you. He even asked you out to lunch.”

I suppose at this point, I should tell Lindsay that Brett and I used to date. But then I think she’d spend the whole time looking for little hints that the two of us still have feelings for

one another. And I think that would be worse than what she's doing now.

AT ROUGHLY FIVE in the evening, I hit "publish" on the article I'd been working on all day, a piece about all the accomplishments the first baseman has made during his decade with the team, and close everything down for the day. Normally, it doesn't take me all day to complete an article, but it does when I keep getting interrupted, like what happened today. It's not that Brett was annoying, I know he wasn't trying to be, but it's hard to write an article when I'm constantly losing my train of thought.

Brett looks up from his monitor when I stand. "You leaving for the day?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm all done. How are things going for you? Are you figuring everything out okay?" It's a genuine question. He may have interrupted me a lot today, but for some reason, I find myself hoping that he at least had a good day.

"I'm doing as well as I can. And thanks for answering all my questions today. I hope I didn't annoy you."

"No, you did fine. Don't stay too late though. No one else does," I say loud enough for Lindsay to hear. She's always coming in late and leaving early.

"See you tomorrow," he says, then returns his attention to his monitor.

When I get home, Julie is already there and she's in the kitchen. From the scent wafting through the house, she's already started on dinner. As if on cue, my stomach grumbles. After I change out of my clothes and into a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt, I head to the kitchen to grab a snack.

"Hey, there. How did it go? I didn't get any texts from you so I'm assuming it went okay?" she asks. Her back is toward me because she's furiously stirring something on the stove.

“It was decent. A little awkward at first, but after a while, I just treated him like any other coworker.” Well, not any coworker—any coworker that’s not on my shit list.

“That’s good to hear. Did you sense any lingering feelings on his part?”

Lingering feelings on his part? No. But were there some on mine? I’d be lying if I said no. “No, none on his part,” I say, and hope it gets left at that. I grab the bag of baby carrots out of the fridge and pop one in my mouth. While leaning over Julie’s shoulder, I ask, “What are you making?” It looks like some kind of creamy sauce, but I can’t tell what it’s supposed to be.

She shifts away from me. “Can you not crunch in my ear?” she says like she’s mad, but there’s a smile on her face. “I’m making macaroni and cheese. If you want to help, you can put together a salad for us.”

“Macaroni and cheese? For me? How did I get so lucky?” She doesn’t say anything and continues facing the stove. “Did you get to talk to your boss today like you wanted to?”

“I did.”

“And how did it go?”

“It went well. Thanks for asking.” I wait for her to elaborate. She turns around and meets my gaze. “Umm... about that salad?”

Dang. She must really be hungry since she’s ordering me around like that. “Sure. I’ll get right on it.”

After about fifteen minutes, the salad is done and Julie and I sit down to eat it while the macaroni and cheese keeps warm on the stove. When we finish our salads, Julie gets up and takes our plates to the sink. She then pulls two bowls from the cupboard to dish up our macaroni and cheese. I rise from my seat to help, but Julie waves me away. Soon, a bowl of cheesy, carb-loaded goodness is placed in front of me. The first bite tastes so rich and buttery, it nearly melts on my tongue.

I’m barely five bites in when Julie starts talking. “I want to apologize for being so cryptic with you earlier when you asked

about my conversation with my boss. There are some things you and I need to discuss, but I wanted to wait for the timing to be right.”

“What is it?” My mind spins with questions: Did she and Dustin get engaged? Did she find a new job? Are they moving in together?

Her gaze meets mine, and when it’s clear she has my full attention, she continues. “When Dustin and I were in Texas, we did more than just visit my mother. We also looked for a new place to live...together.”

I sit in silence, piecing together the little clues that have been dropped so far. There was that look she and Dustin gave each other yesterday, the secrecy this morning, and the talk with her boss today that she didn’t elaborate on. “You’re both moving to Texas?” I ask, because I have to be sure that’s what she meant.

She nods.

“And you’re going to be living together?” Tears rim her eyelids as she nods a second time. “Wow, Jules, that’s serious. He’s giving up his entire life in Washington for you.”

“You’re not mad?” She swipes her hand across her cheek, brushing away any stray tears that have fallen.

My brow creases. “Mad? Why would I be mad? I’ll miss you, but I want you to be happy. And I’ll still call you and text you all the time, so you won’t be totally rid of me.”

“I wouldn’t want to be rid of you,” she says with a grin.

“When are you leaving?”

“In a month. My meeting with my boss was to discuss my leaving the company.”

A month. “You mean I have to find someone I can stand to live with in a month?” I say, feigning shock. “I can’t replace you that quickly.”

I have one month to find a new roommate—and I have no idea where to start looking. I can’t go back to Caroline. She was my roommate for a long time until Julie came along. But I

could only tolerate Caroline at best, even though I dragged her to several singles events with me. Julie and I, though, we're friends, and I hope we continue to be friends even after she leaves.

"I'm sorry. I can't help that I'm so irreplaceable," she says, which gets a chuckle from me. "You know what that means though, right?" she says.

"What's that?"

"Tanner's going to have to find a roommate too."

"It's not going to be me," I say, probably more quickly than I should. No way is that happening. I'm nowhere near that level of commitment with him.

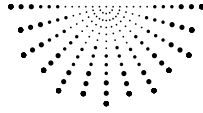
She smiles at my abrupt answer. "You know I was only kidding. Really though, who do you think you might want to room with?"

"I don't know," I say with a shrug. "I've still got some time to find someone, so I'm not worried about it yet. Enough about me though. Where are you guys going to be living and what kind of place did you two find?"

"We'll be living in a subdivision a little north of Dallas. We're renting a house because after renting a house here, I don't know that I could go back to apartment living. Dustin and I both agreed that it would be hard for us to go back to having shared walls."

"I'm so happy for the two of you. You're really lucky to have found him," I say, while in my mind, all I can think is how much I want the same thing for myself.

CHAPTER SEVEN



There's a sort of electric buzz in the air at work the next morning that has been intensifying throughout the day.

Normally, our group doesn't get too excited about most of the baseball games because with a season consisting of one hundred and sixty-two games, that requires a lot of enthusiasm.

But the Mariners are on quite the hot streak and tonight's game is huge. They're neck and neck with the White Sox for the last spot in the Wild Card race. Their records are tied, and the White Sox are currently playing an afternoon game and they're losing. We're all crossing our fingers for the White Sox to choke and not pull off some kind of comeback victory.

If the Sox lose, then everything hinges on tonight's Mariners' game. The Mariners play Oakland, who are a tough team this year, and if the Mariners win, they'll get to move on to the playoffs. If they lose, they'll be tied again with the White Sox, and the team to advance is selected based on their record within their league, so...let's just hope they win.

Our group has been talking about it all day long, and most everyone is going to the game tonight, including myself. Tanner texted me around lunchtime to ask if I wanted to go. Of course, I said yes.

I'm currently compiling an article chock full of videos and highlights of the Mariners' third baseman. He hit a career milestone last night—his two-thousandth hit—and I'm putting together a piece of the very best ones. It has taken me most of the day to do because there are so many good hits to choose

from, and I can't realistically put all two thousand in one article—even though I want to.

Brett, who's been putting together a video of some player interviews about what a spot in the Wild Card race would mean to them, leans over to me. "Are you going to the game tonight too?"

"I'll be there," I say. I don't mention who I'm going with because he doesn't need to know.

"Me too. What section are your seats in?"

"I honestly don't know. Someone else bought the tickets." Again, I don't say who bought the tickets. "I don't care where I'm sitting though. I'm just happy to have a chance to go. All the tickets for tonight's game are sold out." I know because I spent all last night looking for a pair. While Julie baked cookies in the kitchen, I was checking every single vendor I knew of and striking out each time. (Pun totally intended.)

Actually, I take that back. I did find a pair of tickets for nosebleed seats that some guy wanted two hundred dollars apiece. For a moment, I considered it. For an opportunity like tonight's game, I would've had no trouble forking over the cash. I was going to convince Julie to go with me, but right as my finger hovered over the "buy" button, the tickets sold out.

Brett nods. "Maybe I'll see you there."

Probably not. In a crowd of over forty-five thousand people, I highly doubt we'd run into one another. But I'm okay with letting him think we will. "Yeah, maybe you will."

That evening, as soon as I walk in the door, Julie directs me to the kitchen.

"Fern, come in here. I want to show you what I've been working on." Her hair's pulled up in a messy bun and she's wearing some lounge pants and a tank top. There are a few white streaks on her black tank top that look like she's tried to wipe something off.

I enter the kitchen and before me, there's a spread of sugar cookies decorated with white frosting and accented with red to mimic the stitching on a baseball. "How did you have time for

all this?” She baked the cookies last night, but all the decoration on the cookies seems like it would’ve taken a long time to do.

“I left work a bit early today. I finished up with one project and didn’t want to start another, so I left. Frank said it was okay. I mean, I’m leaving soon anyway, so it’s not like it makes much of a difference,” she says with a chuckle.

“These are so adorable. Mind if I have one?”

“Please, eat one...or a few. That’s why I made them. I know how important tonight’s game is to you, so I wanted to get a little positive mojo going.”

She’s right. It’s very important to me. It’s been close to twenty years since the last time the Mariners have made the playoffs. And they’ve never been to the World Series, which is a stat no team wants to have. I’ve been a fan all my life and have seen times where the Mariners have been so close to getting in. When they don’t, I always hold out hope that they’ll get in the next year.

I pick up one of her cookies and take a bite. It’s soft, sweet, and has just the right amount of crispness. “Thanks for making these. I hope it does the trick,” I say, taking another bite. “But if you don’t mind, I should probably get ready. Tanner will be here before I know it.” I pop the last of the cookie in my mouth and rinse off my fingers at the sink.

“What are you going to wear tonight?” she asks, then takes a bite of her own cookie. I can tell by the smug grin on her face that she knows she nailed it.

“I’m going to wear a jersey. I’m just not sure whose I’m going to wear.”

She raises a brow. “You have more than one?”

“Haven’t you ever looked in my closet? I have a bunch of them. But you bring up a good point—the jersey selection might take a while and I need to get started on it.”

I leave Julie in the kitchen and head to my bedroom to look through my closet. Over the years, I’ve acquired a lot of jerseys, but there are only ten or so I could choose from that

would fit me now. I leaf through them, looking at the name on the back and whether there's any negative connotation associated with that name, when finally, I see it. It's a jersey of one of the retired players who was quite the all-star in his day. When I turned twenty-one, my dad took me to a Mariners game and bought me this jersey and my first (legal) beer. The Mariners won that night, and that's exactly the kind of positive energy this evening needs.

I pair the jersey with some skinny jeans and, just because I'm feeling the need to be cute, tie my hair up with a Mariners-themed ribbon. I head to the bathroom to make sure my makeup is still holding up well and take a minute to brush my teeth. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I'm feeling pretty confident that tonight is going to go well.

When I get back to the front of the house, Julie is still in the kitchen, but now she's moved on to putting the cookies away in a storage container. She's being extra careful so as not to damage the icing.

"How do I look?" I ask, spinning around so she can see the ribbon in my hair.

She flashes me a smile. "Very cute. I like it, and the ribbon is definitely a nice touch. What time is he supposed to be here?"

Right at that moment, there's a knock on the door and both our heads turn toward the sound. "Now, I guess." I make my way to the front door and when I open it—

Holy shit.

To say I'm shocked doesn't even begin to cover what I'm feeling. I take a step back to fully grasp what's in front of me. I feel like David on that "David after Dentist" video. *Is this real life?*

Tanner is dressed in full-on Mariners-branded gear: pants, socks pulled all the way to his knees, a jersey, a long-sleeved shirt underneath, wristbands, and a headband. I could overlook all of those things, if he'd just left it at that.

What I can't overlook is the face paint. One side of Tanner's face is navy blue, and the other side is silver. He's also gone to the trouble of putting the Mariners "S" logo on his cheek as well. Even his hair is spray painted with the same navy blue and silver pattern. Maybe he thinks all this is really cool, but all it's doing is embarrassing the hell out of me.

"Oh, hey," I say with as much of a smile as I can manage—which isn't much. "Come on in for a second. I just need to grab a few things and then I'll be ready."

Julie steps in from the kitchen and stops short. Her eyes go wide and her gaze darts to Tanner, then to me, then back to Tanner. "Hey, Tanner. You look like you're really excited about the game tonight."

Tanner smiles, making his face paint crack. "It's a big game tonight. I wanted to make sure I looked the part."

Julie's mouth twitches like she wants to laugh, but somehow, she's able to keep her expression completely deadpan. "I'd say you pulled it off."

"Just give me a second," I say, then start walking toward the bedrooms.

"Sure. Don't take too long though. We need to get going if we're going to catch the bus on time," he says, which reminds me that I agreed to take public transportation to the game tonight to avoid the traffic nightmare around the ballpark. That means I'm going to have to sit next to him on the bus while everyone stares at the two of us. I don't think I can handle that.

I tug on Julie's arm and lead her back to my bedroom all the way at the back of the house. Once we're in my bedroom, I close the door and press my ear against it to make sure Tanner didn't get any ideas about following me back here. I don't hear anything so it appears as though he's still at the front of the house.

"What the hell is that all about?" I whisper to her. Sound carries in this house, so I don't talk too loudly. "He looks like a jackass. I mean, I know tonight's game is a big deal, but that's no reason to look like he does. Aren't we a little old for

face paint? Please tell me I'm not overreacting here," I say, throwing my hands up.

She shakes her head. "No, you're not overreacting. He looks ridiculous."

"I'm so upset, I'm at the point where I'd rather not go to the game at all. I can't be seen with him! What if I see one of my coworkers there? I'd never hear the end of it."

She pats me on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort me. "Just try to forget about him and think of it as you're only going with him for the chance to be at the game. You could always hang out by the bullpen where everyone crowds around to drink and socialize. Maybe he can find someone else to talk to and you can just enjoy the game."

I let out a sigh. "It's an idea, but I don't know that I can pull something like that off." I've never had to ditch somebody like that before. I don't even know how I'd do it. And besides, he's supposed to be my boyfriend.

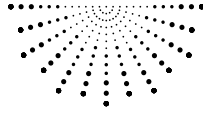
"It's one night," she says, holding my gaze. "If it gets unbearable, text me and I'll come and get you. You can say you started your period or something like that. Guys always freak out when it comes to periods. Then you can say you really want him to stay and enjoy the rest of the game."

I crack a half-hearted smile. "You're right. It's one night. I'll survive." I think.

With that renewed energy, I meet Tanner back at the front of the house. "Ready to go?" he asks.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Our trip to the bus stop is uneventful and we don't talk much. But as we wait for the bus, there's something I have to know. "Do you always dress like this for games?"

He nods. "For most games I attend."

"Even the face paint?" I ask, inwardly cringing while awaiting his response.

"Yeah, even the face paint. Why? Do you think it's too much?"

Yes. "Not at all. I admire your dedication. It must've taken you a long time to do all that."

"Not as long as you might think," he says, then launches into a speech about his gameday preparations.

When the bus arrives, he's still talking and we take two seats all the way toward the back. As I look around at all the others on the bus, I don't know what I was so worried about. We're far from the strangest people on here. I mean, there's a woman in a baby doll costume, so in all fairness, Tanner looks normal compared to that.

Once we reach the ballpark, we file out with the rest of the people on the bus, then wait in line to get our tickets scanned so we can enter the ballpark. There are a ton of people spilling out onto the streets, and everyone is talking excitedly about how tonight is going to be "our" night. The night we've all waited years for.

After we get our tickets scanned, we make our way to the main level where most of the people are congregating. In all the years I've been going to games, I can think of maybe one other time, the time I went to an Opening Day at home, where I've seen this many people. *Maybe I can get "lost" here...* I quickly shake off that thought and vow to make an honest effort to enjoy myself tonight. And as I look around, there are a few people who've gone to the trouble to go all-out like Tanner, so he doesn't stick out too much.

Tanner meets my gaze and points to a secluded area as far away from the crowd as we can get. We head that way while the crowd quickly fills in around us. "Where should we go first?" Tanner asks, leaning close so I can hear him over the din of the crowd.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

He shakes his head. "Not yet. We should get something though. What do you feel like?"

A real, genuine smile spreads across my face. "A hot dog. I don't think I've been to a Mariners game yet without eating one."

"Then I know just the place. Follow me."

The two of us walk over to the area by the bullpen which houses a small restaurant and a place to get drinks. We wait in line and when it's time to order, I order a standard hot dog while Tanner orders a burger. Tanner pays, which I think is more than generous since he's supplying the tickets. I'm sure in his mind this counts as a date, even though it doesn't feel that way to me.

After we get handed our order, Tanner asks, "Should we get garlic fries too?"

"Sure. Why not?" It's not as if I'll be kissing Tanner this evening with the amount of face paint he has on, so who cares if his breath reeks of garlic?

"All right. You take this stuff and find us a table. I'll wait in line for garlic fries."

I find a table for us to stand around and set our food down. I don't touch my hot dog yet because I can see the steam rolling off it. I know if I bite into it, I won't have any skin left on the roof of my mouth. As I'm waiting for it to cool down, I swear I hear someone say my name. I ignore it at first, but then I hear it again and turn toward where it's coming from. *Oh, no.*

"Hey, we did see each other here after all," Brett says, sporting the cutest smile. He's wearing a very tasteful jersey along with some jeans, and he's certainly not decked out in Mariners' gear like someone else I know.

"Yeah, who would've guessed in a crowd of all these people that we'd see each other?" I say with a chuckle. *Please leave before Tanner comes back.*

A woman comes up beside Brett and smiles at me. I stare at her a moment, feeling like I should know her. Finally, it comes to me. It's Ashley from the accounting department at work. A twinge of jealousy stabs me in the gut before I can stop it. Are she and Brett dating now? Of course, I know I have no reason to be jealous. I'm the one who ended things and Brett can—and should—date whomever he wants.

"Hey, Fern. It's good to see you here," Ashley says with a smile. She's wearing a simple Mariners T-shirt which accentuates her curves. Dammit. She looks adorable.

"It's good to see you too, Ashley. I almost didn't recognize you without your work clothes on."

"I thought a skirt wouldn't be very appropriate tonight," she says with a laugh. She leans over to Brett. "I'm going to go find Greg, if you don't mind. You can catch up with us when you're done. We'll be at our seats."

"Sounds good. I'll be there soon," he says to her.

"Who's Greg?"

"That's her boyfriend. He's in my weekend running group and he had someone back out of going to the game. He knows I like baseball, so he asked if I wanted to go."

Well, good. Now I don't have to see Ashley as a threat.

Ugh... I hate having these feelings. I gave Brett up for Tanner, so why can't I be happy with him?

"I finally got the garlic fries. Sorry it took me so long. The line was really backed out," Tanner says, approaching the table and setting the garlic fries down.

My gaze stays on Brett the whole time while he takes in Tanner's appearance. His eyes are practically bulging and his mouth gapes open. I'd say Brett is having the same reaction that I did when I first saw Tanner. Is it possible for the floor to open up and swallow me? I think that would be preferable to standing here right next to Tanner...in front of my ex.

"Wow," Brett says, staring at Tanner. "You must be quite the fan."

"Yep. A huge fan," Tanner replies, his chest puffing out with pride. I'm not lying about the chest puffing out—I could actually see it getting bigger.

"Tanner, this is Brett, one of my coworkers," I say, gesturing between the two of them. "Brett, this is Tanner, my..." I don't want to say it. I know what Brett is going to think, that I left him for *that*. And he would be right. I did leave him for Tanner and now I need to own it. "...my boyfriend."

Brett gives a nod so slight I almost missed it. "It's good to meet you," he says, sticking out his hand. Tanner takes his and shakes it. "I'll leave you two alone," he says, stepping away from the table. "I should probably find the rest of my group anyway."

"Nice meeting you," Tanner calls over his shoulder. Then he turns toward me. "He seemed nice."

"He is," I say wistfully. *Really nice.*

I pick up my hot dog and take a bite, my teeth breaking through the crisp exterior. There's just something about the ballpark atmosphere that makes a nothing-special hot dog taste better. Tanner takes a bite of his burger, a smudge of blue face paint coming off in the process. As we eat, Tanner tries to make small talk while all I can do is focus on how much face

paint is coming off as he eats. His burger bun gets blue and silver smudges on it from rubbing against his face, and he eats it like this is all perfectly normal. Now that I know he paints his face like this for every game he goes to, for him, it probably is.

Once I finish my hot dog, I eat a few of the garlic fries before I've had my fill. Tanner eats some of what's left, but there are still about half of them left on the plate when he pushes it away.

"Are you ready for a drink?" he asks.

I'm more than ready for something to take the edge off this evening. "I'd say it's time for a beer," I say with a grin.

"Beer it is. How about let's get it on the way to our seats. We should probably head that way since the game's about to begin."

"Sounds good to me."

ABOUT FOUR INNINGS IN, it's clear to me that beer wasn't the best choice—for Tanner. He polished off his first before we had even made it to our seats. Then he took a bathroom break and bought himself another. And now he's working on his third and becoming more belligerent with every sip. I don't think he has sat down once. He's too busy yelling at the umpires for their lousy calling or yelling at the Athletics for basically doing their jobs as baseball players. The Mariners are down four runs, and every time Tanner sees one of our players whiff and strike out, he launches into an angry string of cuss words.

I've already told him to stop. I've already told him to sit down. He won't listen to me. He told me to *just sit down and enjoy the game*. All I can do is slump down in my seat and pretend I don't hear him. I'm worried that someone is going to tell Tanner to sit his ass down and we'll have a fight on our hands.

All eyes are on him as he continues to make an ass out of himself. I pull out my phone, ready to text Julie, when there's some commotion coming from the edge of our row. Standing in the aisle is an older woman wearing quite an official-looking getup and a name badge. She motions toward Tanner.

I tap him and he looks down at me. "What is it? I'm trying to enjoy the game here," he snaps.

"I think they want to talk to you," I say, pointing to the woman on the steps.

Tanner heaves a big sigh, clearly thinking nothing of this interaction and heads that way. "I wonder what they want."

The usher motions for us to come toward her. We stand up in our seats and awkwardly try to exit the row while the people around us stand up and try to give us as much room as they can. Around us, the crowd cheers and I hear chants of "Finally!" and "Get that jackass out of here!"

The usher walks up the steps, leading us back to the main level, and we follow dutifully behind. I keep my gaze down to avoid the eyes of everyone around us, but curiosity gets the better of me. I glance up to confirm that yes, everyone is staring, and it just so happens that only a few rows behind our seats are Brett and the rest of his group. Could this night get any worse?

The usher is kind enough to take us to a secluded area where we can be spared any additional embarrassment, although when I look over at Tanner, he looks more annoyed than anything. "Your behavior tonight is unacceptable and I'm going to have to escort you out of the ballpark. And if you don't go willingly, I can get security to come and help me out," she says, placing a hand on her hip. She shoots us a look that tells me we definitely don't want to get security involved.

"I paid for these tickets! I want to watch the rest of the game," Tanner whines.

"Then you'll have to watch the rest of it from home." The usher turns her attention toward me. "Are you able to drive him home or do we need to call a cab for you two?"

“We took the bus, but I’ll make sure he gets home,” I say. Then I get an idea. I pull the usher aside and whisper even though Tanner isn’t paying one bit of attention to me. He’s too busy muttering about how unfair it is that we have to leave. “Do I also have to leave? Can I get him a ride home and come back to watch the rest of the game?”

She gives me a sly smile. “I think we can work something out, and if it were me, I’d do the same,” she says with a wink. I can’t help but smile back.

The usher stays with us all the way until we reach the gates and exit through them. She says a few words to the person at the gate, then leaves us. For a few seconds I think about how I can get Tanner home without having to leave the ballpark. I can’t put him on the bus by himself because I’m not sure he’s coherent enough to know where to get off. And even then, he drove to my house, so he’d have to find a way to get home from there. I’m not about to let him stay over to sleep it off either. I’ve had enough of him for one day.

I call Julie. “Ready to call it a night?” she says when she picks up.

“Not quite. I need you to either call Dustin or give him my number. He needs to pick up his roommate. Tanner had too much to drink and got kicked out.”

I hear her gasp on the other end. “No way. Are you serious?”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

“Text me exactly where you are and then give me a few to contact Dustin.”

“Okay,” I say with a slight wobble in my voice. I’ve never been so mortified in all my life. Sure, I’ve had my fair share of embarrassing moments while growing up, but never in front of so many people. Even though I can go back in and watch the rest of the game, I can’t go back to my seat. Brett will see me, not to mention the other thousands of people who will wonder what the heck happened to Tanner.

“Don’t worry, Fern. We’ll get it figured out,” Julie reassures me.

It takes Dustin about fifteen minutes to show up in his Jeep. With his flashers on, he parks on the street and quickly puts Tanner in the back, probably so he doesn’t try to do something stupid on the way home. “Having a good night yet, Fern?” Dustin jokes with me.

“I’m still waiting for my good night to start,” I say. Why can’t Tanner be normal, like Dustin? Why does he have to kiss weird and act like an idiot? How is it that Tanner seems miles apart from Dustin, yet the two are best friends?

“Don’t hold it against him,” he says with a sad smile. “Tonight doesn’t represent who Tanner really is.”

I’m trying not to hold it against him, but he’s making it really hard for me. Is what I want to say, but instead, all that comes out is, “I won’t.”

After Dustin leaves, I head back into the ballpark and stand on the main level to watch the rest of the game. It’s now the sixth inning and the score is four to two, with the Athletics still in control. The Mariners are batting and already have two outs. The third baseman is up to bat, and he swings on the first pitch, making contact. The ball sails out to center field where the fielder runs all the way back to the wall and catches it. As hard as that was to watch, I’m not worried yet because there’s still a lot of baseball to be played.

Two more innings pass and worry has settled in and taken root in the pit of my stomach. It’s not looking good for the Mariners. The Athletics tacked on an insurance run in the eighth and the least productive batters are up in the batting order. Some of the crowd is filing out, already guessing how this game is going to end.

But I’m not giving up hope yet.

The Athletics’ closer takes the mound in the bottom of the ninth. He gets rid of the first batter with ease, walks the second one, which gives the crowd some renewed energy for when the third batter steps in the batter’s box. But that energy quickly

diminishes when he strikes out. The next batter steps up to the plate and takes the first pitch, swings at the second and misses, then swings at the third and makes contact. The ball doesn't even leave the infield, resulting in a double play to end the inning.

Son of a bitch.

I'm blaming Tanner. This evening was doomed from the start. All my positive energy was negated by all his nonsense today.

With my shoulders slumped at the thought of not making the playoffs...again...I file out with the rest of the crowd and head toward the exits. As I'm walking, there's a tap on my shoulder and I turn my head toward it. It's Brett and he's looking at me, his eyes full of pity.

"What happened to your boyfriend?" he asks. At least we're getting this question out of the way now instead of him asking me tomorrow at work. Once this night ends, I'd like to forget it completely.

"He got kicked out. I called his roommate to come and get him."

"How are you going to get home? Do you need a ride?"

"We took the bus here, so that's how I'll get home."

His brow creases. "It's late, and I don't feel comfortable with you being on the bus alone."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. It's not that far to go."

"I'd rather you ride home with me," he says. I open my mouth to argue, but Brett shakes his head. "I won't have it any other way."

"What about the people you came with?" I say, glancing around. I don't see Ashley anywhere.

"We drove separately because they were going back to her place after the game, and she lives all the way in Mountlake Terrace. I didn't want to make them go out of their way to drop me off."

“Then I guess you’re taking me home then,” I say with a smile.

The ride home with Brett isn’t even awkward because he avoids all mention of Tanner. Maybe he knows I’d rather not relive it. When he pulls up to the curb beside my house, I place my hand on the door handle. “Thanks for taking me home. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. I’m happy to do it. Sorry the Mariners lost today.”

“Typical Mariners,” I say with a shrug.

He chuckles. “Have a good rest of your evening.”

Julie is standing right on the other side of the door when I enter. She doesn’t say anything when she sees my face—she doesn’t have to. All she does is hold out her arms. I lean in and let her wrap her arms around me in a hug.

“I was getting ready to call you because I hadn’t heard from you,” she says when she releases me. “How on earth did you get home? Please tell me you didn’t take the bus.”

“No, Brett drove me home.”

Her brows shoot up. “What? Did you call him to come and get you?”

“He was at the game already. And he saw everything! Julie, it was so embarrassing!”

She takes me by the hand and leads me into the kitchen where she starts the electric kettle. Then she pulls two mugs down from the cupboard and places two herbal teabags in the mugs. When the kettle clicks off, she pours the hot water over the teabags.

With mugs in hand, she comes back to the table and places one in front of me. “Tell me everything.”

And that’s exactly what I do. While we sip our tea, she hears everything, even the parts I’d rather not mention again.

Her face pulls into a frown. “That sucks. I’m sorry your night was so bad. And I’m sorry the Mariners lost. What are

you going to do about Tanner?”

“Nothing. I’m not going to contact him. Instead, I’m going to give him the chance to apologize.” It’s the only thing I can do really. I’m not going to dump him so soon because I’ve barely given him a chance. But it’s hard for me to give him a chance when Brett is still very much on my mind. And it’s even harder to forget about Brett when I have to see him all the time now.

Julie drains the last of her mug and waits for me to do the same with mine. Then she takes them to the sink, rinses them out, and sticks them in the dishwasher.

“Try to forget this evening ever happened. I know it’s hard, but it’s only one night. Don’t let it get in the way of how you feel about Tanner,” she says.

“But that’s just it. Right now, I don’t feel anything about Tanner. All those romantic feelings I might’ve had got squashed tonight.”

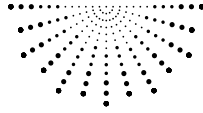
She pats me on the shoulder as she passes by me. “I think you need to sleep this one off and see how you feel in the morning.” She stands in the doorway to the kitchen. “Are you okay? Do you need me to stay up with you some more?”

I flash her a smile. “I’m fine. Thanks for waiting up for me. I won’t be too far behind.”

She hesitates, probably trying to figure out if I’m really okay or if I’m going to burst into tears the moment she leaves. She must decide that I’m fine because she eventually says, “Well...good night then.”

“Good night.”

CHAPTER NINE



The next morning, I'm not feeling very refreshed, but I do have an optimistic attitude. Today is a new day and it's going to be great.

Except later, when I'm at work, it's clear to me that it's not going to be great. When the rest of my group files in for the day, all anyone wants to talk about is Tanner—and the fact that I could go out with a guy like that. Apparently, much to my dismay, he made it on the jumbotron last night so the whole entire stadium saw him. The only other person besides me that's not amused by this topic of discussion is Brett.

When Lindsay chimes in for the fifteenth time today about whether or not she wants to dye her hair navy and silver like Tanner's, Brett leans over and says, "Okay, Lindsay, we get it. I'm sure you've never done anything embarrassing ever in your life. Want me to tell everyone what I saw you doing in the supply closet yesterday?"

I glance over at him, and his face gives nothing away. But Lindsay's face says it all. Whatever she did yesterday must've been pretty bad because her cheeks are as red as beets.

I mouth "thank you" to Brett and he throws me a wink in response.

Later that day, I wait until the rest of our group leaves before saying something to Brett. "Thanks for sticking up for me today. I really appreciate it."

He waves me off. "It's not a problem. They never should've brought it up in the first place. I hated seeing them

treat you like that.” His gaze holds mine and his eyes show a hint of concern. “Are you okay though?”

Warmth blooms in my chest. It’s good to know he still cares about me even though I broke up with him. “My pride might be a little wounded, but I’m fine.” A beat passes between us, then a question pops in my head. “So what did Lindsay do in the supply closet?”

He flashes a grin. “I honestly don’t know. I saw her coming out of there yesterday and she looked surprised to see someone walking by at that exact moment. I decided to just run with it, you know? Do you know what she might’ve been doing in there?”

“Maybe she was in there with Mitchell, her boyfriend. Did you see anyone else come out of there?”

“No, but I didn’t stick around or open the door to look inside either. He could’ve come out a minute or two later.”

“Oh, well. I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m sure she’ll keep her mouth shut now that she thinks you’ve got leverage on her.” I stand up and grab my handbag and jacket from off of my chair. “I should probably get going. It’s been a long day.”

He nods. “Understood. What are your plans for the evening?”

“I’m going over to my parents’ house for dinner.”

A smile spreads across his face. “Nice. What’s your mom making for dinner tonight.”

“Chicken and dumplings. Want to come over?” Shit. Why did I just say that? I don’t want him to come. My mom already doesn’t let me forget him enough as it is. If he walked through her door again, it would just add more fuel to her fire and she’d for sure try to get me back with him.

Brett does his best to hold back his grin. “No, thanks. I have plans tonight.” I don’t bother to ask what kind of plans they are. One, because the jealous side of me really shouldn’t know, and two, because it’s none of my concern. “Tell your mother I said hello.”

I certainly won't because I'd never hear the end of it. "I'll make sure to tell her. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he echoes.

As I walk away, I can almost feel his gaze still on me. I don't dare turn around because that would make it seem like I want to look at him too. And I don't. Of course, I don't.

When I make it back to the house, Julie is home already and she's helping herself to a snack of some grapes.

"How did things go today? Did Brett act strange around you?" she asks, leaning against the kitchen counter. She's already changed for the evening into her usual around-the-house clothes.

"No, he was great today. The rest of my coworkers were a bunch of assholes though. I guess Tanner made it on the jumbotron last night, so all the people in my group saw the whole thing. Everyone kept making jokes all day long about it, until Brett stood up for me."

"That was sweet of him. Has Tanner apologized yet?"

"No, he hasn't. And to be honest, I haven't been waiting on him to apologize because I was too busy trying to save face at work—because of him," I say, my voice carrying an edge to it.

Her lips turn down into a frown. "I'm sorry you had to deal with so much shit at work."

"Yeah, and now I have to go over to my parents' house where I'm sure my mom will grill me about Brett. She knows I work with him now. And I'm almost positive she'll question me about Tanner and whether or not I'm ready to go back to Brett yet."

"Don't tell your mom anything about last night then," she says with a laugh.

"I wouldn't dare mention it."

As I'm getting ready to go over to my parents', there's a knock on the front door. Julie yells from the front of the house, "I'll get it!"

Is it Tanner? Is he coming to apologize for last night? If so, he better have one hell of an apology cooked up because I endured a lot of shit because of him.

Moments later, Julie taps on my door. “Fern, are you decent? Something came for you. It’s on the kitchen table.”

Something? For *me*? I leave my room and pass by Julie, who’s in the hallway with an enormous grin on her face. It doesn’t take me long to figure out why. On the table, there’s a huge vase filled with flowers. Hydrangeas, peonies, roses, and a bunch of other flowers I don’t know are arranged in this vase in varying shades of pink and purple.

I pluck the card from the vase and read it. *Dear Fern, I hope you will forgive me and give me another chance. I’d like to make it up to you. Please join me for dinner on Saturday. I’ll pick you up at seven.*

“The look on your face tells me all I need to know,” Julie says, entering the kitchen.

“What does my face say?”

“That all it takes to win you over is some flowers.” She ducks out of the way as I try and give her an elbow to the side.

“It takes more than flowers to get on my good side. But this is definitely a good start.” A very good start. And I think I’ll take him up on his offer of dinner on Saturday because it’s the kind of do-over our relationship needs. “Would you stop grinning at me?” I yell at Julie.

“Sure. Whenever you stop grinning at the card and those flowers. Are you going to share what it says? As long as it’s nothing too private.”

“He apologized and wants to know if I’ll go out to dinner on Saturday.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Of course,” I say with a definitive nod.

“Good for you.” She looks down at her phone. “Don’t you have to get over to your parents’ house? You know how your mom gets.”

“Why? Is Dustin coming over tonight? Do you need the house to yourselves?” I say, wagging my eyebrows.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” she chuckles. “No, he’s not coming over tonight. I’m actually going to be packing, so if you’re not going over to your parents’, you’re more than welcome to stay and help me.”

A wave of sadness washes over me. I was on cloud nine mere moments ago, and now reality has set in—and it sucks. Julie is leaving. She’s really going to be moving out of here in a month and this house won’t be the same without her. The next roommate I get, whoever it might be, will have some pretty big shoes to fill because I’m not sure there’s anyone who can come close to the relationship that Julie and I have. It wasn’t always rosy, and we’ve definitely had our disagreements, but I think the good times far outweigh the bad.

I set the card back in the holder in the vase and give the flowers a final sniff. “Okay, I really should get going before my mom sends out a search party. If I leave now, I should be able to make it there with a few minutes to spare, provided traffic isn’t a nightmare.”

“It’s Seattle. You should always expect bad traffic,” Julie quips.

By the time I make it to my parents’ house, I’m only five minutes late, which is pretty damn good considering the traffic I had to go through to get here. I get out of my car and, as quietly as I can, walk through the front door. My goal is not to sneak in. I can’t just pretend that I’ve been here the whole time. I’m being stealthy because I’m listening in. I want to gauge how mad my mother is that I’m late. Is she telling my father about how irresponsible it is for me to show up late for dinner?

As I creep through the house, I don’t hear any commotion coming from the kitchen. Where is everyone?

“What are you doing?” someone asks, making me jump.

“Jesus, Dahlia, you scared the shit out of me,” I say, clutching my chest.

A wide smile tugs at her lips. I notice she’s a bit more put together than last time, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, but her hair is still unkempt. “Are you trying to sneak in? If so, I wouldn’t bother. Mom’s already pissed that you’re late.”

“I got stuck in traffic on the way here.” And the flowers might’ve derailed me a little bit, but no need to bring that up. “But no, I wasn’t trying to sneak in. I was listening in to see if Mom was ranting about me being late.”

“Well, she’s waiting in the kitchen for you. In fact, we’re all waiting. Mom sent me out here because she thought she heard a car door close. She wanted to know if it was you.”

I make a mental note that if I’m late next time, I’ll have to close my car door quieter.

When I enter the eat-in kitchen, my mom is sitting at one end of the table, her eyes narrowed. She glares at me the whole time until I get to my seat. It’s five minutes! She can cut me some slack tonight. I’ve shoveled enough shit today, and I don’t need it from her.

“Hey, honey, how are you?” my dad pipes in.

I smile warmly at him. “I’m just fine. I’d be a lot better if Mom would quit glaring at me.”

“I’d be a lot better if my daughter would get here when I ask her to get here,” she fires back. “What does she expect me to do? Hold up dinner forever?”

My dad gives her a placating look. “Come on. You didn’t even have it ready until—” My mom cuts him off with her hard stare.

I heave a sigh. “No, Mom. I don’t expect you to hold up dinner for me. But I do expect you to be understanding when traffic doesn’t cooperate with me. I’m the only person in this situation that has to travel. I think it’s okay for me to be a few minutes late.”

She holds my gaze for several more seconds, then looks away. She picks up the ladle and begins spooning up bowls full of chicken and dumplings. I get served last, which is her way of maintaining the upper hand. Fine by me. I'm okay with letting her think that she's won this round.

The rest of dinner passes without much conversation, my mother giving me the stink eye every so often. Afterwards, I clear the dishes from the table. It's my way of making up for the fact that I was late, even though I don't agree with her outburst.

"Fern, if you don't mind, could you get dessert from the fridge?" my mother asks from her seat at the table. "And bring over four small bowls for us."

"Sure. Anything else?" I ask.

She takes a few seconds before she answers. "No, I think that'll do it."

I open the fridge and take out a big bowl, which looks to be banana pudding, then grab a few smaller bowls from the cupboard. With my arms loaded down, I take all of this to the table and my mother helps me unload it all. She dishes each one of us a bowl of pudding and the second my mouth hits the creamy custard, any annoyance I had toward her vanishes.

I know it's banana pudding, but I'd be just as happy if the bananas weren't in there. But this way, I can tell myself it's "healthier" than just custard, vanilla wafers, and whipped cream because it has fruit in it.

After dinner, my father leaves to watch TV in the front room, Dahlia heads to her room, and it's just my mother and me in the kitchen who are left to clean up. I'm at the sink this time, hand washing all the dishes that couldn't fit in the dishwasher while my mother dries them with a towel.

"How are things going at work? How's Brett settling in?" she asks while drying off one of our dessert bowls.

"He's fine. It's only been a few days, but I think he's enjoying it." I rinse off another bowl and hand it to her.

My mother meets my gaze as she takes it from me. “And how are you doing with being so close to him?”

“It was weird at first, and still is a little bit. But I think it’ll get better with time.”

“How are things progressing with the new guy?” she asks.

How should I even answer that? No matter what I say, she’s going to use it to tell me all the ways in which Tanner is wrong for me and Brett is right. I definitely don’t need that right now. My mother picks up on my hesitation.

“Not good, I take it?”

I shrug. “For starters, his name is Tanner and things are... okay. Not great, but we’re getting there.”

She sets down her towel and looks me in the eye. “I think you should know your dad and I saw what happened at the game last night.”

I suck in a breath. “You what? How?” Is there anyone in this city who didn’t see? I’m beginning to think not.

“It was on TV. They showed him on the local broadcast, and they also showed the two of you getting escorted out. I told your dad not to say anything to you about it. But we’re both concerned.” She places a hand on my shoulder, her touch gentle. “We want to make sure he didn’t hurt you or anything.”

I whip my head toward her. “What? No, he wouldn’t do that. He just got caught up in the moment, and I know it won’t happen again. This guy is Dustin’s roommate and there’s no way the two of them could be such good friends if he was a total ass.”

My mother’s lips turn up in a wide, warm smile. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.” I hand her another bowl and she picks up her towel and resumes drying. “Anything else going on in your life that I should know about?”

“Actually, there is something. Julie and Dustin are moving to Texas in a month. That means I need to find a roommate because I can’t afford the rent and all the bills on my own.”

“They’re what? Julie is moving away?” She sounds shocked, but maybe it’s more jealousy because that’s someone else who’s moving away from here.

“I know. I was shocked too. But the two of them are serious about each other and that’s where she’s from. And Dustin is sweet enough to move for her.”

“I’m happy for the two of them. Are you two going to stay in touch?”

“I hope so.” And I really do. I can’t stand the thought of possibly never talking to Julie again. “We can always text and call one another. And maybe when he comes back to visit family, she can come along so we can see each other. It’ll also give me an excuse to go to Texas.”

“Do you have any idea who you’re going to get as a roommate?”

“Not a clue. But I need to find someone soon.” My mother clears her throat loudly and takes a plate from my hands to dry it. “What is it?” I ask.

“Your sister needs a place to stay. She has a steady job, so she could pay the rent and half of the bills.”

I shake my head. No way. I can’t room with Dahlia. The only time I’ve ever had to room with her was once when we were younger. My family rented a two-bedroom cabin and Dahlia and I had to share a room. We nearly killed each other. So I don’t think rooming with her now would end well. “That’s not happening. She and I can’t live together. We barely survived childhood together.”

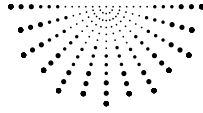
“Please,” my mother says, her blue eyes narrowing. “You two have grown up a lot since then. I think it could work.”

“No,” I say again, more forcefully this time.

“Just tell me you’ll think about it? Please? It would mean a lot to her,” she pleads.

My shoulders slump with the sigh I let out. “Fine. I’ll think about it.”

CHAPTER TEN



By the time the weekend rolls around, three things have happened. One, I've thought about Dahlia moving in and I've come to the conclusion that it's definitely not happening. Two, yesterday marked the first day at work that I haven't had to hear about Tanner. And three, Brett and I are now officially working as a team to ward off Lee.

I didn't plan for this to happen, but I'm not about to let Brett suffer on his own. Lee is a horse's ass, and no one needs to experience that.

It all started when Lee asked Brett to go out for lunch—again. Apparently, Lee has noticed that Brett goes out around the same time each day, which is borderline stalkerish, and wondered if he'd like to go out with him and Marissa. Brett gave me a look like, “What am I supposed to do here?” and I chimed in for him.

I said, “No, Brett and I are going out to lunch today.” Which, of course, made Lindsay sit up and look over at us.

And Lee, dumbass that he is, wasn't perceptive and asked, “Oh, cool. Would you two like to go out with us?” Even though I could tell it pained him to say that to me, since he and I don't get along.

Then Brett said, “That's kind of you to ask, but we're going to be discussing some things about a project we're working on. It's top secret, and no one else in the group knows yet.” Then he gave Lee a wink, as if to say, “Let's just keep this between us, okay?”

Lee, thinking he's been let in on something big, gave a nod and said, "Don't worry about me. I won't say a word."

By the afternoon, everyone was talking about our top-secret project. (So much for Lee keeping it a secret.) Even Reed came by to ask what the secret project was. Now Brett and I have to come up with something great, otherwise it'll be all for naught.

But all of that needs to be pushed to the side because it's Saturday evening and I've got a date. I spent a long time debating what to wear because this evening is huge. It's a restart for Tanner and me and I wanted to look good. I settled on some skinny jeans, a white, sleeveless blouse, and a black faux leather jacket. I even took the time to accessorize with a chunky, green beaded necklace. I'm just applying my lipstick when Julie knocks on my bathroom door.

"Wow, Fern. You went all out, didn't you?" she says, leaning against the doorjamb. She's dressed much like I've seen her lately, in nothing more than some lounge clothes.

I blot my lips with a tissue before turning toward her. "You like it?"

"Love it. It's very cute," she says with an approving nod.

"What are you doing tonight? Are you going out with Dustin?"

She flashes a smile. "Clearly not. Not dressed like this anyway. I'll be packing and he might come over later, but I doubt it."

My brow furrows, and I hope my eyes convey the concern I'm feeling. "Are things still okay with the two of you? I haven't seen you two together a lot since you've been back."

"Things are great. There are just a lot of loose ends to tie up here. Not so much for me, but for him. I'm sort of giving him his space because he has a lot to do before we leave. I mean, his whole family is here and that's a hard thing to leave. So he's taking the time he has left here to make his rounds between all of them. He'll be back to visit at certain times of the year, but we're not sure how often that's going to be."

Well, now that makes me feel like an ass. This whole time Julie's been back in Seattle, I've been worrying about Brett and Tanner, and I haven't really spent much time with her. I need to do better. I need to plan some sort of going away party for the two of them. I can't let her leave without knowing she'll be missed. "Do you want me to bring you back anything from the restaurant tonight?"

"No, don't worry about me. I've been snacking all evening. You go out and enjoy yourself. I hope Tanner's apology dinner is something special."

"It'd better be. I don't dress up like this for just any occasion," I say with a laugh. "But we need to have a girls' night soon, and maybe I'll even help you pack."

"Sounds like a plan," she says, then turns toward the front of the house. "I think I heard someone knock. Do you want me to get it, or do you want to answer it?"

"I'll get it. I'm finished in here anyway."

By the time I get to the front of the house, another set of knocks tap on the door. I open it to reveal a very sexy Tanner on the other side. He took the time to dress up tonight in a pair of dark washed denim jeans, a light gray button-down shirt, with some brown lace-up shoes. His hair has been styled and his facial hair trimmed close to his face.

In other words, my body is fully aware of how good he looks. Already, this evening is off to a fantastic start.

Tanner's gaze slowly drifts up and down my body before settling on my eyes. He smiles at me, the skin around his eyes crinkling, and reaches for my hand. I oblige and place my hand in his, and he brushes his lips across the top of it, sending a little shiver down my spine.

"Are you ready to go or do you need a few minutes?" he asks.

"I need to slip on my shoes and grab my purse, and then I'll be ready." Julie, who is keeping out of view, comes up beside me with my purse in hand. "Thanks," I whisper to her.

My black leather booties I was going to wear are right by the door, so it only takes me a few seconds to put them on.

When I step out, Tanner lets me lead the way down the front steps and even opens the door for me when we reach his black Subaru Impreza. This time of year, seven o'clock means the sun is almost down for the evening, which adds to the ambiance.

"Where are we headed?" Even though I've texted Tanner, trying to get out of him where we're going, he's been tight lipped about the whole thing.

"You'll see when we get there," he says, stealing a glance at me. "You look beautiful, by the way."

A grin tugs at my lips and I don't even try to hide it. "Thanks. You look good too."

"You think so? I had to borrow this shirt from Dustin because I haven't done laundry yet. The pants are mine. I'm glad you like it though."

Ugh. Why would he say that? Now, all I'm picturing is a giant pile of clothes on his bedroom floor because he hasn't done laundry in weeks. Is he wearing days-old underwear too? I'm more meticulous when it comes to laundry. I do mine weekly and pull the clothes out of the dryer and fold them as soon as they're done.

Tanner merges onto I-5 where traffic seems to be moving smoothly. "I was going to wait until we got to the restaurant to say this, but I don't want to wait anymore. I need to tell you how sorry I am for how things ended that evening. I'm sorry for embarrassing you at the game, for making you miss out on most of it, and for generally being a dick and spoiling your evening."

"You didn't just embarrass me at the game, you know. All of my coworkers saw you. Even my parents saw what happened and they weren't even there. You made it on the jumbotron, which then was aired on the local broadcast."

He shakes his head in what I hope is disgust. "I know. Trust me, most everyone at my work saw it too. I'm so sorry

for what I did, and I hope you'll forgive me. It won't happen again."

That's good enough for me. If we're really going to start over here, then I need to forgive and, with enough time, forget. "Apology accepted."

"I heard you went back in to watch the rest of the game. Is that true?"

I let out a laugh. "Yes. I was so pissed, I had a little sidebar with the usher and asked her if it was possible for me to go back in and finish the game. After Dustin picked you up, I watched the rest of the game from the main level."

The corner of his lips turns up in a grin. "Good for you. I don't blame you for going back in."

"Just sucks that they lost though." If the Mariners would've won, I wouldn't be as irritated about the way things went down between us. But the loss really rubs salt into an already painful wound.

"Typical Mariners," he says. It's what every Mariners fan has said at least once in their life.

"Typical Mariners," I echo. "That's okay. Next year will be our year though. I just have a feeling."

"And how many years have you had this feeling?" he says with a chuckle.

"Hey, now," I say, narrowing my eyes. "That's a very personal question, and one I don't feel comfortable answering."

"Don't feel comfortable or don't want to admit that you've been saying the same thing for years?"

I cross my arms over my chest and let out an exaggerated huff. I'm joking, of course. I'm not really mad. But I am glad that we're able to banter back and forth again. When we first met at Discovery Park, and even at the brewery, this was the kind of banter we'd shared. It had come so easily, and then somewhere along the way we lost it.

At some point, Tanner exited the highway because we're driving down a street and passing very close to the Space Needle. We're heading toward Elliott Bay, and I see a lot of boats up ahead.

"Are we going to a marina?" In my mind, I'm picturing Tanner taking me on a sunset cruise where we'll have dinner for two by candlelight on the deck of the boat. We'll share a few kisses across the table, *Sixteen Candles* style, and he'll have even brought a dessert on board. To cap off the night, a pod of orcas will swim by and one of them will wave a pectoral fin at us.

Now *that* would be an evening to remember.

"Not quite," he says, jarring me out of my romantic fantasy. "We're going that way and we'll be in the same parking lot as the marina, but not actually there."

Tanner pulls into the parking lot and finds a spot, not an easy task on a Saturday evening. He gets out of the car and comes around to my side to get the door for me.

"Thanks," I say as he reaches out his hand for mine.

We walk hand-in-hand toward the entrance of the restaurant, and when we reach the door, there's an employee who opens it for us. After Tanner gives his name to the hostess, we're led back to a table right near a window with a fantastic view of Elliott Bay.

I never even knew this restaurant existed, but I wouldn't. My mother never bothered much with nearby restaurants, thinking she could cook it better herself. The only time we ever really ate out was pizza on Friday nights, and that was mostly because she wanted a night off from cooking. It's gorgeous though. Lovely views, beautiful exposed wood beams on the ceiling, very open and spacious. Every table around us is full, and all the chatter in the room is blending together in what sounds like a low hum.

Our server comes over to the table and asks for our drinks. I glance over the menu and do a double take at the prices for wine by the glass. Some of these wines are twenty bucks a

glass! No thanks. I'm not much of a wine connoisseur, so I don't even know what half of these are. I settle for something I do know, which is a hard cider. Tanner orders a beer, earning a raised brow from me. Are we going to have a repeat of the Mariners game? Am I going to get another apology dinner because he's going to screw up this apology dinner?

Tanner takes in my expression and says, "I promise it's just the one." I nod in response. "What are you thinking about ordering?"

"Not sure yet," I say, flipping the menu over to the entrée section. "Their seafood pasta sounds good, or their chicken."

He cocks his head to the side, and a little mischief plays around his eyes. "No filet mignon? Come on. It's an apology dinner. Milk it for all it's worth."

I shake my head. "No filet mignon. I think I'm going to go with the chicken though. It sounds the best." What I don't mention is that I'm worried the seafood pasta will make my breath smell, and if this evening ends how I hope it will, that's not the sort of takeaway I want Tanner to have.

"Suit yourself," he says with a shrug.

Our server comes back after a few minutes and sets our drinks down. She takes our order and then it's just the two of us again. I turn my attention toward the lovely view of the Olympics which are now shaded by the sun setting. Tanner clears his throat, and I turn my head toward him, thinking he's trying to get my attention.

I wait for him to speak, and he clears his throat again. "What is it?" I ask.

"Sorry, it's nothing. I just think I have something stuck in my throat. Maybe a little mucous. My allergies haven't been great lately."

Gross. I hope we don't spend the whole evening talking about mucous. It's not exactly playing into the romantic evening I had envisioned. "That's okay," I assure him.

He clears his throat again, then takes a sip of his beer. "There. I think that should take care of it."

But it doesn't.

He clears his throat, louder this time, and more than one restaurant guest turns their head toward our table. I smile at them, in a way that says, "Nothing to see here. Everything's under control."

Has he been clearing his throat the whole time and I just haven't noticed it? Quickly, I think back to the car ride over here, the walk to our table, and can't remember whether or not he had cleared his throat at all. I don't think he did, but there was that one time... When we were walking toward the restaurant, I might've heard a little cough from Tanner, but didn't think much of it. Maybe he was clearing his throat but tried to disguise it as a cough. The other patrons give me half-hearted smiles and return to their respective conversations.

I need something else to focus on, otherwise I'll spend the whole evening listening for any hint of throat clearing coming from him. "So, I assume you know about Dustin and Julie's move by now?"

"Yeah, he told me as soon as he started thinking about it." He tilts his head down and clears his throat again. "I'm going to miss my friend, but I'm really happy for the two of them. Dustin is obviously very serious about Julie and wants to go wherever she wants to be."

"I think it's sweet what the two of them have. But I'll miss my friend too. Julie has been a great roommate, who then quickly became a great friend. The next roommate I have won't be the same—at all. And whoever it is, they probably won't be as good of a cook as she is."

Tanner clears his throat again, quieter this time, so quiet I almost missed it. "Do you have any ideas about a roommate yet?"

My body goes still. Oh, no. What is he thinking? Is he trying to drop a subtle hint about the two of us rooming together? I register the look on his face. He's smiling, which doesn't mean much. Other than that, there's nothing about his expression that hints to me that he wants us to room together. Just to be sure, I need to shut any possibility of it down.

“Actually, I think my younger sister might move in. She recently had to move back in with my parents, and I think it would help her out a lot.” I haven’t really come to that conclusion yet, even though it’s the easiest one.

“That’s good. I’ve already got another roommate lined up too.”

Phew. Problem solved.

Our server comes back with our meals and sets my down first, then sets Tanner’s down. My plate has a modest portion of chicken placed on a helping of mashed potatoes, and on the side of the plate are some Brussels sprouts. Tanner’s plate looks much like mine, but instead of chicken, he got the filet mignon.

“Does everything look okay?” our server asks.

Tanner clears his throat again, then says, “This looks great. Thank you.”

“If you need anything else, let me know. Enjoy your meal,” she says, then leaves our table.

“Everything looks really good, I’m not sure what I want to try first,” I say. But I go for a bite of the mashed potatoes first. They’re really creamy, smooth, and seasoned well. Even though I shouldn’t be thinking this and should just enjoy this meal for what it is, I can’t help but think about how it doesn’t compare with my mom’s mashed potatoes. Part of the reason I like my mom’s mashed potatoes so much is that they contain little bits of unmashed potatoes, which gives it a nice texture. These mashed potatoes are so smooth, it’s almost as if they’ve been taken through a blender. I then try it with a bite of the chicken, which is cooked to perfection, but it’s not any better than what my mom or Julie has made a thousand times before.

It’s not worse—so at least there’s that.

What’s wrong with me? I need to stop comparing this meal to what I’ve had. But when the price is so high, I expected to be wowed...and I’m just not. I guess that’s the downside to having a mother, and even a roommate, who are such good cooks. I’ve been spoiled by good food all my life.

“How is everything?” he asks, not so subtly clearing his throat. Another patron turns toward our table, and I don’t miss the eyeroll coming from them.

“Everything’s great. Really delicious,” I say with a smile.

“Have you ever had anything this good before?”

Yes. All the time. “Never. I’m really being spoiled tonight,” I say, hoping my face doesn’t let on that I’m lying.

“Good. I’m glad I could bring you here.” He clears his throat again, making me cringe with how loud it is. A few people shift in their chairs away from us, probably thinking Tanner has some kind of disease. “But I still hate that I had to bring you here under these circumstances,” he says.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not even thinking about that anymore.” Which is true, because all I can think about is him clearing his throat and it’s to the point where I don’t even want to finish this meal.

Tanner isn’t doing anything wrong per se, but more and more people are starting to take notice of his noises and it’s embarrassing. My cheeks are so flush now, Tanner is probably going to think there’s something wrong with *me*.

To get this evening over in a hurry, I take bigger bites and am able to finish my plate before Tanner is done with his. If he’d spent less time clearing his throat, he would’ve been done by now.

“You must’ve been hungry,” he says.

“It was so good, I didn’t want to stop eating,” I say with a smile. And really, the portion sizes weren’t *that* big, so it’s not like it was a challenge for me to finish everything.

“Are you interested in dessert?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t leave room for any.” *Please, just get me out of here.*

When the server comes back to take our plates away, she asks about dessert and Tanner politely declines. Thank goodness. I was worried he’d ignore me and get dessert anyway.

By the time we finish paying and are back at Tanner's car, it's dark and all the marina lights are washing everything in soft lighting. It's romantic, and if things had gone better in the restaurant, this is where I'd kiss Tanner and we'd go back to his place or mine.

But things didn't go well, and that's not the ending I'm going to get tonight.

Tanner opens my car door and holds my gaze before I get in. He leans in and I know he's going to kiss me, and I'm going to have to kiss him because I'm not about to say it's over right here and now. I have to let him down gently, when the time is right. Tonight was supposed to be a do-over for us, but I've made up my mind—I can't go through another evening with him.

Tanner's lips meet mine and I kiss him back, my lips moving against his, merely going through the motions. I feel nothing. It's not earth shattering; it's not sending a tingle down my spine. Nothing.

"I hope you had a good evening tonight," he says, looking down at me.

"I did. Thanks for taking me out."

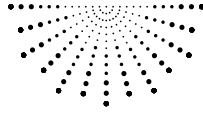
When we get back to my place, Tanner leans over the center console and plants a few chaste kisses against my lips.

"You don't have to get out," I say. "Thanks again for dinner. I enjoyed it."

"No problem. Let me know when you want to go out next."

"I sure will," I say, then close his car door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



As soon as I get in the house, I kick off my shoes and plop down on the couch. I lean my head back, close my eyes, and sigh with relief that the evening is now over. I think the only thing that would've made the evening worse is if Tanner and I got kicked out for being too loud. He was *that* loud. I could've tolerated it once or twice, but the whole evening? No thanks.

I really did give it my all tonight. I went in with a very open mind and was ready to put the past behind us. But now, I know what I have to do. It's obvious whatever Tanner and I shared at the brewery was a fluke and isn't going to happen again. I need to end this thing.

I don't see Julie come in but feel her sit down at the other end of the couch. I open my eyes and glance over at her.

"From your expression, I'd say it didn't go well?" she asks, her brow furrowed.

I sit up so I can see her better. "It was horrible. First of all, he mentioned he had to borrow his shirt from Dustin because he didn't have one clean. Why didn't he plan better? Or better yet, just don't say anything at all and accept the compliment."

"What compliment?"

"I said he looked good tonight, and he followed it up with mentioning he had to borrow his shirt from Dustin."

She nods in understanding. "Okay, that's kind of annoying, but not a deal breaker."

“I agree. But then once we got to the restaurant, he started clearing his throat. He said his allergies were bad and he even brought up the word mucous, which is not what I want to think about when I’m on a date.”

“So he cleared his throat. What’s the big deal?” she asks.

“If it was just once or twice, it wouldn’t be a big deal. But it was all-the-time. And he was so loud that people were starting to stare.”

She looks as though she doesn’t believe me. “Come on. It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“It was,” I say, staring directly at her. I demonstrate as best as I can, what I had to endure tonight. From the little ones to the loud ones, I go through every little clearing of the throat Tanner did.

Julie’s mouth twitches. She holds her hand over her mouth while her eyes crinkle around the edges. Her cheeks redden and her body is now shaking. She finally lets out the laugh she’s been holding in. “Are you serious? He actually did that?” she manages to get out between laughs.

“I swear. I wish I was making it up. Julie, it was so damn embarrassing! There were people turning around and glaring at us! I thought at one point we were going to get kicked out for disturbing the other guests.”

“Has he ever done that before? You know? The throat clearing?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But it could be because I didn’t notice it before. Because I had a different opinion of him.”

“Okay, let’s calm down here,” she says, looking like she’s deep in thought. “Maybe his allergies really *are* bad this time of year. No one’s perfect—not even you. Do I need to remind you that you snore?”

“I don’t snore!” I squeal. She gives me a look like I should know better than to refute that. “Okay, that was one time because I was sick. My head was all congested.”

“I had to buy ear plugs, and even that wasn’t enough to quiet down your snoring.”

“That was *one time*,” I repeat, glaring at her.

“And this is also one time,” she retorts.

“But this is one time where it mattered. Would you be saying all of this if Tanner was just some random guy off the street?” She’s silent, confirming exactly what I suspected. “No, you wouldn’t. If it were someone else, you’d be telling me to ditch him and move on.”

She throws her hands up. “It’s just because I know Tanner is a nice guy. And I’d hate to see you give up on him so soon.”

“He’s had plenty of chances, and I’m fully ready to admit I was wrong when it came to him. I thought he’d be perfect for me, but I just don’t see how it would work.” I cross my arms over my chest, putting an end to this conversation.

Julie gives me a look like she’s about to say something I don’t want to hear. “I think you need to give him another shot. Take some time away from him, text him here and there so he doesn’t think you’re mad, and then try again when you’ve had more time to get over this botched apology dinner.”

I take a few seconds to think about how to play this to my advantage. “Okay, on one condition.”

“What is it?”

“You let me throw you and Dustin and going-away party.” She narrows her eyes and I know I’ve got her now. All along she said she didn’t want a big to-do over them leaving. But I can’t let her leave without showing how much she’ll be missed. She may not want to stay here in Seattle, but I want her to know she’ll always have people here who care about her.

“Fern, you know I don’t want you to fuss,” she whines.

“It’s the only way I’ll give Tanner another shot. I’ll invite him to the party and get him to help me plan it.”

She hesitates, then lets out a sigh. “Fine. You can throw us a party.”

BY THE TIME I get to work on Monday, I have an idea for where I want to throw the party that I think will make both of us happy. My parents' house is the perfect setting. Their backyard is fairly private, and has a nice deck, which is more than I can say for our rental house. Julie has been to their house a few times, so she's comfortable with it, which is my way of making this party as "not fussy" as possible. My mom and I will take care of the food, and all the invited guests, which won't be many, will bring moving supplies for Dustin and Julie to help them with their upcoming move.

And bonus, I don't even need Tanner's help to plan this. I did text him yesterday to tell him thanks again for the apology dinner, and to inform him about the party. I put him in charge of bringing drinks, so now I can say I held up my end of the bargain.

I'm sitting at work, scrolling through a few appetizer recipes on my phone, waiting for everyone else to file in, when Brett arrives.

"Are you working on our secret project?" he says, glancing at my phone. Before he takes his seat, he shrugs off his jacket and places it on the back of his chair. He then sits down and starts up his computer.

Gosh, he smells amazing. He's wearing a cologne that's both citrusy and woody at the same time. It's one he usually wears, but for some reason, it's hitting my nose a little harder today. Instinctively, I lean in, close my eyes and inhale. When I open them, Brett is staring at me with a little grin tugging at his lips. I sit up straight and act like nothing happened. "No, I'm looking at appetizer recipes for a going away party."

"Oh?" he asks, his head cocking to the side. "Who's going away?"

"Julie."

His mouth falls open. "No way! She's leaving? Where's she going?"

“She and Dustin are moving to Texas. They leave in less than a month.”

His eyes meet mine and he holds my gaze. “And how are you doing with it?”

I shrug. “I don’t really know, to be honest. I’m happy for her, but a selfish part of me wants her to stick around because I like our friendship and don’t want to see that change. But I know she wouldn’t be happy here.”

Brett takes my hand and holds it in both of his. His touch is warm, his grip firm but tender, and it takes me back to when we used to date. I stare at his full lips and watch them move as he speaks. There’s a part of me I’m trying to ignore right now that wants to lean in and kiss them. “Let me know if you need anything. Would you mind if I stopped by sometime to say goodbye to Julie?” A beat passes before he adds, “If it would make you uncomfortable, I don’t have to.”

“No, it wouldn’t make me uncomfortable at all,” I say before thinking.

“Oh, so is this your secret project?” Lindsay says, pulling her chair out. Her gaze lands straight on my hand in Brett’s and I waste no time pulling it away.

“Yeah, and it’s called, ‘None of your business, Lindsay,’” I snap back, surprising myself—and her—with my sass.

Even Brett looks shocked, and he stifles a grin, then turns his attention toward his monitor.

“WOULD it be weird to invite Brett to your going away party?” I ask Julie when I get home that evening.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had an ex that’s nice after a breakup like Brett, so I can’t say for certain whether or not I’d do it. Since you’re asking, I assume you’re thinking of inviting him?” she says while chopping up an onion for our dinner.

“Yeah, I thought about it.” I open the fridge to look for a snack, and instead, pop open a sparkling water and take a sip.

“Okay...but *why* were you thinking it?” She scoops up the chopped onion and places it into a pan, which sizzles as soon as the onion makes contact.

“Before everyone came into work today, I was looking at some recipes on my phone. Brett saw and asked what I was doing. I told him I was searching for recipes for your going away party, and then he asked if it was possible for him to stop by and see you before you left. He said if it would make me uncomfortable, then he didn’t have to. I said it wouldn’t.”

“So you pretty much told him it’s okay for him to come over. And now you’re asking me because...?”

“I don’t know! I said it was okay before really thinking about it. But that’s why I wanted to invite him to the party, because I think it would be even weirder if he just came over here by himself. It’s too private, and I’m supposed to be giving Tanner another chance. The potential for alone time is too great here, if you know what I mean. At least at the party, Tanner would be there, and Brett and I wouldn’t be alone.”

Julie nods her head, while her attention is on the onions in the pan. She plops a package of ground sausage down in the pan and starts breaking it up with her spoon. “I see your point. In that case, I agree that you should invite him to the party. I mean, the two of you work together and happen to sit right next to one another. If you can get along there and not raise too many eyebrows, then this party should be a breeze.”

My mind goes back to when Brett held my hand today. I wish Lindsay hadn’t interrupted. I wish we hadn’t been at work. I’d never wanted a hug so bad in my life as I did in that moment. I just wanted him to hold me in his strong arms.

“Oh, my God. What is it? What happened between the two of you?” Julie’s staring at me so hard, like she knows something’s up.

“What do you mean?” I ask, avoiding her gaze. I focus my attention on the can of sparkling water and take a sip, then

pretend I don't see her.

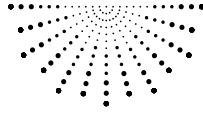
“You got quiet, and your face took on this sort of doe-eyed look. What happened?” Her eyes narrow and just for good measure, she puts a hand on her hip. It's her not-so-subtle way of letting me know she's not going to tolerate any of my evasions today.

“He held my hand at work today.” Julie's eyelids snap open. “It's not what you think!” I screech, defending myself. “We were talking about you leaving and I got sad about it. He held my hand to comfort me.” Julie cocks her head to the side and waits to see if that's the end of it. “That's it,” I say, holding my hands up in surrender, managing to not drop the can in the process. “That's as far as it went.”

“I was going to say, if it was anything more than that, then maybe you shouldn't invite him to the party. But since you said that's all it was, I think you're fine.” She turns her attention back toward the stove and I go back to my room and change my clothes.

I don't dare mention that his simple act of holding my hand made my mind go back to when he and I were dating. And I don't dare mention how badly I wanted to lean in and kiss him because he smelled so good, and if we weren't at work, then maybe I would have.

CHAPTER TWELVE



It's Saturday, the day of the party, and I'm at my parents' house trying to get everything ready before the guests of honor arrive. Julie tried to convince me that I should let her help out, but I said she can't help out with her own going away party. Besides, I've got my mom and Dahlia helping me in the kitchen, and my dad is outside getting the yard ready. Really, all Dahlia and I are doing is getting fruit and vegetable trays ready to go. My mom is doing all the serious cooking.

Our menu for tonight consists of: Swedish meatballs with my mom's homemade rolls for anyone who wants to make it a sandwich, a fruit tray, a veggie tray, some ham and cheese pinwheels that are made with bread dough and baked, and a few other finger foods like chips and dip. We're also having chocolate cupcakes with vanilla icing, and they'll be adorned with some cute little Texas-shaped toppers I found online.

We're keeping it low-key tonight with the guest list. It's just going to be my family, Brett, Tanner, Julie, and Dustin. I asked Julie if we should invite Dustin's family, and she said they had their own thing planned. Julie said not to make a big fuss, and this small guest list is about as fuss free as I can make it.

"Fern, come over here and hold this, will you?" my mother hollers from her place over by the fridge. This little galley kitchen is feeling quite cramped, and with Dahlia and I taking up a lot of counter space for assembling our fruit and vegetable trays, we've had to use nearly every available surface for storage.

“Sure.” I set down my knife and she hands me an empty tray to hold. There’s literally no room for her to set it down on the counter. She begins placing cupcakes on it, and when it’s full, she tells me to put it over on the table. I set it down, gently so the cupcakes don’t tip over, and look around at the spread before me. There’s a slow cooker full of meatballs, then another slow cooker with the ham and cheese pinwheels. The other appetizers are plated and already on the table, and all we’re missing is the fruit and vegetable trays that Dahlia and I have to finish assembling.

“What time is everyone supposed to be here?” my mother asks, peering at me from under the cabinets that divide the eating area from the kitchen.

“Tanner is supposed to be here any minute, and then everyone else is supposed to be here at seven.” I check my phone for the time and it’s after six thirty, which is when Tanner said he would be here.

My mother places any remaining cupcakes in a storage container. “And who’s bringing drinks?”

“Tanner is,” I say, glancing at my phone again to make sure I didn’t miss a text from him. Where the hell is he? My foot taps a steady rhythm on the floor, while I check my phone a second, then a third time. Even though this small party is just that—small—I still want everything to go off without a hitch.

“Do you have another plan in case he doesn’t show up?” my mother asks, her back turned as she finds an empty spot on top of the fridge for the leftover cupcakes.

“No, I don’t. I don’t need a backup plan. He’ll show up,” I say. Does she really think he wouldn’t show up to his best friend’s going away party?

My dad steps into the kitchen from the sliding door that leads to the backyard. “Okay, I strung the lights up outside, and plugged them in. The fire pit is ready to go for when people get here, and the cornhole game is set up. Did I miss anything?”

“No, Dad. I think you’ve got everything. Thank you for helping,” I say with a smile.

My mom’s head whips around. “Hold on. I’ve been busting my hump in this kitchen, and I haven’t heard a single thank you from you.”

“I’ve said thank you at least fifteen times now,” I say, defending myself.

My mom places her hand on her hip and shakes her head. “No, you haven’t.”

“Yes, she has,” Dahlia says, coming to my rescue. She’s the most dressed up I’ve seen in a while, wearing a pair of jeans and a nice sweater. Her hair is down, and she’s even put some makeup on. I smile at her, my way of saying thanks for sticking up for me.

My mom looks like she’s about to say something else when the doorbell rings, interrupting our standoff.

“I’ll get it. It’s probably Tanner.” *It’s about time.* All I can say is that his drinks better be cold already because he’s not leaving me any time to chill anything. But when I get to the door and open it, it’s Brett, not Tanner. “Oh, hey! You’re early,” I say with a grin that probably takes up my whole face.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he says with a small half-smile. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Not at all. We’re just finishing up getting the food ready. You can come in if you’d like.” I step aside, but he doesn’t make any move to come in.

“Actually, I was wondering if I could get some help. You didn’t tell me what to bring, so I brought some drinks,” he says, then glances at me to gauge my reaction. “If that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay. It’s very thoughtful.”

I follow him out to his car and stand on the curb, while he opens his door. As he leans in, I can’t help but notice the way his long-sleeved T-shirt rides up a bit, revealing the barest hint of skin. It’s stupid really, for me to be noticing this because I’ve seen all of Brett—*all* of him—several times, so this little

pocket of skin shouldn't even register with me. But it feels so...so...provocative seeing this much skin, especially since he's not mine to look at like that anymore.

"I wasn't sure what you'd have here, so I brought everything: ice, a cooler, and a mix of beer and soda," he says, pulling the cooler out of the backseat.

"This is great. Thanks so much for bringing all this." It really is great because if Tanner ends up screwing up the one task I gave him, then Brett just saved me from having to make a mad dash to the store.

Brett sets the cooler on the ground and gives my outfit a good once-over. "Are you okay helping me carry things? I don't want you to get your sweater dirty."

He's commenting on the fact that I'm wearing an ivory sweater with black leggings. "It's fine. I've been cooking in this sweater most of the afternoon, so if I could survive that, I can survive carrying a few things."

Right as I'm bending down to pick up my end of the cooler, Tanner's black Subaru pulls up behind Brett's car. Tanner gets out and walks toward me with two six-packs of beer in hand. *Is that really all he brought?* When he sees Brett, he tilts his head like he's trying to make heads or tails of this situation. "Hey, Fern," he says, giving the beers in his hand a quick glance. "How many people did you invite to this thing?"

"Just my family, you, Brett, Julie, and Dustin," I say, even though I swear I told him the guest list already.

"Oh, okay," Tanner says with a nod. "I just didn't expect to see your coworker here."

Oh, my god. That's right. He doesn't know. "Um...would you excuse me? I forgot something in the oven. Tanner, would you mind helping Brett take the drinks to the backyard? The gate is right over there." I point to the general location of the gate and hurry back toward the house. It's probably not the best idea to leave the two of them alone, in case something slips out, but I have to hurry and catch my family before anyone has a chance to talk.

When I get back into the kitchen, the rest of my family is there, which is good. I'll only have to say this once. "I need you guys to listen up. Tanner is here, and so is Brett. But Tanner doesn't know Brett and I dated. He thinks that Brett is just a coworker, and if it slips that we also dated, things are going to get really uncomfortable around here." I give them a know-what-I-mean kind of look. "So you have to avoid anything personal that involves Brett and I as a couple."

Before my family has a chance to say anything, Brett and Tanner can be seen through the sliding door carrying the cooler into the backyard. I get my mom's attention and give her quite the stare down. If there's any one of us that would be an issue, it would be her. She adored Brett, and I bet she was going to use this evening to reminisce about good times and tell him all the ways that he's better than Tanner.

"Can I at least give Brett a hug?" my mother asks with a pleading stare.

Dahlia looks up at her and grins. "Don't you think it would be strange if you hugged someone you've never met?"

My mom nudges her in the side. "But he's not someone I've never met."

"He's supposed to be," Dahlia answers for me. Thank goodness. At least someone gets it.

"Dad, promise me you're not going to immediately take Brett to the garage and talk baseball with him." My dad has a collection of signed baseballs from over the years and the last time Brett was over, they talked out there for at least an hour. "At least get him to talk about baseball first, then you can take him to the garage if you want."

"I'll do my best to remember, Fern. But I can't promise that I won't slip up," he says.

It's the best I'm going to get. "Okay, everyone be cool." Behind me, my mom and Dahlia snicker, both probably assuming that this whole evening is going to fall to pieces.

I head over to the sliding door and open it, sliding the screen into place to at least keep the bugs out. “How’s everything going out here?” I ask Brett and Tanner, who are standing around chatting.

“Things are great,” Tanner says. “We were just talking about what’s left of the baseball season.”

“Why don’t you guys come in for a second and meet my family?” I say.

Tanner comes into the kitchen first and stands beside me, and Brett stands by the sliding door, looking unsure of his place here.

My dad slides his hand out to Brett. “Hey, Brett. It’s good to see you—” Oh shit. I whip my head around and glare at my dad. He shrugs, like he’s apologizing for his slip up. “I mean, it’s nice to meet you, Brett,” he says, amending himself.

Tanner looks down at me and I can see the uncertainty in his gaze. “I’m sorry. Do you know him?” he asks my dad.

My dad’s expression flattens. “No, I don’t. But I know you, Tanner. I saw you on TV at the Mariners game.”

Please, let me make it through this evening.

Tanner’s cheeks bloom with redness and he stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, it wasn’t my finest moment. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

My mother steps forward. “Don’t let him get to you, Tanner. Maybe you should ask him about the time he got kicked out of Fern’s softball game.”

“That umpire was awful. His strike zone had to be a mile wide!” My dad holds out his hands for emphasis.

“It was a middle school game!” my mother fires back. Clearly, she’s still embarrassed by this. “Tanner, it’s good to meet you. And Brett, nice to meet you as well.”

I introduce Tanner to the rest of the family, and when my mom drags Tanner over to where the food is, I sneak away and get Brett’s attention. “Brett, could you give me a hand with something?” I nod my head toward the hallway, and Brett

follows me down there. When we're far enough out of earshot of everyone else, I lean in and whisper, "Tanner doesn't know we dated. So, if you think my family is acting strange around you, it's because I told them to act like they don't know you."

"Tanner thinks we're just coworkers?" Brett says, raising a brow.

I nod. "Can we please keep it that way? Just for one evening?"

"What about Julie and Dustin?"

Tanner pokes his head around the corner. "Oh, there you are," he says, smiling at me.

"I was showing Brett where the bathroom is," I reply, pointing to the bathroom door. "Right before you got here, he said he needed to use it and hasn't had the chance yet." I step away from Brett and link my arm through Tanner's. "And in case you need to use it tonight," I say, poking Tanner's chest, "it's right there."

"Okay, great. Your mom said she thought she heard a car door, so she wanted you to check to see if Julie and Dustin are here," Tanner says.

"Sure. Let's both go out and check." I lead Tanner to the front door and when we step outside, Julie and Dustin are walking up the sidewalk. I unhook my arm from Tanner's and rush over to where Julie is, engulfing her in a hug. "Hey, you made it!"

"Yeah, traffic on the highways was bad, so we took some of the surface streets to get here," Dustin says.

"Not like traffic was any better there, but instead of being really late, we're just late," Julie says with a chuckle.

"That's okay. You're here and that's what matters. Let me take you into the backyard. That's where we're going to be this evening." I lead everyone through the side gate and into the backyard where my dad is rooting around in the cooler for a beverage.

My dad says hello to both Dustin and Julie, then engages Dustin and Tanner in conversation. I tug Julie's sleeve and motion for her to follow me into the kitchen. When we step inside, my mom and Dahlia are talking to Brett, probably apologizing for all the weirdness.

I huddle with Julie in the corner. "Julie, Tanner doesn't know Brett and I dated, so please try to avoid any personal talk."

"Does Brett know he doesn't know?" she whispers back.

"I told him already. Please tell Dustin when you get a chance, hopefully before he sees Brett."

My goodness. This is so stressful. I've never had to be so secretive before. But what am I supposed to say? "Oh, hey Tanner, you may be my boyfriend now, but Brett was my boyfriend right before you, and now we work together."

Yeah, I'm sure that'll go over well.

This was only supposed to be a small party, and by inviting Brett here, I thought I was doing the right thing because I'm supposed to be giving Tanner another chance and all. But I think it would've been easier to have Brett over to the house and risk whatever alone time we might've had. At least then I wouldn't have had to orchestrate so many people.

Julie breaks away from me and gives my mom a hug, then goes outside to find Dustin. I stay in the kitchen because I need a moment to regroup and get my bearings. I pluck a few carrots from the veggie tray and while I'm crunching, my mom sidles up beside me.

"I don't get it, Fern," she says while watching Tanner with everyone else outside. "I don't know what you see in him."

I know she said that because Brett is standing close and can probably hear her, even though he's talking with Dahlia. "Mom, please give him a chance," I say, even though I'm wasting my breath. She already has her mind made up.

"I'm trying to. I really am. But you and Brett seemed so perfect for one another."

“Mom, I really don’t need this now. Can we please get through this evening and save any relationship talk for some other time?”

She pats me on the shoulder. “Okay, honey. I won’t say another word about it,” she says, then heads outside and stands next to my dad.

Brett comes up beside me and points to the rolls on the table. “Did your mom make these too?”

“I think you know store-bought rolls would never end up on her table,” I say with a grin. Shit. That’s too personal. What’s the matter with me? I can’t even keep up my own charade. Dahlia heads outside, leaving Brett and I alone in the kitchen. “I’m sorry for all the awkwardness tonight. I thought inviting you here would be easier, but I forgot that Tanner doesn’t know about us.”

He gives me a half-hearted smile. “It’s okay. If you want me to go, I can. I don’t want to be a distraction and take away from the intent of the evening. You can say that something came up and I had to leave.”

I shake my head. “You’re not a distraction, and you should stay. I think the rest of the evening will go well. Come on,” I say, tugging his shirt sleeve. “I think we should join the rest of the group.”

TO MY SURPRISE, the rest of the evening does go well. All of that initial weirdness vanished, and everyone got along and chatted like normal. Tanner and Brett even teamed up at one point for a round of cornhole.

It’s been a few hours, and most of the food is gone. Dahlia has called it quits for the evening and is in her room, and my mom and dad stepped inside to get a couple of gifts for Dustin and Julie. The rest of us are huddled around the fire pit because now that it’s completely dark outside, the air has cooled down quite a bit. Tanner looks down at me and smiles. It’s almost ethereal, the way he looks right now with the glow

of the fire highlighting his features. I'm so taken by it that I reach out for his hand and lace my fingers through his.

My dad steps through the sliding door first, a giant stack of boxes in his arms, and my mom is right behind with a gift bag. I know exactly what's in the gift bag because I helped organize it.

"We couldn't send the two of you off without getting you something first," my dad says, placing the boxes on the ground.

"That's right. We got you two some moving boxes, and there's also another stack in the garage. And this is also for you two," my mother says, handing the gift bag to Julie. "It's from everyone, but there's a little something special from me." Something special? My mom didn't tell me she was going to get something extra.

"You guys didn't have to do all this," Julie replies. She starts going through the gift bag, handing each item to Dustin for him to hold. In the bag are some rolls of packaging tape, some permanent markers for labeling, a couple of mattress bags, and then she pulls out the gift card.

"We thought you and Dustin could use a little head start when you get to your new place. So we all chipped in on a gift card so you two can stock your kitchen," I say.

Julie stares at the amount. It's a two-hundred-dollar gift card to a grocery store chain in Texas. "This is more than generous. Thank you so much," she says.

Dustin chimes in with his own set of thank yous. But Julie's not done with the gift bag. She pulls out something else, a plastic-combed book of some sort. She leafs through it, her eyes moistening with every turn of the page.

My mother smiles, looking quite pleased with herself. "Fern told me once that you wanted to know some of my recipes, so I took the time to get them printed and bound into a book for you."

I'm shocked. I can't believe my mother went through all that trouble. For years my father has been after her to keep all

of her recipes in one place instead of scattered throughout the kitchen. I guess she finally had a reason to make it happen.

“There are four copies: one for you, one for Fern, one for Dahlia, and one for me,” my mother says.

Julie snuffles and brushes her cheeks with the back of her hand. She wraps her arms around my mother and squeezes her tightly. “Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

My mother releases her and dabs at her eyelids. “You’re so welcome, dear. I’m really glad you’re going home, but you’ll definitely be missed here.” My mother’s gesture is so sweet, even I can’t help the tears that are springing to my eyes.

After a little more small talk and more thank yous and goodbyes, Brett is the first to leave, followed by Julie and Dustin. Tanner stays and helps with the cleanup, which impresses my mother, and once the kitchen is put back to its pre-party state, I head outside with Tanner.

“Thanks for hosting this and organizing it. Sorry I didn’t do more to help out and bring more drinks. I wasn’t really thinking,” he says.

“It’s okay.” I don’t dare mention it now, but if Brett hadn’t showed up with all of his drinks, I would’ve had to make a trip to the store because two six-packs of beer was nowhere near enough.

“Will I see you again soon?”

I don’t have to think about it. Tonight went far better than I could’ve expected, and I think my mom might’ve even warmed to him. There were no funny quirks coming from him, and the only thing that would top this evening off is a kiss. “Yes, we should get together soon. Sound good?”

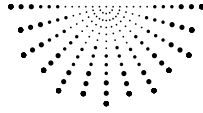
“Sounds great,” he says with a grin. He stands there, all quiet and stares at me intently. His gaze lands on my lips and he palms the back of my head, then leans in closer to me. When our lips meet, his kisses start off as cautious, safe. But once I press my lips firmer against his, he takes that as his cue to deepen the kiss.

It's finally happening. I'm feeling this kiss straight to my core and when Tanner grazes my bottom lip with his tongue, a shiver runs down my spine.

He pulls away, then presses one more kiss to my lips. "See you soon?" he asks.

"See you soon," I say, then turn away and go back into the house.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



When I get home that evening, Julie isn't in the front room, so I'm assuming she's in her bedroom. It's late and the house is dark, so maybe she's sleeping. In case she is, I quietly move through the house, flip on the kitchen light, and place the cupcakes my mom sent home with me on the counter in the kitchen.

It's dark as I walk down the hallway, the kitchen light illuminating things enough so I don't bump into anything. Right as I'm about to go in my room, a tap on my shoulder nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

"Julie, you scared the shit out of me!" I say, whipping my head around to face her.

"I'm sorry," she says, holding her hands up. "I wasn't trying to. I stood here for a few seconds debating whether talking to you with your back turned or tapping you on the shoulder was less likely to scare you."

I flip on the hallway light and Julie shields her eyes from the brightness. "I don't think there would've been a winner there. They both would've scared me because I was expecting you to be asleep in your room," I say.

She blinks a few times, then opens her eyes fully. "I wanted to wait for you to get home so I could tell you thanks for everything you did this evening. It was really sweet. Dustin and I were both touched by you and your family's thoughtfulness."

“It was my pleasure,” I say with a smile. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

“It was perfect. I don’t think I could’ve asked for a better going-away party. The gifts were so generous. Thank you for organizing that. But your mom’s gift...” Julie trails off and stands there, her eyelids beginning to glisten. If she doesn’t stop, then I’m going to end up crying too. “...It was so sweet. I will cherish that book forever,” she says, dabbing at her eyelids.

Dang it. I didn’t want to cry, but here I am, brushing my hand across my cheeks to catch the stray tears that are making a quick descent down my face. “She did that all on her own. I didn’t even know about it until tonight.”

Julie takes her shirt sleeve and blots any tears that remain on her cheeks. She snuffles a few times, then says, “Make sure to tell your mom how much I love it in case I don’t get to see her again before I leave.”

She’s leaving. It’s actually starting to sink in that Julie is leaving in only a couple of weeks. When she came back from Texas and told me she was moving in a month, it seemed like I still had forever with her. But I know these next few weeks will fly by. And I’m not ready. There’s so much I want to cram in even though I know we won’t have time for any of it.

If you would’ve asked me two years ago if I thought I’d have any sadness toward Julie leaving, I would’ve said no way. Back when I moved in, we were polite to one another, but not what I would call friends.

Now, I can say that Julie is my friend. And to be honest, she’s really the only person I talk to on a consistent basis, besides my family. Sure, I have friends from high school, but they’ve all moved on and have lives of their own. The only time I see them is maybe once a year when we all get together for a girls’ night out.

But my relationship with Julie is different. I can tell her things I wouldn’t tell my other friends. She and I “get” each other. And I’m going to miss that closeness.

I hold out my arms and she lets me wrap her in a hug. We stand there, both sniffing and crying, until finally we break apart. “We need to go out together once more before you leave. Your choice. Whatever you want to do.”

She nods. “I didn’t think leaving would be so hard, but I’m struggling. I really am. I’m excited to go home, and even more excited that Dustin is coming with me, but I’m going to miss you. You’re my friend, Fern, and I’m going to miss being able to spend time with you.”

Another fresh stream of tears spills over my eyelids. “You’ll definitely be missed here too. This house won’t be the same without you.”

Julie vacates her spot and retreats into her bedroom. A few seconds later she’s back with a few tissues and hands me one. We both dab our faces, then blow our noses, making a lot of unattractive noises. Now that my nasal passages are somewhat clear, I can breathe without feeling like I’m being suffocated by my own snot.

“I didn’t mean for this to become a crying session, but I just wanted to catch you before you went to bed. And I also wanted to know how things went with Tanner after I left,” she says.

A smile spreads across my face. “It was good.”

“Yeah?” she says, returning my smile. “Think you’ll see him again?”

“Definitely.”

WHEN I GET to work on Monday, I start my day by texting Tanner to arrange a time for us to meet up this week. I am fully committed to giving him his second chance. Or is this now his third chance? I don’t know. He responds by telling me that he’s free this week and to let him know once I have a firmer grasp on what this week is going to entail for me.

Right as I'm putting my phone away, Brett sits down next to me and starts up his computer.

He flashes me a smile. "Good morning." He's sharply dressed in a striped button-down, long-sleeved shirt and dress slacks—not that I'm paying attention to what he's wearing or anything. Of course not.

"Good morning," I say, smiling back at him. "Thanks again for bringing the drinks on Saturday. You have no idea how much it helped out." Lindsay isn't here yet, so I'm safe talking about personal matters.

"Glad I could help out. Did Julie and Dustin have a nice time?"

"They did. But I think my mom stole the show with her gift," I say. I have to tread lightly here because if I talk about it too much, I might cry again.

"It was very thoughtful of her. And you had no idea?"

I shake my head no. "She did it all on her own."

Brett hesitates, like he wants to say something else and can't quite come up with the words. I can't help but stare back, his eyes having a sort of mesmerizing effect on me. As we're having our wordless exchange, Brittany from human resources comes over to our table and hovers over us. Brett and I both turn our heads at the same time.

"Reed wants to see the two of you in his office," she says with a smirk on her face.

My stomach drops and my mouth turns dry. Shit. Someone found out about us. Someone has been spying on us and knows that we used to date. My mind goes directly to Lindsay. She's always eavesdropping every single time Brett and I say anything to one another, even if it's just hello. "Does he need to see us right now?" I ask.

She checks her watch and taps her foot, clearly impatient with my question. "Yes," she snaps. "He's expecting you now. If you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to get to." She turns on her heel and walks away, leaving Brett and I alone.

I'm too stunned to move. *Reed's office*. In the years that I've worked at Mirrormont, I think I've only ever gone to Reed's office once. And that was when I was first hired. Even though Reed likes to pride himself as being the approachable type, you don't go to his office for anything good. So to hear he wants to see both of us doesn't sit well with me. My stomach is all swimmy with nerves and the breakfast I ate this morning is churning away, threatening to come back up.

Brett stands up first and reluctantly, I follow behind. As we're walking toward Reed's office, I say, "Do you think he knows about us?"

"I don't know," he says with a shrug. "But I don't know why it'd be a problem."

"Did you say something?" I ask, my voice a cross between a whisper and a screech. It had to be him. Who else would know about our past relationship? My mind is whirling, and all thoughts are coming right back to me getting fired. I'm going to lose my job, I won't be able to afford rent, and I'll have to move back in with my parents like Dahlia.

That's ridiculous. I'm not going to get fired. People can't get fired for something that happened in the past. Right?

Oh, God. I don't like this. Not at all. Reed can be such a wild card sometimes. He once fired someone for a social media post from before she even worked for Mirrormont. And it wasn't even that bad. Really, it wasn't. Susie posted a picture of herself at a party with some of the NFL players from her home state of Georgia. That's it.

But two months after she started working here, Reed found out and said he didn't want to employ someone who couldn't maintain objectivity in her job. Fraternizing with the very people she writes about, even though it was done years ago, was enough to get her fired. I mean...are we even real journalists?

It was that bastard Lee who did it. Lee had the hots for Susie and when she rejected all of his advances, he got pissed and turned her in. Too bad. Susie was really nice too.

Lee. It had to be him. Brett must've said something in passing that Lee filed away to bring me down later.

"I swear to you, I haven't said anything," he says, gazing at me while doing so.

"Then why are we both being called into his office?"

"I don't know, Fern. Why would I lie? I don't benefit from lying to you."

He's right. He's not the one I should be concerned about. Maybe it was Lindsay. Maybe somehow, she found out and that's why she hasn't shown up yet this morning. That bitch. I'm going to have words with her when she gets in—if she ever gets in today.

When we enter Reed's office, his back is turned and he's shuffling around some papers. "Go ahead and have a seat," he instructs. "And close the door behind you."

Close the door? Oh, this is bad. I guess I should be thankful that my job here was good while it lasted.

My knees wobble as I take my seat. I shift in my seat a few times, trying to get comfortable. It's not like Reed can see me anyway since his back is still toward us. But it's no use. There *is* no getting comfortable in this office. I just hope I don't break down in tears.

"How's your secret project coming along?" Reed asks, his attention now on the filing cabinet behind his desk. He opens one of the drawers and moves a few things around, then closes it. "What are you two working on anyway?"

I glance at Brett for some help here. I don't know what the hell our secret project is, and right now, I probably couldn't even string a sentence together because I'm so nervous.

"Fern and I are working on creating a dream team for the Mariners by polling our audience to see who they'd want on their team. We thought it would be a fun way to continue the hype from this year even though the season is over," Brett says.

I look over at Brett again. He shrugs and mouths, "What?"

Nothing, really. I'm just surprised he came up with that on the fly. I give him a nod and a thumbs up because it's the only gesture I can think of to show that I approve of his explanation.

Reed swivels around in his chair to face us. He steeples his fingers against his mouth and glances between the two of us. Reed is probably in his late forties, if I had to guess. And most days he comes to work wearing a pair of dress slacks and some color of polo shirt. Today it's orange, and not even a soft orange. This one is loud, more like what you'd see on a safety vest. It's not a good color on him because all I can focus on is how blotchy it's making his skin look. "Well, I hate to drag you away from that, but I have something else I need you two to work on right now," he says.

Oh, sweet Jesus. I'm not getting fired. A wave of calm washes over me and my voice finally finds its way back to me. "It's no trouble at all," I say. And it's not. Now that the Mariners' season is done, new content is limited to potential roster moves and whatever else we can dig up.

"Good," Reed says with a smile. "As I'm sure you two know by now, our audiobook production has been ramping up lately, and a job landed on my desk Friday afternoon. It's a rush job, which is not normally how we like to do things here. But the author needs it by the end of next week and she's paying us—and you—very well for doing it. If we deliver the audiobook on time, you'll both receive a bonus of five hundred dollars, courtesy of the author."

"But why us?" Brett asks.

I want to say, "Why not us? It's five hundred dollars. Don't complain." But I keep quiet and let Reed explain.

"You two were picked because the author liked your voices best of all. I'm not sure if I should be saying this, but Fern, you were picked because she said you sounded innocent enough for the part. And Brett, you were picked because she said your voice sounded hot." Reed dips his head and loses eye contact with us. He's beginning to look like a pumpkin with his shirt and now beet-red cheeks. I hold back a snicker.

At Mirrormont, whenever anyone gets hired now, they have to record an audiobook demo. Everyone has to do this whether you want to record audiobooks or not. Then when a job comes along, the author gets to choose from a lineup of all of our voices.

“You guys might be wondering why it’s such a rush job,” Reed says. I wasn’t, but if he wants to think I care about that, then so be it. All I care about is the nice payday this is going to bring me. “The author had another company lined up to do this, but they backed out at the last minute, and she needs it done as soon as possible to stay on schedule. I said we’d love to help her out. This is probably going to require some overtime for you, which you’ll get paid for along with receiving the bonus.”

“Of course. Anything to help out. What kind of book is this?” I ask.

“It’s a romance,” Reed says. *Oh, God. You can’t be serious.* “I’ve flipped through it, and...it’s pretty graphic. So if that’s not something you’re comfortable with, then I can let the author know and she can choose someone else.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m not bothered by it,” I say, then glance over at Brett. It’s probably not that bad. Reed is kind of prudish anyway.

“It’s fine with me,” Brett says.

“Are we going to be recording it separately?” I’ve only recorded one other audiobook and it was some dual-point-of-view literary fiction book. I recorded my parts in the booth first and then the other person recorded theirs. Then our audio engineer cut them together.

Reed sighs. “We don’t have time for you to record it separately. I need you in the booth together so we can make sure your parts get done by Friday. Then Kyle is going to take next week to edit and proof it and have you two rerecord anything if necessary.”

“Sure. No problem,” I say, nodding along. “May I see the book?”

Reed hands us both a copy. It's called, "His Cherished One." Aww...that's kind of sweet actually. The cover seems safe enough. It's nothing but an unfurled red rose set against a black cover. What could be bad about that? I flip through, but don't take the time to really look at it. I want to come at this book fresh, like I'm reading it for the first time.

"I need you both to take a few minutes, get a drink, go to the restroom if you need to, and then I need you in the booth. You're going to record the first chapter together today to work out any kinks, and then you'll start recording first thing tomorrow morning. Any questions?" Reed asks.

I shake my head. "I can't think of anything."

Reed smiles and nods. "How about you, Brett? Any questions?"

Brett glances up from the page he was reading. "Huh?" He looks at me, then Reed. "Oh, no. I don't have any questions."

"The author has also requested that whatever you read, you keep between the two of you. At least until the book is released. Can I count on both of you to do that?" Brett and I both nod. "Okay, good. I'll let Kyle know to expect you in the booth in about twenty minutes." Reed flicks his hand toward the door, essentially dismissing us.

Right. I can do this. I can most definitely read a romance novel with Brett right beside me. They're just words. Nothing more.

"I'm going to go to get a bottle of water from the vending machine. Want anything?" Brett asks me.

"No, thanks. I have a water bottle at my desk."

"Okay. I'll see you in a few then."

I head back to my seat and Lindsay is there. Her gaze flicks up toward me, then lands directly on the book in my hand. "What are you doing with that?" she asks, her eyes widening.

"Brett and I have to go record an audiobook for this in a few minutes."

Her brows raise. “Are you serious? Do you have to do it together?”

I nod. “Reed said it’s a rush job and there’s no time to record it separately.”

“Have you ever read any of her books?”

I look down at the author’s name, Trixie Skye. It’s not one I recognize, but that’s not surprising considering romance isn’t really my genre. I’m more of a cozy mystery kind of girl. “Never heard of her. Is she good?”

A huge grin takes up Lindsay’s face. “Yeah, she’s good. Very good, if you know what I mean.”

I let out a sigh. “No, Lindsay. I don’t know what you mean.” I really don’t have the time to be playing her games. The clock is ticking, and I still want to use the restroom before I have to go into the booth.

“Well, I don’t want to spoil it for you. Can I see the book?” she asks, holding her hand out like I’m about to give it to her.

I clutch the book tight against my chest. “I’m not supposed to show anyone.”

“Can I read the blurb on the back of the book?”

“No. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get to the booth,” I say.

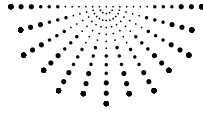
“Fine,” Lindsay huffs, then turns her attention back toward her monitor.

I check my watch and realize I only have about ten minutes before I need to record. I grab my water bottle and walk to the booth, feeling like I’ve got some prized possession in my hands. Five hundred dollars is at stake, so I can’t be careless with it. I set my things right outside the audio booth, under Kyle’s watchful eye, and tell him it’ll be just a minute while I use the restroom. Through the audio booth window, I notice Brett is already in there fully engrossed in the book. Hmm...must be pretty good then.

When I get out of the bathroom, I pick up my things and head into the booth. The booth is dark, padded, and so small, it

shoves Brett and I together in a way I'm not exactly comfortable with. I adjust a few times in my seat to make sure the chair won't squeak, then when it looks like Brett is ready too, we give Kyle the signal to start.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Holy hotness. How the hell can one chapter be so... raunchy?

Brett and I are finally out of the booth for the day, and I don't think it could've gone any worse. We had to stop so-many-times. And it wasn't because of Brett. It was me. I guess I'm not used to there being so much sex on the page so early on in a book. If I couldn't even get through one chapter without stumbling, how the hell am I going to get through tomorrow?

Brett though...he sailed through like a champ. It was like it was no big deal for him to read things like "my fingers plunged into her core." While every time I had to read something like "his release came hard and fast in my mouth, almost choking me," I stumbled.

I didn't think it would take all morning to read one chapter, and it didn't. It took all morning and part of the afternoon.

One thing's for sure—when I get home, I'm reading this book because I have to know what I'm getting into. I'm not going to be the reason we have to stop all the time.

I'm currently standing in the bathroom, making sure my cheeks aren't fire-engine red before going back to my seat. I'm sure Lindsay would get quite the kick out of that considering she knew all along what kind of book it was.

I've got about two hours left of this workday and to be honest, I don't know that I can concentrate on anything after

that. And I'm not even sure I can look at Brett again today after what we had to read.

Is it wrong that while reading the chapter, I was picturing doing some of those things to him? And him doing those things to me? That's probably normal, right? We used to date, so it's not hard for me to picture these things since I know what he looks like down there.

No, never mind. That's weird—and gross now that his “rigid member” just popped into my brain. Oh, gosh. Now that I'm thinking about it, I'm feeling all weird inside. My whole body is warm now, and I fan myself off with my hand, which isn't doing anything other than making me look like an idiot. I run the cold water in the sink and stick my hand under it to get it nice and cold. Then I place my hand on the back of my neck in an attempt to cool myself off.

I let out a sigh. It's no use. I just have to accept the fact that this week is going to be a weird one, and next week we can go back to normal.

I leave the bathroom, pick up my things that I left outside the booth, then return to my seat where Brett is focused on something on his monitor. He seems completely unbothered by what just went down in that booth. Lindsay is there too, and when she sees me, she flashes me a Cheshire-cat grin.

“So...how was it?” she asks.

“It was fine,” I say coolly. Nothing to see here, Lindsay. Go back to your work.

She leans in and whispers, “Word is already getting around that you were struggling in there.”

Great. That's what I need right now. Another reason for people to talk about me. Now everyone will think I'm some kind of virginal prude—which is exactly the character I'm supposed to be in the book. A nice, innocent virgin. “Sure, I struggled. I wasn't sure what kind of book it was, so it surprised me. Now that I know what I'm getting into, it won't be an issue,” I say, sitting up straight, hoping that I exude confidence.

“Will you at least tell me who the book is about? Trixie Skye isn’t saying anything about it. No blurb, no cover, nothing. Pleeeeeease,” she begs.

“I really shouldn’t. I could get in a lot of trouble.”

“Please, Fern. I need to know if I’m finally getting my favorite couple’s story.”

I suppose it can’t hurt anything, and this way, she won’t spend these next few weeks until release day trying to get it out of me. “It’s about Lucy and Donovan.” *Whoever they are.*

“Oh, my god!” she squeals, making everyone in our group and the two other groups next to us turn their heads. I flash a smile to show everyone that everything’s okay. “I can’t believe it! Lucy and Donovan. Finally,” she says, sighing with relief. “I’ve been waiting three years for their book.”

Around us, people slowly return to their monitors and discussions they were having before Lindsay’s outburst.

“Look, I’m really happy you finally get your book. But you need to keep this to yourself. I don’t want to get in trouble for telling you.” I don’t mention that my payday could potentially be on the line.

Lindsay leans in like she’s going to share a secret with me. “I won’t say a word, but if someone accuses you of telling me, you can just say I grabbed the book from you and found out for myself. Deal?”

I nod. “Deal.”

Did that really happen? Are Lindsay and I in on a secret together? I can’t believe it. I don’t think we’ve ever been in on anything together, other than that one time I caught her taking the batteries out of Carrie’s computer mouse. Lindsay’s mouse was dead, and I guess she didn’t feel like getting up to get other batteries. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but Carrie, who can be a bit dramatic sometimes, freaked out thinking someone had sabotaged not just her mouse, but her whole computer. She even got Reed involved and there was an investigation, which of course turned up nothing because Lindsay made me promise I wouldn’t tell. And I never have.

When the workday finally ends, I wait until most everyone has filed out for the day. I don't need anyone making jokes about how terrible I was in the booth. Brett is still here and ever since we came out of the booth, he hasn't said more than a couple of words to me. He asked me if I needed anything from the breakroom earlier, and I declined. Other than that, it's been nothing but silence on his end. It's weird, to be honest. He's normally more talkative.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow," I say, picking up my belongings. I stand up and meet his gaze and there's something in his expression I can't read. A seriousness to him that wasn't there before.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow." A whisper of a smile crosses his lips.

"Is everything okay? You seem kind of down." It's really none of my business what his problem is, but maybe this whole audiobook thing is really bothering him. Maybe he's not as comfortable with it as I thought.

"No, everything is fine," he says, gazing at me intently. I'm feeling exposed all of the sudden, like he can see all the way to my soul.

But that's ridiculous. That's probably just something I read in Trixie Skye's book. "Okay. Have a good evening then." I turn away before he can stare at me any longer. As I'm walking away, I get the urge to turn around to see if he's still looking at me. I ignore it and continue toward the front of the building. So what if he is still looking at me? I'm not going to do anything with it, so why bother?

When I get home, Julie is in the kitchen as usual, except this time she's not cooking. I mean, there *is* something going on the stove, but she also has a few boxes that she's putting things into.

"Do you need any help?" I ask after I get changed into some lounge clothes. It's hitting me now that I haven't helped her out much at all. I've been too focused on which guy I should date and how disastrous some of my dates have been.

During these final days, I need to do a better job at offering up my time.

Julie smiles while wrapping a couple of glass baking pans with bubble wrap. “No, that’s okay. I’ve got it. I had a little bit of time while the pork chops were cooking, so I thought I’d pack a few things. I didn’t think I had that much stuff, but I’ve packed a lot of boxes so far.”

I peek into the box she’s packing. There are the glass baking pans she just placed in there, plus a few other small bowls. “I need to write down all the kitchen items you’re taking. That way I know what to replace.”

“You don’t need to worry,” she says, grabbing a bright yellow bowl off a shelf in the kitchen. “I’m not taking a lot from here. Just the things that are meaningful to me.”

“Going to pack me up and take me with you?” I say with a grin.

She returns my grin. “You’re a bit big. But I’d love it if you came for a visit someday.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Are you wrapping things up at work this week?”

She lets out a sigh. “Yeah, this week is my last. Both Dustin and I are taking next week off to get things ready to go. And then it’s time.” Her gaze drifts back to the bowl she’s wrapping.

I notice she doesn’t say the word leave. I know that even though she’s excited to be starting this new chapter with Dustin, next week is going to involve a lot of tears—for both of us.

“Enough about me,” she says, reaching for another bowl off of the shelf. “How was work today?”

I groan and shake my head. “It was awful. Brett and I have to narrate an audiobook and we have to be in the booth at the same time.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad, right? It’s just reading.”

“You don’t know what kind of book it is. Ever heard of Trixie Skye?”

Julie’s eyelids snap open. “Oh, my God. No way. You have to read one of hers?” She tries to cover up her grin. “Wow... just wow. Her books are very dark, and very sexy.”

“I *know*. We recorded the first chapter today and I have never read a book where the first chapter is that graphic.”

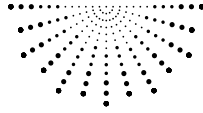
“Well, you’re in for a treat then,” she says with a chuckle.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying this. If you’re okay here, I should probably head to my room because I’ve got some reading to do. I need to know what’s in store for me tomorrow.”

“I know what’s in store for you. A whole lot of hot sex.”

I narrow my eyes which makes her burst out laughing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I *can do this.* When I walk into the booth the next day, I repeat the same mantra that I've been saying since I woke up this morning. *I can do this.*

At least today I'm not going in blind. I know exactly what kind of book I'm reading, and it's hot as hell. Actually, hotter than hell. I'm not going to lie; I was turned on more than once last night while reading. And that was when I was reading it by myself. Today, I'll have Brett staring at me.

Brett, with his sexy grin, his rock-hard abs, and his little whorls of chest hair I want to play in, will be staring at me with his do-me eyes. Oh, God. This book is getting to me already and we haven't even started yet.

I take my seat and pretend I don't notice Brett. But my body is so aware of him. There's going to be some steam in this booth today, and I know my mind is going to go back to all the times Brett and I were together.

I glance at Brett, and he glances back at me. When I nod, he then gives the signal to Kyle that we're ready to start.

APART FROM A SHORT LUNCH BREAK, we spent almost nine hours recording in the booth. After parting ways with Brett, I came out to my car, but can't bring myself to leave the parking lot yet. My joints ache from sitting so long, my lips feel like

sandpaper, and my mouth is parched. I could really go for a nap right now.

But there's one part of me that's ready to go. Down below is screaming for attention. All day long I had to read about other people having sex while Brett stared at me, intently I might add, and I don't think it's possible for me to be any more turned on.

My mind wants to go home and sleep. My lady bits down below want some action. I'm sitting here, deciding which part of me is going to take over tonight.

I take out my phone and send Tanner a text to see if he's going to be home tonight. And not just home, is he going to be alone?

TANNER: Yeah, I'll be home. I'm home now

ME: Is Dustin there?

TANNER: He's at his parents'

ME: Is he going to be gone long?

TANNER: He won't be back until late tonight

ME: I'm coming over

I'm coming all right. In more ways than one. At least that'd better be what happens tonight. I'm going to use tonight to determine whether this thing with Tanner can work in the long run. When everything else with him so far has been hit and miss, if we can somehow have fantastic sexual compatibility, then everything else *should* fall into place.

But how in the world do I even approach this with him? With Brett, it was so much easier. All I had to do was look at him a certain way and he knew what I wanted. With Tanner? I think I'm going to have to be more obvious until we get to know each other better. I've never been great at being a seductress though, so I'm sure I'll botch this up big time.

When I arrive at Tanner's, I apply some lip balm and spread it on extra thick to smooth out my rough lips. I take a few swigs of water, pop a mint in my mouth, and head up to the door. After knocking a few times, I check over my blouse

and dress slacks to make sure I'm not too wrinkled from sitting in the booth most of the day.

Tanner answers the door wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans, and his feet are bare. Already this is going my way. There's something about jeans and bare feet on a guy that brings me to my knees.

The corner of his lips pull up in a grin. "Hey, there. What brings you to my door?"

I bat my eyelashes and flash him a smile. "I know we're both going to be busy helping our roommates move out this week and next, and I thought I'd stop by for a visit since I had the time tonight." Just for good measure, I flick my red hair over my shoulder, exposing my neck. A neck I'd like very much for him to kiss, but we'll get to that part later.

"Well, come on in," he says, then steps aside.

I walk over the threshold and pause right in front of him. A look passes between us. It's now or never. So he knows my intentions, I plant my lips against his and he deepens the kiss, latching onto my waist, running his hand down my backside. He tastes like mint, so maybe he was hoping for something too and brushed his teeth before I got here.

He pulls away and runs his tongue along his bottom lip. His gaze flicks up and down my body, and I know deep down, he's practically undressing me with his eyes. If he would just hurry up and take me back to his bedroom, he could see what I look like.

"When you said you were coming over, I wasn't sure what to expect," he says.

"You didn't think I was coming over for dinner, did you?" I say with a flirtatious smile while kicking off my shoes.

"I was hoping not. It looks like we're both after the same thing, so I won't waste any more time. My bedroom is this way," he says, then takes me by the hand and leads me down a hallway.

When we reach his room, he flips on the light to reveal a decent set of bedroom furniture. It's modern with dark wood

tones. The bed is made, but the sheets aren't smooth, making me think he hastily made it for my arrival. We stand there, at the foot of his bed, both of us waiting for someone to make the first move. I don't want it to be me. I've done enough just by contacting him and coming over here. I want him to take charge now. Dammit. Let me live vicariously through the character I'm narrating, who has a take-charge man at the helm.

Tanner finally closes the distance between us and presses his lips to mine, then grazes my bottom lip with his tongue, just like he did after the going away party. But this time, I feel nothing. There's no shiver down my spine, nothing I'm feeling deep down.

I press my lips harder against his, deepening the kiss, wanting to feel something, anything. Tanner untucks my blouse from my pants and brushes his hand against my bare skin around my waistband. It's a touch that doesn't even register with me.

His lips leave mine and make their way down my neck, which should be giving me goosebumps. Again, nothing. His tongue dips into the hollow of my neck, and all I'm feeling is wetness on my skin that I want to wipe off. I was more turned on today while reading words on a page than I am right now in the midst of the actual act.

Everything about this situation feels wrong and I can't let it continue. I know what the problem is. It's because the person in front of me is not who I want to be with, and I think I knew it all along. But stubbornness got the best of me, and I had to see this thing with Tanner, whatever we're calling it, through.

It's time. I have to end this, but I'm not about to break up with him here, not when I'm the one who came here practically begging for sex. As Tanner fumbles with the buttons on my blouse, I place my hands over his in an attempt to get him to stop.

"Oh, did you want to take it off yourself?" he asks, lifting his lips away from my neck.

“No, I don’t want my blouse to come off.”

“Okay, we’ll leave it on then,” he says, then reaches for the button on my pants.

I take his hands off my waistband and hold them in mine. “We need to stop.”

“What’s wrong? Afraid I’ll be too big for you?” He takes my hand and rubs it against his erection.

“Oh, my God, no. That’s not it at all,” I say, pulling my hand away like I’ve just been burned. “I...I...” I’m struggling to come up with a reason to leave, when finally, it comes to me. According to Julie, guys always freak out when this is mentioned. “I started my period.”

Tanner rights himself and looks at me in disbelief. “Just now?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I knew it was coming soon, but I guess it’s decided that right now is the time. It feels like a real gusher too,” I add, just to drive the point home.

Tanner strokes his chin, like he’s deep in thought, and shrugs. “I’m okay with it if you’re okay with it. We can just put a towel down on the bed or something like that. Or we can take this into the shower.”

Is he seriously suggesting that we have sex while I’m on my period? And here I thought I’d find the one topic that would repulse him, ensuring my ticket out of here. “I’d rather not. I’m so sorry to cut this short, but I need to get this taken care of. I’ll see myself out.”

Before he can say anything more, I make my way to the front of his house and slip on my shoes that I left by the front door. Tanner catches up with me right as my hand grips the door handle.

“Maybe we can pick up where we left off some other time,” he says, his tone sounding hopeful.

I open the door and look at my car parked on the street, keeping my attention on it while I lie. There will be no other

time. I'll only need to see Tanner once more after this, when I finally end things for good. "Yeah, maybe."

"WELL, IT'S OFFICIAL," I say when I walk in the front door to our house. I throw my keys down on the entryway table. "I'm breaking up with Tanner."

Julie, who was lying down on the couch in some pajamas, sits up. "Oh, no. What happened?"

"I went over to his house to see if we're sexually compatible."

"And? What did you find out?"

"I couldn't go through with it."

"Why not? Was he bad in bed? Terrible at foreplay?"

"I don't know. We didn't get that far." She looks at me, waiting for me to explain. I take a seat at the other end of the couch and tuck one leg under me, letting the other dangle. "You know how I've been narrating that book with Brett?" She nods. "I was so turned on today, I needed to do something about it. So, I texted Tanner to see if he was home alone, which he was. I got to his house, and we started kissing. Then we walked back to his bedroom where he tried to kiss me some more, but I felt nothing. When he tried to take my blouse off, that's when I had to put a stop to things. He's not who I want to be with, and I think I knew that after the brewery tour. In my mind, I had him on such a pedestal, I thought that his awful kiss had to be a fluke. If it was just one bad kiss, I could've ignored it, but from there, things just kept going downhill."

"How'd you get out of it? What did you say to him?"

My face twitches from trying to hold back the grin that's forming. "I told him I started my period."

Julie's mouth gapes open. "You didn't."

“I did,” I say with a nod. “I even said it was a ‘real gusher.’”

She chuckles. “What did he say? Was he grossed out?”

“No. That’s the weirdest part about it. He said that we could put a towel down or take it into the shower.”

“Gross,” she says with a grimace. “That’s definitely not what I’d expect from him.”

“I know. I don’t get it either. Why would he want our first time together to be a situation like that? It would be memorable, but for all the wrong reasons. But this just solidifies that I’m doing the right thing by breaking up with him. It just sucks that it took me so long to get to this point.”

“It’s partially my fault that you pursued it so long, since I kept pushing you to give him another chance. I guess Tanner isn’t who I thought he’d be,” Julie says.

“Don’t blame yourself. It was my choice all along. I had something great and I gave it up. I guess all these mishaps with Tanner is fate’s way of teaching me a lesson for breaking up with Brett.”

“Well, now you can say that you gave him many chances, but some things aren’t meant to be. When are you going to break up with him?”

“This weekend. I’ll let what happened tonight sit for a few days, and then I’ll contact him.” My stomach grumbles, and I glance toward the kitchen. “Did you eat dinner yet?”

“I had leftovers from last night. There’s still plenty in the fridge if you want.”

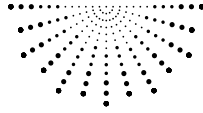
I turn back toward Julie and look her in the eye. Pretty soon, I’m going to be looking at someone else on this couch, and I don’t know who that’s going to be yet. “Hey, when are we going to have our final girls’ night? And have you thought about what you want to do?”

“No, I haven’t thought about it. But I don’t really have the energy for a big to-do. I still have quite a bit of packing to do,” she says with a sigh.

“Well, since you don’t have the energy for something big, we can stay in. Will you bake something in the kitchen with me one last time?”

She smiles. “Sure. I’d like that.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I survived. That's the best thing I can say about work this week.

We finished our audiobook narration late last night and now it's in Kyle's hands. My character did get her happily ever after with Donovan, and their honeymoon was, of course, filled with glorious sex. So that was nice...for them.

When I got home, the only thing I had energy for was vegging out. I even went to bed early. I never knew reading aloud could be so tiring. And not just reading, reading about people having sex for practically the whole damn book wore me out.

But today is a new day. I'm feeling fully refreshed and ready to go. It's Saturday morning and I'm on my way to a coffee shop a few blocks away from our house. It's also breakup day today. And while I was more than ready to tackle this breakup head-on when I left the house, every step I get closer to the coffee shop, the more nervous I'm getting. There's a knot forming in my stomach, and when I see the crowd in the coffee shop, I'm thinking maybe I should've picked somewhere less public.

I thought this coffee shop would be a safe choice, since we never went here together. It's also a place I've never heard Tanner talk about before, so I don't need to worry about ruining someplace that's a favorite of his.

And I thought that by picking a public place, I could avoid him trying to talk me into staying with him. But now that I

think about it, that's really self-centered of me to even think that. Who says he even wants to be with me anymore? Maybe he'll be relieved about this breakup.

When I arrive, I hurry in and grab a table before they're all taken. Around me, the sounds of the coffee shop: espresso machines hissing, blenders whirring, and people talking all blend together in an assault on my eardrums. It's perfect for what I want. Unless Tanner starts yelling and making a scene, no one will hear what's said between us.

About five minutes later, Tanner arrives and even though the line is out the door, I told him I'd grab a table when I got here. He stands close to the door, his gaze darting around, not seeing me at all. I stick my hand up and wave him over. A smile crosses his face when he sees me, and a pang of guilt hits me in the chest. Soon that smile is going to be erased.

Tanner is dressed much like I am, in a sweatshirt and jeans. My sweatshirt is from my alma matter, the University of Washington, whereas his is a Mariners sweatshirt. In this light, in these clothes, in this atmosphere, I can't help but admit he's attractive. But he was always attractive to me. It's everything else that's a turnoff.

"Good morning," he says. He hesitates and gives me a little grin, like he wants me to get up so he can give me a kiss. Not happening. I stay in my seat and flash a polite smile until finally he gets the hint and sits down.

"Good morning," I reply. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

He shakes his head. "No, I've seen this place before, so I knew where it was. Did you order yourself something to drink?"

"I wanted to wait on you. But now that I'm seeing the line, I probably should've ordered for you."

"That's okay. We can wait a little bit for the line to go down."

What I don't say is the line will probably stay out the door all morning. I've seen it happen several times. But since we're

not getting drinks right now, would this be a good time to break up with him? Should we skip the drinks altogether so we can both move on with our mornings? No use getting drinks if things are about to get awkward very soon.

Wait or do it now? Hmm... I should probably just come out with it.

Tanner looks at me from across the table, and I smile at him again. Oh, God. It was so much easier when I was only thinking about dumping Tanner. But now I actually have to go through with it and say the words.

Maybe some small talk first. "So, what are you watching now that the Mariners are done? Are you into the Seahawks at all?"

"Not much of a Seahawks fan. I'm more of a Sounders guy," he says. "If you liked my Mariners getup, you should see what I wear for the Sounders."

"Yeah? You paint your face for that too?"

"Of course. And dye my hair." He sits up, like he's proud of this, which further confirms that I'm doing the right thing. I can't be with a guy who dresses up for professional sports like he's still in college.

I swallow once, then lean closer to him so he can hear me. All of the tables beside of us have now filled up with a mix of young people, at least younger than me, who are talking like they just need to be heard. I mean, I can hear every-single-word they're saying. There's a girl who is showing her friends pictures on her phone of her recent vacation to San Diego. "The beaches were so nice, and it was warm enough for me to show off my new bikini." There are a few guys who are trying to organize their next party. "Which brewery do you think we should get a keg from?" And then there's a young woman who is lifting her pant leg and showing off a rash. "Do you think it's serious?" she's asking her friend. If she has to ask that question, she should probably just get it checked out.

It's getting harder and harder to concentrate on anything in here, so it's time to come out with it. But what the hell should

I say? Should I go with the classic, “It’s not you, it’s me”? Or “Maybe we can just be friends”? But no, I don’t even want that.

I clear my throat and make sure his eyes are on me. “Tanner, the real reason I asked you here today wasn’t to have coffee with you this morning.” I glance across the table and he’s staring at me like he’s extremely fascinated in what I have to say. “I don’t think it’s working out between us.”

I sit there, waiting to see some kind of reaction from him. I’m getting nothing. No change in expression, no twitch of his face, not even a gasp. Maybe he’s cool with it, which would be amazing. I’d hate for him to walk out of here in a huff.

Tanner turns and looks over his shoulder. “Hey, the line is going down. Want me to get you something to drink?”

“Did you hear what I said just now?” I say, louder this time.

“What?” he calls out.

Oh, my God. This coffee shop was a bad idea. It doesn’t do me any good that no one can hear our conversation when we can’t even hear ourselves. How is it that I can hear him, but he can’t hear me? I’m not whispering for crying out loud. “I don’t want anything to drink. That’s not why I brought you here.”

Tanner looks over his shoulder again. “I’ll just go and get us something to drink,” he says, then stands up. I need to hurry if I’m going to do this, otherwise I’ll be stuck here for who knows how long, drinking a drink I don’t really want with someone I don’t want to be with.

I shake my head and point to his seat, which he sits back down in. Great. So apparently pointing works. Maybe I can mime my way through this breakup.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want something to drink?” he shouts, struggling to compete with the noise surrounding us.

Okay, shouting it is then. “I don’t want anything to drink!”

“Then why did you want to meet here?” he yells again.

Oh, my gosh. It's time to abort. I can't shout my way through this breakup—I just can't. This is not at all what I had envisioned when I was thinking about how this would shake out. “I think it's time for us to go.”

He cocks his head to the side. “But you just had me sit back down. And now you want to leave? That doesn't make any sense.”

I can't go through with it. Not now. “I just...I need to leave.” I stand up and make an attempt toward the door, but Tanner grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my skin. It doesn't hurt, but I don't appreciate being held in place and try to shake off his grip. It only makes him grip my arm tighter. A few people from the surrounding tables glance over at us and after I flash a smile, they resume their very loud conversations.

“You showed up at my house the other day and left in a hurry. You made me come all the way here and now you're leaving again. What's going on with you?” he asks, his brow furrowed.

Why is he making this so difficult for me? I really want to do the right thing here, but he's right. All of my inconsistencies are adding up and he'll eventually get the hint. And I feel like that would be worse than this public breakup. The truth needs to come from me. “You want to know the real reason I brought you here?”

“Yes, Fern,” he says with a slight eyeroll. Maybe I wasn't supposed to see it but I did, and it irritates me. “That's what I'm asking.”

Fine. If he wants to know, I'll come out with it, and I'm going to make sure I only have to say it once. “I brought you here to break up with you!”

The tables around me go silent and all heads turn in our direction. Tanner releases my arm and sits there, too stunned to move. The expression on his face is one of hurt. And now everyone is looking at us, seeing the hurt on his face and knowing I'm the one who made him look that way.

“What? Why? I thought you were enjoying our time together,” he says, his expression one of disbelief.

“It’s just not working out for me,” I say, my voice coming out almost like a whisper.

Literally everyone in the coffee shop is focused on us now. Even the baristas have stopped what they’re doing to watch the showdown. When I brought Tanner here, I thought I’d be avoiding a scene, but a scene is exactly what we’re getting.

“You seemed to enjoy yourself when you came over to my house the other day,” he says, his eyes narrowed. “That is until your period showed up.”

I hear a few snickers around me from the neighboring tables. If he wants to go there, I’m happy to oblige. “I faked it, okay? I didn’t start my period. I just didn’t want to have sex with you. There. Now you know.” I look down at him, my eyes meeting his. “This isn’t how I wanted this to go down, so I’m sorry for bringing you here. And I’m sorry that people can’t seem to mind their own business,” I yell, loud enough for everyone to hear, not that they had any trouble hearing me earlier. “Goodbye, Tanner. I’m sorry again it had to end this way.”

As I’m walking out of the coffee shop, it feels like everyone’s eyes are on me. Which they probably are, but I don’t dare turn around to look. I’m seeing enough eyes on me right in front of me. Since everything around me is silent, I have no problem hearing the woman who calls me a bitch, or the guy who says, “Can I get your number?” which causes a whole round of giggles from the crowd. My cheeks are warm and probably look like they’re on fire.

People standing in line are doing their best to look busy, probably trying to spare me any further embarrassment. But somehow, them ignoring me feels worse. I’d almost rather they stare at me because then I could stare back and throw them one of my best icy gazes. A woman, a bit shorter than me, holds the door open for me as I pass through. It’s not a kind gesture though. She’s holding the door open because

that's where the line is now, and it's wrapping around the building.

"What a shitty thing to do," the woman says under her breath as I pass by. I don't bother responding.

As I exit, I can hear the crowd behind me resuming their conversations, and the baristas resuming their work. The blenders are going again, the coffee beans are being ground, and it's as if I was never there at all. A large part of me wants to sneak a glance at Tanner to see how he's doing in there. I hope he's not too upset, even though I know that's just me trying to make myself feel better. Of course, he's going to be upset. I humiliated him in front of a whole coffee shop full of people. I should've had him over to the house. It would've been so much easier. But hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

I'm no more than ten feet down the sidewalk when I hear someone call my name. Oh, God. Was there someone in the coffee shop from work? Are they coming out here to make fun of me? I should keep going and not stop walking until I'm far away from this place.

"Fern! Wait up!"

I turn and see Brett standing on the sidewalk outside the coffee shop. Why does he have to be here now of all times? He's standing next to a woman and he leans over, says something to her, then he's running toward me. A spark of jealousy ignites inside of me. Is that his new girlfriend? If so, she's stunning—and the exact opposite of me. She's tan with honey-blond hair and pouty lips. Maybe Brett decided that having one girlfriend with pale, freckled skin was enough for a lifetime. And dammit...even her clothes are stylish. She's dressed in some kind of pants suit, more fitting for going to a fancy party than a coffee shop.

"What happened? You look upset," Brett says. It's then that I notice he's wearing a shirt I bought him a while back. It's a graphic long-sleeved T-shirt with Sasquatch on it that says, "Hide and seek champion." It pleases me to know that he kept it and feels comfortable enough to wear it while out with his new girlfriend.

“Don’t act like you didn’t hear what went on in there,” I say. Breaking up with Tanner, having everyone witness it, hearing their snide comments, and now seeing Brett with his new girlfriend is too much for me to handle. Tears of frustration are rimming my eyelids and all I’d need to see is Brett kiss his new girlfriend and it would send me over the edge.

“What are you talking about? I just got here,” he says. His eyes show concern, and he reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder. His touch is warm, comforting, and keeps the tears at bay. Gosh, I’ve missed this. I’ve missed Brett and his kind, caring personality, and his touches, even ones so small like this.

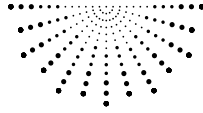
I take a deep breath and swallow down the catch in my throat. “I broke up with Tanner and the whole coffee shop overheard. I don’t think I can show my face in there ever again.” Too bad. I really liked their white chocolate mocha, and their lemon blueberry scones were so tender.

Brett’s face pulls into a frown. “I’m sorry to hear that. Are you okay?”

I manage a small half-smile. “I will be. Thanks for checking on me. You should probably head back,” I say, nodding toward the coffee shop. “The line is really starting to move now that the baristas are working again instead of listening in.”

I turn away and leave Brett standing there on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



It's a long walk home, which gives me way too much time to think. What an idiot I am for thinking a public breakup would be the best choice. If the roles were reversed and Tanner broke up with me publicly, I think I'd probably hate him forever.

And I can't believe I said that bit about faking my period. What an awful thing to do and so unlike me. But I felt like I was being attacked, so I lashed out. I think Tanner probably could've survived the very public breakup, but to have someone say they don't want to have sex with you...in front of all those people? That's probably going to sting for a while. The woman at the door was right. It was a shitty thing to do, and I don't think I could feel like any worse of a human being.

Then, to top things off, I got to see Brett with his new, gorgeous girlfriend. It's great that he's moved on, but that's not the image I want to carry with me. To think, I could still be with Brett now, but instead, I'm single and feeling like an absolute jerk.

When I walk in the door, I set my keys and phone down on the entryway table. The house is silent, which is odd because Julie was here when I left. She's not in the kitchen, not in the living room, and I don't hear any movement from her bedroom. I'm guessing she has headphones on and didn't hear me come in.

I trudge to my bedroom to change and as I'm getting ready to open my door, Julie pokes her head out of her room.

“How did it go?” she asks. She’s still in her pajamas, which is exactly what I’m going to be wearing as soon as I get changed.

I heave a big sigh “Horrible. Probably the worst it could’ve gone. Although, he didn’t yell and scream at me, so I guess it actually could’ve been worse.”

Her face pulls into a frown. “Want to tell me all about it? Or would you rather not relive it?”

“No, I can talk about it. It would probably do me some good to get things out in the open. Give me a few to change and then I’ll talk.” She’s about to go back in her room when I interrupt her. “Can we have our baking day today? I could use a pick-me-up.”

She flashes a smile. “Sure. And while we’re baking, you can tell me all about it.”

WE’RE SITTING at the kitchen table in our pajamas, waiting on our cake to finish baking in the oven, and we’ve both got mugs of hot herbal tea in front of us. It’s probably about time for us to have lunch, but after spending all that time baking, I really don’t want to get up and make anything.

While we worked on getting the cake together, I told Julie everything. Even the part where I told Tanner I faked my period because I didn’t want to have sex with him. She didn’t necessarily side with me, and I didn’t expect her to, but she said he kind of had it coming. I also mentioned seeing Brett and his new girlfriend outside the coffee shop, which still hurts to think about.

“So now that you’ve got your breakup off of your chest, maybe now’s a good time to tell you this,” Julie says, looking at me over the top of her mug while she takes a sip of tea.

“Tell me what?”

Her gaze flits to the table’s surface and she wipes off crumbs that didn’t exist. “When I move out in a week, Tanner

offered to help out. He said he wants to help Dustin carry out some of my heavier furniture.”

Great. That’s just great. Here, I thought that with Dustin leaving and Julie moving out, I would never have to see Tanner again. There’s really no reason for our paths to ever cross again, unless we happen to see each other at a Mariners game, where he should be easy to spot, and easy to avoid. I should’ve known better. “You could’ve asked me to help, you know. I was planning on helping you out anyway.”

“You can’t lift the heavier items.”

“Sure, I can. Look at these muscles,” I say, pretending to flex my wimpy arm muscles.

She chuckles. “Please. Remember the time we moved the kitchen table across the room? I ended up doing it myself because it was easier and quicker than moving it together. And do I need to remind you about the time I asked you to help me move the couch?”

No, she doesn’t need to remind me about that time. I felt like I was really giving it my all, but I was barely picking it up off the floor. “It’s a heavy couch,” I say with a shrug.

She belts out a laugh. “I’m only teasing. Seriously though, my feelings won’t be hurt if you want to leave while we’re moving stuff out. That way you can avoid seeing Tanner.”

“No way,” I say with a distinct shake of my head. “I’m staying to help out. If things are going to get weird, then so be it. I’m not going to miss out on these last few moments with you.”

Julie cracks a half-hearted smile and takes another sip of her tea. “Have you decided who you’re going to room with after I leave?”

It’s something I’ve been thinking about, and even though I said I wasn’t going to room with this person, it’s not as if I have a lot of options. I haven’t really looked for anyone else, so this choice seems the least disruptive. And I know it would mean a lot to her. “Yeah, I think I’m going to have Dahlia move in with me.”

Her eyes go wide. “What? I thought you were never going to room with her.”

“I know. I thought the same thing, but with all the work stuff going on and things with Tanner, I haven’t had the time to look for anyone else. I know it would mean a lot to my mom and to Dahlia, so I’m going to do it.”

“I’m happy that you’re going to have someone here so soon after me. I would hate for you to be alone here.”

“I know Dahlia won’t be as cool as you, and I doubt she’ll listen to me complain as well as you, but maybe this is what we need to grow our relationship as sisters.” I take a sip of my tea and focus my gaze on Julie. “I sure am going to miss you though. We’ve had some fun times.”

“Yeah, we have,” she says with a grin.

ON MONDAY MORNING, when I wake up for work, it’s cloudy and drizzly which isn’t helping my mood. But what did I expect? It’s October, so the weather is always hit and miss around this time of year. Getting ready for work feels like it takes me days, and when I head to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee, I’m feeling quite sluggish, and my footsteps are heavy. Julie is there already, and she greets me with a smile.

“Good morning,” she says, and when she sees my face, her lips turn down into a frown. “I take it it’s not a good morning?”

“No, it’s not.”

“What’s wrong?” She pours a cup of coffee and sets it down in front of me, then pushes the creamer and sugar, which are already on the table, closer to me.

“A lot of things. What happened this weekend, seeing Brett, you leaving. It’s just really hitting me hard today.” I don’t say this, but I think part of it is because last week I spent so much time with Brett, in such close proximity, and even though we were narrating the whole time, it reminded me how

much I missed being with him. So to see him with someone else is really hard. And now I'm going to have to work beside him and act like everything is great and normal when it's not.

Again, I don't need reminding that it's all my fault.

"Well, if you need anything from me, let me know." She goes back to the stove and spoons some scrambled eggs onto a plate, then pivots to the toaster and grabs two pieces of toast that just popped up. The whole plate is set down in front of me. I look up at her in shock and she shrugs. "It wasn't that long ago that you did the same for me," she says.

"Did you pack my lunch for me too?"

She flashes a grin. "I might have."

Oh, no. Not now. The tears I've been trying to keep at bay are now threatening to spill over. If I cry, then my mascara will be toast and I'll have to redo it, which will then make me late for work, and on top of everything else I've got going on today, I just can't handle that right now. "Thank you," I manage to squeak out, my bottom lip quivering.

She holds out her arms and motions for me to stand up. I get up from my seat and let her wrap her arms around me. "It's going to be okay. Today is going to be rough and awkward, but you're strong. You'll get through it." When she releases me, she glances over toward the counter. "And there's still some cake leftover, so you have that to look forward to when you get home."

That gets a smile from me. "You'd better not eat all of it."

"I wouldn't dare."

By the time I get to work, Brett is already there, which is unfortunate. I was hoping I'd beat him here so I could be fully engrossed in a project when he arrived. That way, except managing a small hello, I could pretend he wasn't there. After spending all last week in the booth, there's no shortage of work for me to do.

He glances up at me and there's concern in his gaze. "Hey, Fern. How are you?" On any other day, this would be a normal question. But this isn't any other day. His expression, and his

knowledge of the events that transpired over the weekend, make this question a loaded one.

This isn't what I need right now. I don't need him to pity me. "I'm fine," I snap, not believing for a second the words coming out of my mouth. I'm most definitely not fine. Sure, I put on a brave face when I left the house this morning, but all that confidence has vanished.

"You don't look fine." He glances around the room. "Come on, no one else is here yet. It might do you some good to get it out."

I doubt that. "I'm not fine, okay? I broke up with Tanner, which you already knew, Julie is moving out this week, and—" Shit. I can't say that. Not in front of him. I can't say I'm upset that he's seeing someone else.

"And what?"

Think, Fern. *Think*. "And I've decided to let Dahlia move in with me, even though I'm not sure it's the best choice." There. That sounds believable enough.

Brett nods but hesitates before speaking. "I'm taking you out to lunch then."

"But Julie packed my lunch for me. Taco salad and a chocolate chip cookie for dessert," I say, and can't hold back my grin. Julie knows me too well. She knew I'd need that chocolate chip cookie today.

"Then you can bring it to the restaurant with you. I really want to take you out though," he says, looking at me sincerely. I don't read into that at all because I know he's only trying to make me feel better. "I think you need a chance to vent."

I can't argue with that.

When lunch time rolls around, Brett and I walk out together, not too close though, so as not to alarm Lindsay. But when we get out on the sidewalk, we move closer to one another. I'm carrying my lunch box, because I'm not about to let Julie's hard work go to waste, and Brett has his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black dress slacks. The rain has stopped—for now—but the clouds are still thick, blanketing

everything in gray, and there's a chill in the air which makes me wrap my cardigan tighter around me.

"Where were you planning on going to lunch?" I ask.

"I wanted to take you to a place where you'd be most comfortable eating a lunch you brought with you instead of something you bought there, and I came up with Hungry Bigfoot. They have an area in the back of the restaurant where you could eat your lunch and no one would think twice about it," he says with a hint of a smile.

This is just another example of the kind of person Brett is. He's always thinking about what's best for the other person. And right now, that other person happens to be me.

At the restaurant, Brett holds the door open for me and I mutter a thanks. He stands in line for his sandwich while I go find us a table. I take the table all the way in the back, where no one is, so we can hopefully talk without anyone listening in. Not that anyone would find our conversation exciting anyway, but I know this place is a popular hangout for my coworkers, so I'm trying to make sure we're discreet.

I spread out the contents of my lunch box and smile when I see Julie's handwritten note: *You've got this. And if you don't, ditching work is always an option.* I tuck the note back in my lunchbox right as Brett sits down.

"Well, that's a different look than the one I've been seeing all morning," he says, noticing my smile.

"Julie wrote me a note giving me permission to ditch work if I felt like I couldn't get through the day."

"That's nice of her. I'm sure if you show Reed that, he probably wouldn't argue."

"He'd be smart not to argue with her anyway. He wouldn't win." I nod toward his sandwich. "What did you get?" I ask, then take a bite of my taco salad. It's got cumin, some acidity from lime juice if I had to guess, creaminess from the guacamole, and sweetness from the corn.

"I went for the Italian sub today. I wanted something other than my usual turkey club," he says, then takes a big bite of his

sub. When he finishes his bite, he says, “So this week is it, huh?”

I don’t have to ask what he means. “Yeah, she’s moving out this weekend.”

“Do you need any help moving?”

“I don’t think so. She’s got Dustin and Tanner offered to help too.”

His face pulls into a grimace. “I’m sorry. I bet that’s going to be weird having Tanner around since you just broke up,” he says, then takes another bite.

“I’m sure it will be. But I’m not about to miss out on helping her because of it.”

“Hey, since we’re on the topic of Tanner, I wanted to apologize for not walking you home after what happened to you at the coffee shop.”

I wave him off. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault. I did it to myself. I didn’t have to break up with him there, but I thought it’d be easier.”

“I felt terrible anyway, but my cousin was in town visiting and it was the first time she’d ever been out here.”

“Your cousin?” Wait a minute. Does he mean that woman he was with wasn’t a new girlfriend? It was his cousin?

“Yeah, she’s the woman I was with at the coffee shop. She was in town from Boston for work and had some time to meet up. I’d promised to show her around a little bit.”

I nod in understanding, but don’t know what to say yet. All weekend long, I lamented the fact that I had really screwed up with Brett and he had finally moved on. “Your cousin,” I finally say at last.

He pauses, and I can tell he’s reading my expression. He’s probably got it all worked out in his head. “Who did you think she was?” he asks, even though I’m sure he knows what I was thinking.

“I thought she was your new girlfriend,” I say, my cheeks feeling flush.

A grin tugs at the corner of his lips, and his gaze meets mine. “You don’t have to worry there. There’s no one new.”

“I wasn’t worried,” I say quickly, but there’s no fooling Brett.

A silence descends over our table, and I don’t feel the need to fill it with small talk. I’m still trying to process the fact that Brett is still single, and now I’m single. But that’s crazy for me to even think about. He wouldn’t want me back, would he?

After we finish our respective lunches, I ask Brett if he wants to split the cookie with me. Consider it a sort of peace offering. He accepts, and I split the cookie as close to even as possible and hand him half. It’s too bad there’s only one cookie to split between us because as soon as the sweetness hits my tongue, it’s transformative. It’s hard to be in a bad mood when eating a chocolate chip cookie.

When we finish up, Brett clears his trash and I pack up my lunch box. We make our way through the maze of tables and once outside, he turns toward me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I will be, I guess.” I’m definitely better now that I know Brett is single, and I can almost forget about my terrible breakup with Tanner. But my best friend is still leaving town, and I’m going to have to sit with that all week.

“Come here,” Brett says, and holds out his arms. Immediately, I go to them and let him wrap me in the most comforting hug I think I’ve ever had. It’s warm and tender, and I can’t stop myself from inhaling. A delicate floral scent, which I know to be from his laundry detergent, hits my nostrils, and this embrace isn’t one I want to leave. But then drops of rain begin to fall, and we have no choice but to pull apart.

The walk back to the office is swift since neither of us is prepared for heavy rain, and then we’re both back in front of

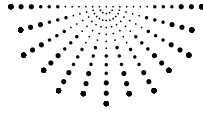
our monitors, pretending that nothing happened. Brett throws a glance my way and smiles. I can't help the grin that stretches across my face.

An hour later, Brittany shows up and looks down at Brett and me. "Reed wants to see the two of you in his office."

A week ago, this would've sent a cold shiver down my spine. Now, I'm guessing maybe he has another audiobook for us to narrate. But when we enter and I see Reed's expression, this doesn't look like good news.

"Close the door behind you and sit down," Reed instructs. Brett closes the door and joins me in the seat right next to mine. "So...how long have the two of you been in a relationship?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



He found out about us. My worst fears about Brett and I working in the same place have finally come to fruition.

Even though Brett and I are most certainly not in a relationship, that doesn't mean anything here. My mind flashes back to the day Susie got fired for her social media post. I'll never forget the tears streaming down her face as she gathered her things and walked out of the building. How mortifying for her. I'd hate for the same thing to happen to me.

But there's no one in this office who knows that we were once a couple. Even so, I don't dare look over at Brett because that might give something away. Reed is perceptive and he might see a little flicker of recognition between us. Or he might see Brett giving me a look that says, "Don't be worried."

"There's nothing going on between us," Brett says, breaking the silence.

Reed steeplés his fingers in front of his lips and looks my way. "Fern, is that true?"

I keep my expression as composed as possible. "Of course, it's true," I say with an affirmative nod. "I've been here long enough to know your policy about dating inside and out. And I hope that by now, I've earned your trust, so you'll trust me when I say there's nothing going on. Who told you otherwise?"

Reed's gaze darts between the two of us, probably looking for one of us to break, before finally settling on me. "It doesn't

matter. When the person came in here telling me about a hug between the two of you, it didn't sound like something you'd do, Fern."

Oh, fuck. Someone saw the two of us? Dammit. When we were at the restaurant, I didn't see anyone from work there, but then again, I wasn't really paying attention either. I was too focused on Brett in front of me. But then we hugged outside... for all to see. How stupid of us.

I could lie about it, but then if someone had decided to be really nasty and took a picture, well, that I can't deny. "Yes, he gave me a hug. But that doesn't automatically mean we're in a relationship. I was having a really bad day, and Brett tried to console me. My roommate is moving to Texas this week, and I just broke up with my boyfriend."

Reed's expression changes to a more sympathetic one. "I'm sorry to hear that. If you feel like you need to take the rest of the day off, you're more than welcome to."

"No, I'm fine now. Brett was kind enough to listen to my woes for a little bit." I look over at Brett and give a small smile.

"It's nice that Brett seems to be adjusting well here. It seems you two have formed a close bond already," Reed states.

"Yeah, I think so," Brett answers.

"I agree," I say with a nod. "He's been a great addition to our group."

"Well, good. I won't waste any more of your time," Reed says. I begin to stand up, but Reed interrupts. "Oh, I forgot to tell you that Trixie Skye was very pleased with your narration. Good job you two."

My eyes widen. "The audiobook is done already?" Goodness. I knew Kyle was good at his job, but I didn't think he was *that* good.

Reed shakes his head. "Oh, no. He's not done yet, but the chapters he's finished he sent to Trixie to get her take on it. She's really happy with the whole thing and because of your

performance, I think she's going to move all of her audiobook narration to us."

"That's good news. And we were happy to help," Brett says.

Brett and I stand up and move toward the door. "Thanks for coming in you two. I'm sorry I had to take time out of your afternoon for this," Reed says.

"It's no problem," I say.

When Brett and I exit Reed's office, inside, I'm fuming. Who the hell went running to Reed to snitch on us? But deep down, I already know who it is. I glance over to where Lee's sitting and he meets my gaze. There's a glint in his eye and I know it was that little asshole who went to Reed, probably trying to earn brownie points with him. Just for good measure, I glare at him, and he flashes me a smirk. *Bastard.*

"I'm going to go use the restroom before heading back," Brett says.

"It's probably best that we don't return together anyway. We don't want anyone else to think there's something going on between us."

Back at my group's table, as soon as I take my seat, Lindsay leans over to me. "What happened? I heard you and Brett had to go to Reed's office...and not for something good."

"Yeah? Who told you that?"

"Carrie, who heard it from Kevin, who heard it from Grady, who heard it from—"

"Let me guess. He heard it from Lee?" I say with a sneer.

Her head cocks to the side. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I suspect Lee was the one who ran his mouth to Reed." Of course, I don't have proof, so I can't say that I *know* it was Lee.

Lindsay looks up and sees Brett coming back to our group. She whispers, "Don't let Lee get to you. He's just pissed that

he'll always be an annoying little shit." The corner of her mouth pulls up in a grin.

I let out a chuckle and smile back at her. I guess Lindsay and I have something in common after all.

FIVE THIRTY ROLLS AROUND, and while most everyone has left for the day, Brett and I still have our faces buried in our monitors. After missing all week last week, I feel like I'm behind on my articles and behind on Mariners news in general. There have been a few management changes, and a few roster moves in the last week, so this week I'm playing catch up. I don't want to stay too late every day though, because this is the last week I'll get to spend with Julie. But I promised Kevin, the guy who proofreads and fact checks my articles for me, that I'd have something for him in his inbox first thing tomorrow morning.

I read over my article on the management changes and what it will mean for the team one last time, then email it to Kevin. I begin the process of closing everything down for the day when Brett looks over at me.

"All finished?" he asks.

"Yep. How about you?"

"I'm just about done too. If you wait a few minutes, we can walk out together."

"You sure that's a good idea? Someone might complain to Reed again," I say with a smile.

He returns my smile. "Let them complain. We haven't done anything wrong."

His attention goes back to his monitor and while I wait for him, I take out my phone and send Julie a text to let her know I'll be home soon. She sends me a text back saying that she's already got dinner ready, and she'll keep it warm until I get home. Something tells me that Dahlia probably isn't going to have dinner waiting for me like that.

Brett grabs his jacket and stands up and I take that as my cue to get up. With all my belongings, we walk out of the office and as we're leaving, I glance around to see if there's anyone who might see us together and tattle on us. But there's only one other person here and she doesn't even notice us leave. When we walk by Reed's office, I sneak a peek inside and even he has already left for the day.

In the parking garage, Brett and I stop by my car, and he waits for me to unlock it. I put my stuff on the seat on the passenger's side but can't quite bring myself to walk around to the driver's side yet. There's something about the way Brett is looking at me and his silence that keeps me rooted in place. His brown eyes lock onto mine and I'm so transfixed, I can't look away. Brett breaks our staredown first and looks all around the parking garage: behind him, to the left, to the right, in front of us. Then he brings his hand up to my cheek and cradles my face in it.

I know what he's going to do. And it's something I thought I might never get again. I'm so focused on Brett and what he's about to do, the entire world around me fades away. I don't hear the traffic outside or the way it echoes inside the parking garage. I don't see the people that I know are walking along the street right now. It's like we're in our own little bubble and the only thing that matters is us.

Brett's lips meet mine and his kiss starts off gentle and tender, but I want more and kiss him back because finally, *finally* I'm getting kissed like I want. His kiss hits me everywhere. I feel it on my lips, of course, but it's making my stomach flutter and my toes tingle. And, okay, it's hitting down *there* too.

He pulls away, and it takes me a few seconds to register that we stopped kissing. My lady bits are protesting because they were really enjoying it. My eyelids flick open to see Brett gazing intently at me.

"You need to know I still have feelings for you," he says.

Oh, thank goodness. It looks like I'll have another chance with Brett after all. This time, I won't screw it up. I've learned

my lesson and the grass isn't always greener on the other side. I had something so perfect for me and now I get a do-over. "I've done a lot of dumb things in my life, but breaking up with you was by far the dumbest. I'm so sorry for doing that to you." I suck in a deep breath because if we're going to get things out in the open, then it's time for me to unload *all* of my feelings. "I don't know what I was thinking. It's just that I met Tanner before you, but I had been chasing after someone else, so I didn't pursue it. And then Tanner started dating someone, making me feel like I'd missed my chance. After some time, I found you, and even though what we had was great, more than great actually, there was still a little part of me that was like, *what if?* And I know that's not an excuse for what I did to you, and I know I don't deserve your kindness, but now that I know what it's like to be without you, I don't want to feel that way again."

"It's okay. I didn't hold it against you. I just thought maybe you had to work through some things," he says while stroking my jawline. Gosh, his touch is so soothing and comforting, I could literally melt into his embrace.

Despite his assurances that he didn't hold it against me, there is one thing I have to know. "When I broke up with you, why didn't you react? I mean, I didn't expect you to cry or anything, but I just felt like we could've been talking about the weather."

He drops his hand from my face and his gaze darts to the ground, then focuses back on me. But there's a seriousness in his gaze that makes my stomach drop. "I think maybe in a way I was relieved. When I went over to my parents' house that day, before I came to your place, my dad kind of dropped a bombshell on me."

I reach out and grab his hand and give it a gentle squeeze. "What happened?"

"My dad said that he and my mom are actually going through with getting a divorce."

My heart breaks for him. His parents' relationship has always been on unstable ground, and his parents were one of

those stay-together-for-the-kids types. So there has always been talk of divorce in his family. But to hear they're actually going through with it is awful. "I'm sorry to hear that. And really sorry for breaking up with you on the same day you got that news."

He waves me off. "You didn't know. In a sense, I'm glad for our breakup because I really needed some time alone to process things. And now I'm in a better place to be with you. I've accepted the fact that my parents are getting divorced and as much as it hurts, it's better for them. At least this way I won't have to worry about the two of them being angry with each other all the time."

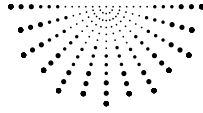
"Still, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you." I rise on the balls on my feet to give him a peck on the lips. "I'm here for you now if you need me, and that's not going to change."

"Thanks. But enough about my parents. I think it's time to talk about us. Aside from work, when can I see you again?"

"I'll let you know once I figure out what this weekend is going to look like." Julie is moving out, and I'm going to have to see Tanner, so I'm sure a date with Brett will be the perfect pick-me-up.

A grin tugs at his lips. "Okay, sounds good. See you tomorrow."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“He kissed me,” I say as soon as I get home. Julie bolts up from her resting position on the couch and stares at me.

“What do you mean? Who kissed you?” She searches my face for meaning, her face full of alarm.

“Brett. He kissed me, and it was magical. It was everything I’d been wanting in a kiss, and then some.”

Julie slides over to one end of the couch and moves the blanket she’d been using to cover herself. She motions for me to sit down, which I do. “You’re going to have to explain.”

“How long do you have?” I say with a laugh.

She chuckles. “However long it takes.”

I explain everything, starting from when I arrived at work this morning and the mood I was in, to our lunch together, getting called into Reed’s office this afternoon, to Brett walking me to my car this evening, and then finally, our kiss.

A smile stretches across Julie’s face and her eyes have taken on a glossy sheen. “Fern, that’s amazing! It’s exactly what you wanted.”

“I know. But there’s one thing that worries me.”

“What’s that?”

“My job.” It’s the one hang-up in all of this. Can Brett and I be discreet enough to not arouse any more suspicion than we already have. Lee, for whatever reason, seems to have it out

for me, and he's the one we'll have to watch out for. Otherwise, one of us will be getting moved and I don't want it to be me. I've worked so hard for my job and have built up quite a following, and I don't want to let my readers down.

"Oh, that's right. Doesn't your boss have some sort of weird rule on office dating?"

"Yes, he does. He tolerates it as long as it's not within the same group. And I really don't want to move groups. Baseball is my favorite sport, and there's really no other place I'd want to work in that office."

Her face pulls into a frown. "That sucks. How are you two going to keep it a secret?"

"I don't know," I say, my voice rising. "Stay away from anything too personal, don't go out for too many lunch dates, don't hug or kiss at work. Then we'll also have to avoid going on dinner dates at restaurants around the office since a lot of my coworkers live nearby."

"That sounds like a hassle. Do you think it'll work?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It's the best I've got."

"Well, don't let that stop you from enjoying this moment. It's something to be celebrated, and it's what you wanted. I know you regretted breaking up with Brett, and it appears as though he's forgiven you."

"Yeah, he has," I say, my thoughts drifting away to what our next date is going to look like.

Right now, worrying about work can wait. The evening stretches before me and I can use that time to focus on not just Brett, and how happy I am to be back with him, but also Julie, and how we're going to spend these last few days together.

Just then, my phone rings and I fish it out of my purse, which was on the cushion right next to me. Maybe it's Brett calling me because he's missing me so much and can't wait to hear my voice. But it's not; it's my mother. "Excuse me," I say, getting up from the couch. "I should take this." Julie waves me off and returns her attention to her show.

“Hey, Mom. How are you?” I say, once I’m in the confines of my bedroom.

“I’m good, honey? How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” I say, not quite sure how much I want to tell her yet.

“I know Julie’s moving out this week. How are you doing with that?”

“I’m dealing with it as well as can be expected. I’m feeling really bad that I haven’t been able to do much with her lately because I’ve been swamped at work. I hope she understands how much she’s going to be missed around here.”

“I’m sure she does. We’re going to miss her too. How are things with Tanner?”

Might as well get it out in the open. This way, I can spare her from using this call to tell me all the ways he’s wrong for me. “Things with Tanner are over. I broke up with him on Saturday.”

I hear her gasp and there’s a hesitation before she speaks again. “What happened? Did he do something to hurt you? If he cheated on you...”

“No, it’s nothing like that. It was my decision to break up with him. I finally realized that he’s not right for me. And I’m with Brett again, so Tanner is far from my mind.”

My mother squeals on the other end of the line, actually squeals, which makes me smile. I knew my mother would be excited for me to get back with Brett, but I didn’t know she’d be *this* excited. “What? You have to tell me what happened.”

For the next several minutes, I fill my mom in on the events that transpired over the weekend and at work today. I think she’s a little hurt I didn’t tell her about the breakup right away, but some things are nice to keep private for a while—until I made sense of them, at least.

After I get her up to speed, my mom talks to me about the weather, what my dad has been up to, and different recipes she’s made. It feels like she’s dancing around something, when

finally she asks, “Have you given any thought to having your sister move in with you?”

That question was probably the sole reason why she called. “I have thought about it, and I’d like to have her move in.”

My mom lets out the breath she was holding. “Oh, honey, thank you so much. I know it’ll mean a lot to Dahlia. Her self-esteem has taken a huge hit lately, and I know she really wants to get back to living on her own. It’s not very cool to have to move back in with your parents.”

“I think she lucked out though. I’m sure there are worse parents to live with,” I say, trying to make my mom feel better, even though I don’t think I could live with them again. There’s just something about having your own space that can’t be replaced. I know my mom probably tried not to hover, but she can’t help it. Dahlia was probably inundated with questions like, “Where are you going?” and “When are you going to be home?” Sometimes it’s nice not to have to answer to anyone.

“Do you want to be the one to tell Dahlia or should I?”

“I’ll let you handle it,” I say.

“I’ll talk to her tonight at dinner. Speaking of, I should probably get off the phone and finish it up. Does Julie need any help moving this weekend?”

“No, thanks. I think she’s got it covered. I’ll let her know you asked though.”

When I hang up with my mother, I head back out to Julie, who’s still on the couch in her lounge clothes.

“How’s your mom?” she asks, flipping through channels.

“She’s good. She offered to help you move, but I told her not to worry about it. And she’s excited I’m back with Brett.”

Julie raises a brow. “You told her? Wow. I can’t believe you told her so soon. You must be serious.”

“I am,” I say with a nod. “I’m not going to let him go this time.”

IT'S HAPPENING TODAY. It's the day I've been dreading ever since Julie told me she was moving out. Moving day. I've been trying to help Julie out as much as I can, but I can't help the tears that keep creeping up on me. It's not helpful when both of us can't stop crying.

I'm happy for Julie, I really am. But I'm too focused on all the time we lost with each other in the beginning. It's no secret that she and I didn't get along super well when I first moved in. I think Julie thought I was a flake, and I thought she was kind of gruff. But once we finally opened up to one another and really got to know each other, she became a great friend. And I know Dustin will take care of her. He's a great guy, and she's lucky to have found him.

All morning, I've been helping Julie carry her packed boxes to the front of the house so it's easier to load in the moving truck. Dustin's family is going to be driving the moving truck with Julie's car being towed behind it. Then Dustin and Julie are going to be together in Dustin's Jeep. I told Julie that if she gets lonely on the drive, or even if she wants to show me something cool, I'd love to have her call me.

We've arranged to have Dahlia move in next weekend, so I'm going to have a whole week in this house by myself. I'm not looking forward to it, to be honest. Julie spoiled me. It was great to walk in the door and smell food cooking in the kitchen. And my part was making sure the rest of the house was tidy and taking care of laundry whenever it'd pile up.

We had a rhythm.

But I'll survive. And I guess if I get lonely, I can always have Brett come over and keep me company.

I'm in Julie's bedroom, getting ready to pick up a box when Julie sticks her head in. "They're here," she says, giving me a knowing look. *They*, meaning Tanner and Dustin. "It's

not too late to leave, you know. You could sneak out the back while I distract them up front.”

I flash her a smile. “No, that’s okay. I’m not a coward. If I’m going to face Tanner again, I’d rather do it here so we can clear the air. That way, in case I run into him in public somewhere, he doesn’t let me have it, even though I deserve it.”

“Okay, if you insist,” she says, then I hear voices at the front of the house, Tanner’s being one of them. “I’m going to go greet them.” She leaves me in her bedroom, and seconds later, I hear her talking with the two of them.

What I don’t say is I plan on using this time to apologize to Tanner for the way things went down between us. That’s not at all how I wanted to end things, and I’d hate for him to have that bad experience be how he remembers me.

Their voices get louder as they’re approaching Julie’s bedroom and I’m frozen in place, waiting for them to walk through the door. I should look busy. Yes, that’s a good idea. Looking busy would be better than the deer-in-headlights look I probably have on my face right now.

Julie cracks the door open, sees me pretending to smooth down the tape on the box in front of me, then opens the door wider. Dustin smiles at me right away, and I don’t miss Tanner’s eyeroll followed by a scowl. I’m okay with his response. I definitely deserve it. At least he didn’t call me a bitch to my face even though he’s probably thinking it in his mind.

“Good morning, Fern,” Dustin says, flashing me a smirk. I’m sure he’s heard all about the way I dumped Tanner. I raise my hand in a pathetic wave and say hey. “We’re here to start loading her bedroom furniture.”

“Okay,” I say, stepping around the box so I don’t trip over it. “I’ll just get out of here and let you two have at it.”

“Come on, Fern,” Julie says, nodding toward the front of the house. “You can help me supervise.”

She breezes past Dustin and Tanner, and then it's time for me to do the same. Oh, gosh. I wish I would've thought about what I was going to say to him. I can't just say nothing. "I'd better do what she says," I say with a weak chuckle. God, that was lame. But what was I supposed to say? "Sorry for being terrible to you, Tanner?" I can't say that right off the bat. That'll come later when I can get him alone for a second—*if* I can get him alone. Tanner gives me a wide berth, and again, I deserve it.

When I catch up with Julie at the front of the house, she whispers, "That was so awkward."

"I know," I say back. I guess I'll be owing Julie an apology later too, for making her move-out day so uncomfortable.

AROUND LUNCHTIME, the whole move-out process has hit a lull. Tanner and Dustin are tired from moving all the heavy furniture and boxes around, and they're sitting outside on the steps talking to one another. It's cool outside and there's a breeze, so that's where they wanted to be even though Julie and I told them they could sit on the couch. Julie and I are in the kitchen getting lunch for everyone. We're making sandwiches, and we bought a few different kinds of chips to go with them.

The only thing that's left to move is a few stray boxes, then Julie is going to take one last look around to make sure there isn't anything she missed. I've already told her that if she thinks of something she left behind, she can call me and I'll gladly send it to her. After her walkthrough, they'll be on their way.

Dustin comes into the kitchen and asks, "Do you need help with lunch?"

Julie smiles at him. "No, you've already done enough. We're just about finished in here. Do you want to eat in here or outside?"

“I’ll eat in here. Tanner said he’d rather stay outside,” Dustin says, casting me a glance. He probably wants to eat outside to avoid being near me. But I don’t say that because I know that’s what we’re all thinking anyway.

“I’ll go take Tanner his lunch then,” I say, which earns me a few raised brows. I take the plate with the turkey and cheese sandwich on it and grab one of the bags of chips. Julie gets the front door for me and Tanner turns his head, his expression pleasant. But when he sees me, his smile flattens.

Julie closes the door behind me, sparing me from having to apologize with an audience. I hand over the plate with his sandwich and the bag of chips. Tanner mutters a thanks. It’s nice to see that I’m not so far down his shit list that basic manners no longer apply.

I sit down next to him on the steps because my legs are feeling a little unsteady and the butterflies in my stomach have turned into full-blown birds, thrashing and beating around. “Thanks for coming out and helping today. I know Julie appreciates your help, even though you probably wanted to be anywhere else than near me.”

“Are you really so full of yourself that you thought you factored at all into my decision to help out?” he scoffs.

Ouch. That was really harsh, even though I totally deserve his malice. Still, it feels like a knife went through my chest and my breath has been stolen from my lungs. I sit motionless and wonder if I’m wasting my time being out here. But I have to say what’s on my mind, even if Tanner doesn’t want to listen. “I’m sorry for how things went down that day. And I’m sorry for humiliating you like that. If I had it to do over again, I would. I’d take it all back and do it someplace private. I don’t know what I was thinking, breaking up with you in a public place like that. It was a terrible choice, and you have every right to be angry with me. If it were me, I’d be angry too.”

Tanner takes a bite of his sandwich and makes me wait for an answer until he’s completely done chewing. “I’ll spare you

from some of the comments made after you left the coffee shop.”

I can only imagine the choice words uttered, especially since I had a few hurled my way while I was still in there. “I’m sure it wasn’t nice. Because what I did to you wasn’t nice.”

He shrugs it off. “If we’re apologizing for things, I should apologize for grabbing your arm. I don’t know what came over me. I guess I just wanted to keep you from running away. I wanted you to stay and explain yourself because nothing was making sense to me. But you didn’t owe me anything, and I never should’ve done it,” he says, his gaze focused on the paint that’s peeling off the steps.

“I was trying to avoid a scene. I was going to break up with you some other time, in a place that we could actually hear each other. But I got irritated when you grabbed my arm, and a scene is exactly what we got.”

Tanner turns toward me, and the corner of his mouth turns up in a grin. It’s a look that I used to think was sexy, but I don’t see him that way anymore. “Don’t feel too bad about it. Your public breakup caused a few women in the coffee shop to feel sorry for me, and I’ve got a few dates lined up.”

I nudge him in the arm. “You juggling multiple women? I never would’ve guessed.”

He gives a noncommittal shrug. “Yeah, well the opportunity presented itself and I’d be an idiot to say no. I’m not serious about any of them yet. I’m just seeing where it goes.”

“Okay. If those don’t work out and you need to stage another public breakup to meet more women, let me know.”

We both laugh, and that’s when I know that whatever went down between us is water under the bridge at this point. And if we end up seeing one another in public again, we can at least say hi without any hurt feelings attached.

“I should probably go in and eat my lunch,” I say. No need to ruin the moment with more small talk neither of us want to

have. “You can come in and eat with the rest of us if you want. You don’t have to stay out here.”

“All right. I’ll be right behind you,” he says.

After all of us eat lunch, it doesn’t take Dustin and Tanner long to load the rest of the boxes, which disappoints me. I know Julie and Dustin need to get on the road because they have a long trip ahead of them. And I know Julie is eager to get started on her new life.

But I’m not ready for her to leave.

Now that she’s done her final check, it’s really time for her to go. As I followed her through the house during her check, it hit me hard the number of things in this house that were hers. Her bedroom and bathroom are now completely empty, except for a few stray bath products she’s leaving behind. There are a few knickknacks that used to sit in the living room that are gone. And all the kitchen items she’s taking with her. She told me she was leaving a lot of the basic kitchen equipment behind, but the stand mixer that had a permanent home on the counter is gone, the blender has been packed away, and there are so many other things missing I’m too sad to mention.

Tanner already left, engulfing Dustin in a bro hug, and giving Julie a gentle hug, wishing the two of them the best on their journey. Apparently, Tanner has already scheduled a trip to Texas in February, so their goodbye was more of a “goodbye for now” kind of one. I’m jealous I haven’t scheduled a trip like he has.

Dustin gave me a hug already and he’s waiting outside, letting Julie and I have our teary moment inside the house. His family is also here, and I don’t want to be a blubbering mess in front of them. I take the wad of tissues I have in my hand and dab my eyelids. I haven’t even said anything yet and the tears are already flowing.

“I’m really going to miss you, Fern,” Julie says, speaking first.

“I’m going to miss you too,” I say, a fresh stream of tears streaking down my cheeks. It feels like we’ve said these words

so many times over the last month, but now it's for real. This isn't a drill anymore. It's the real thing and it needs to count this time.

“Living with Dustin is going to be great, but I doubt he'll know what to do when I'm having my PMS week,” she says with a chuckle that comes out more like a ragged cough because it's mixed with tears.

“Does he even know your favorite chocolate bar?” I ask with a grin.

“No, but he'll figure it out very soon.”

We stand there, both of us not ready to leave yet. But there's no sense in prolonging this any more than we already have. “You should probably get going. It's a long trip for you and you don't want to get caught in the Seattle traffic on your way out. I doubt it's the parting gift you want.”

“Yeah, I'd rather not get stuck today,” she says, blotting her eyelids with her tissue.

“Come here.” I hold out my arms and she comes to me, and we stand there in an embrace, not saying a word because everything we want to say has already been said. And everything we haven't said doesn't need to be spoken because we both know deep down how we feel.

Julie breaks away and stands in front of me with a sad smile on her face. “I guess this is it,” she says.

I nod, the tears making it difficult for me to speak. “I'll follow you down the steps,” I manage to get out.

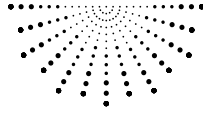
I walk with Julie down the steps and onto the sidewalk where we exchange another set of hugs and more tears. I tell Dustin he'd better drive carefully and to take care of Julie even though I know he will. He is madly in love with her.

I stand on the curb and watch them pull away from the house and don't move until I see them round the corner. And then they're out of sight.

I trudge back up the steps and when I get inside the house and close the door, I lean my head back against it. It's real.

She's really gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY



I can't be here alone; I decide as soon as the door is closed. I would be an absolute mess tonight. I can see it now, me walking through the house, wondering if Julie was here what we'd be doing. Wondering what she'd make for dinner. Wondering what we'd watch on TV.

Nope. That's not going to be me tonight. So I don't waste any time sending Brett a text, asking if he's free to come over. And lucky for me, he says he'll be over as soon as he can.

Some pity snacks are in order, and I know Julie probably has some chocolate chip cookies still stashed in the freezer. I pull open the freezer drawer and almost choke on my tears. Julie left me the best present of all: a fully-stocked freezer complete with meals for the week and instructions on how to make them. She made all my favorites: lasagna, beef stew, a batch of chili, and there's even some shredded pork to make pulled pork sandwiches. And the fridge is the same way. She has meals like her Mediterranean chicken and orzo salad, her burrito bowl, and another chicken salad all packed and ready to go. They're in these cute little containers with labels on them for when I should eat them. For example, the chicken salad she recommends eating first because it won't keep as long.

How did she do all this? And when? My gosh, this all must've taken her so long, probably... *The entire week*, I think to myself. I was wondering what she'd been doing all week by herself at home because most of her stuff was already packed, but it appears as though I have my answer.

And I never suspected a thing. Whenever I'd arrive home from work, the kitchen always looked spotless, and she'd have dinner already made for me. I guess Julie had a few surprises up her sleeve after all.

I send her a text, letting her know I saw her generous gifts, and she responds back that there's more where that came from. More? What does she mean by that? The freezer and fridge can only hold so much. I go through the kitchen, opening every single cupboard and every single drawer to figure out what she's talking about.

In every little corner of the kitchen there's something special. The cupboard has been stocked with all my favorites, and she's also left candy bars around with labels like, "PMS Cure" and "Sadness Eliminator". It makes me chuckle, but it also makes a few tears leak out. She bought me a set of cute little measuring spoons with owls on them, there's a new set of sheet pans because I always seem to mess them up, and in one of the drawers, a drawer that we never, ever use, is a printed copy of every recipe of hers from her blog. They have her handwritten notes on them, giving me tips in places where she thinks I might mess up. But let's be real here...every step is a chance for me to mess up. I'm not Julie, and I could never replicate what she did in this house. And that's the point. She's trying to hold my hand along the way until I'm able to function in this kitchen like she did.

As I stare around the kitchen, this place looking more like a horror movie scene with the way I've opened up all the cupboards and drawers, my vision is blurred from all the tears. Everything looks as though there's a dream-like haze over it and when my phone vibrates, I have to dab my eyes repeatedly to be able to see the screen. Crap. It's Brett letting me know he's on his way. That's much quicker than I was expecting, and I haven't even had a shower yet. Maybe I can get away without taking one. Just to be sure, I sniff my armpits to see if I can skip the shower. No way. I want Brett to stay with me, not run off as soon as he gets here.

A quick shower is all I have time for, and I hurry back to my bathroom, start the water, then pull out a wash rag from the

linen closet. *Dang it.* My gaze lands on another of Julie's heartfelt gifts. I thought once I left the kitchen I'd be done crying because I'd be done seeing the mementos, but there's even a surprise in the linen closet for me. It's a small gift basket with different bath soaps in my favorite scents, some bubble bath (again, in my favorite scent), and a new loofah. I can't believe she remembered the time I mentioned how much I love the smell of lavender. It must've been months ago, and I only said it in passing that it relaxes me. It was after a stressful day at work where Lee had been a little shit most of the day, Lindsay wouldn't leave me alone, and I had to work late to meet a deadline. I was so strung out and all I wanted to do when I got home was take a bubble bath. I thought Julie wasn't listening to me complain because she was in the middle of cooking something in the kitchen. But she was listening the whole time.

Julie spoiled me. I really don't deserve all of her gifts. I wasn't *that* good of a roommate. But I'm pleased she did all of that for me. Warmth blooms in my chest when I think about how much trouble she went through. And keeping it a secret, I'm sure, was no small feat. Where the hell did she stash everything?

As much as I want to search the house to see if she left anything else, I really do need to take a shower. The hot water has fogged up the bathroom so much, I can't even see my reflection in the mirror. I step in and feel a little jolt when the water touches my skin. But once my body adjusts, the hot water soothes my tense muscles. I rub some of the new lavender bath soap on my rag, take a whiff, and a sense of calm washes over me. With little time to spare, I don't have time to bask in it like I want to. I manage to work through the basic shower tasks and step out, feeling a hundred times better and more like myself.

I throw on lounge pants and a T-shirt, wrap my hair in a towel, and that's all I'm able to manage before Brett is knocking on the front door.

"Hey," he says, when I answer. He's dressed casually tonight, wearing a pair of jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. He

looks at me with concern in his eyes, which punches holes right through my resolve. I thought I was done crying—I thought I was going to be more put together than this. “How are you holding up?” he asks with a little tilt of his head. I shrug because that’s all I can get out. If I speak, I know it’s going to come out garbled. He steps over the threshold and reaches his arms out to me. It’s taking all I have to stop myself from collapsing onto him. Brett wraps his arms around me and this right here, is the embrace I thought I could melt in. Poor Brett—he’s practically supporting my entire body weight because I’m so unsteady on my feet.

We break apart, and I take his hand and lead him over to the couch because clearly, standing isn’t going to happen for me. We both sit down and I settle into the crook of his body as he drapes one arm around me. I sniffle and clear my throat, make a few choked sounds, and utter some other unattractive noises. Brett strokes my back and flips on the TV, eventually finding some nature show for us to watch. The two of us sit there in silence. We don’t need to talk. He already knows why I’m upset and he’s not going to make me rehash everything for him. He knows this is what I need and I’m grateful I don’t have to come out and say it.

Halfway into the second hour of this show, my eyelids are growing heavy and there’s an uncomfortable tug on the roots of my hair. My hair is still up in a towel and if I want to have a chance at it looking decent, I really need to get up and dry it.

“I’m just going to go to the bathroom to dry my hair,” I say, reluctantly unraveling myself from his body.

“Okay. Do you want anything from the kitchen while you’re gone?”

Hungry is probably the last word you could use to describe me. Drained, weary, emotionally spent, yes. Hungry? Not so much. “I don’t need anything, but if you want some snacks, you know where to find them. Julie left everything well stocked.”

He gives me a warm smile and heads for the kitchen while I go back to my bathroom. I take my hair down from the towel

and it's...a mess. Actually, calling it a mess is too kind. This is a monstrosity. I can probably salvage it with some product and open the bathroom cupboard to reveal five new sets of tweezers and nail clippers setting on the shelf. A smile tugs at my lips—another one of Julie's surprises. She knows I'm always losing mine and borrowing hers. I grab my bottle of mousse, apply it, then start to dry.

I'm on the last strands of hair when Brett appears in the bathroom doorway. He's wearing a mischievous grin that makes me think he's up to something. Ooh...I like where this is going. My girl parts are starting to come to life thinking about what his sexy grin could mean.

"What is it?" I ask after I turn off the dryer. "Did you decide you'd rather have me than mess around with some snacks?"

He clears his throat in a kind of cough-slash-laugh. "Not quite," he says, glancing down the hall to look for what? I don't know. "Actually, your mom is here."

"My mom? What is she doing here? She didn't tell me she was coming." Unless I missed a text... But when I look at my phone I brought in the bathroom with me, there's nothing from her.

He lowers his voice. "She said she didn't tell you on purpose because she didn't want you to turn down her offer."

"What offer?"

"She brought you dinner. If you're almost done, she's out on the couch in the living room."

I forget about drying the rest of my hair and follow Brett down the hallway. Sure enough, when I enter the living room, my mother is sitting there on the couch. Her attention is fixated on the TV, but I doubt she was watching it. The volume is turned down so I'm sure she heard the shock in my voice at her arrival.

My mother's gaze flits up to me. She's more dressed down than usual, wearing a pair of jeans and an oversized sweater, and she's not wearing any makeup. I imagine if she knew Brett

was going to be here, she probably would've dolled up a bit. "Sorry, honey. I wasn't aware you'd have company. I brought you dinner, pot roast and mashed potatoes, because I know Julie usually cooks for you. Since she's not here anymore, I wasn't sure if you'd eat tonight. But you're clearly busy," she says, flashing Brett a grin, "so I'll be on my way."

I should let her go. This evening was supposed to be mine to spend with Brett, our first night back together. But she's also my mother, and I'm touched she was so concerned for my wellbeing that she brought me dinner. "No, Mom. You can stay. If you haven't had dinner already, you can eat with us. Right, Brett?"

"That sounds great to me," he says. "It's been too long since I've seen you last, Mrs. Davis."

During dinner, my mother can't help doting on Brett. She gets his plate for him, gets him a drink out of the fridge even though he insisted on getting his own, and she even takes his plate to the sink for him when he finishes. The whole time we ate she was smiling, probably ecstatic that Brett is back in my life.

When it's time for her to go, she gives both of us a hug. "It's so good to see the two of you together again," she says.

I'm glad she approves of our reunion—not that I thought she'd have an issue. Even though she was cordial toward Tanner at Julie's going-away party, and even stuck up for him once, I know she didn't really like him. I think deep down she knew that Brett was the one for me even if I couldn't see it for myself.

"Well, it's just the two of us now," Brett says, coming in the door after walking my mother to her car (because he's chivalrous like that).

"I guess so," I say, and pat the spot on the couch next to me. Brett sits down and puts his arm behind me on the back of the couch. I lean into his body and tuck my legs underneath me. So we don't sit here in silence, I turn the television on and flip through the channels until I land on an episode of

Downton Abbey that I've already seen before. I'm not planning on watching much of it anyway.

I'm glad Brett is here tonight. It's the first time I've ever had to be alone in this house. Sure, I've slept here by myself before when Julie and Dustin went on vacation and when she'd stay at his house, but her stuff was always still here. It felt different then because she was always coming back.

This is the point where I want to ask him to stay the night, not only because I don't want to be here by myself, but with Dahlia moving in soon, we won't have too many opportunities to have the house to ourselves. But we're just now getting back together, and I don't want to rush things or push him into something he doesn't want to do. And he might have plans tomorrow that don't involve me. Earlier in the work week, he asked me what my plans were for the weekend and I told him that other than moving Julie out, I didn't have any and probably wasn't going to be up for anything.

And now here I am changing things up on him.

"You didn't have anything planned tonight, did you? I know we talked earlier in the week about getting together, and I said don't plan on me for anything. Did I ruin your plans?" I ask, sitting up so I can look at him better.

He strokes a lock of my hair and twists it around his finger. His lips turn up in a grin. "No, I didn't have anything going on. I had a feeling you might call me once Julie moved out."

"Oh, yeah? Why do you say that?" I say with an air of feigned annoyance. Am I really that predictable? Did he know I couldn't stand to be alone here?

He shrugs and keeps the grin on his face. "I just had a hunch. I knew it would be a tough night for you. I guess if you want to put a label on it, call it being on standby. I was waiting around in case you called, but if you didn't call, that's okay because my dad asked me over tonight to have a beer with him. But lately, all he wants to do is complain about the divorce and he's really talking to the wrong person there. So I didn't mind putting him off."

I kiss his cheek and snuggle back into his body. “I’m sorry again about your parents.” And even though it’s already been said, I’m still sorry I wasn’t there for him. But I have time to make it up now, and if he needs to talk to someone in the future about it, I’m here.

“It’s okay. I think it’s for the best. There were times when I was in college that I almost wished they would go through with it. The tension in that house was unbearable.”

Hearing Brett talk about his family makes me appreciate the relationship my parents have with one another. Sure, there were fights and arguments sometimes, but my parents would always make up and apologize to one another. And they never badmouthed the other one. They respected each other, and it’s unfortunate Brett didn’t have the same experience with his parents.

Some time passes, and if not for the TV show changing and the darkness outside, I wouldn’t have noticed. Other than the kitchen light casting a subtle glow in this room, the TV is our only source of light. It’s giving me some romantic vibes, and also a certain amount of confidence because the darkness is concealing. I shift my body, so I can look up at Brett’s face. He’s sporting a five o’clock shadow and this time, unlike when I asked him over to break up, I’m able to run my hand across it because he’s mine. It feels scratchy on my palm, but I love the sexy, rugged look it gives him. Brett’s eyes meet mine and nothing more needs to be said. He knows what I want, and he leans in and presses his lips to mine. His mouth moves over mine in that take-charge way of his and I kiss him back with a sort of fevered hunger.

I need this tonight. I need to feel him inside of me. I need to feel this connection with him once again, and when we finally break apart, both of us gasping for air, I take his hand and lead him back to my bedroom, flipping on the hallway light, but keeping my bedroom light off.

He takes his time, undressing me, just as I take my time undressing him. Our hands are everywhere, touching each other wherever we can, and I realize now, how much I missed the feel of his skin against mine. As we stand in nothing but

our underwear, my fingers slide over the whorls of his chest hair, down the hard planes of his stomach, all the way down where they rest at his waist. He trails a line of kisses down my neck while his hands reach for the clasp on my bra. Down it goes, onto the floor, and Brett stands back to take me in.

“I missed this,” he says. “I missed you.”

God, how I wish I could go back and change things. I never would’ve let him go. But maybe letting him go was exactly what I needed to appreciate him, as messed up as that sounds. I now know what a great thing I have and don’t feel the need to look elsewhere. I step forward, close enough that my breasts press against his chest. “I never want us to be apart. We had a great thing before, and I want that again.”

He looks at me, his expression intense and focused. “I love you, Fern,” he says, his voice husky and gravelly. “Even when we were apart, I still loved you. It damn near broke me to see you with Tanner because you deserved better—you deserved me. But I wanted to give you your space to figure things out. I’m so glad we ended up working together because I would’ve hated it if we never saw each other again. I love you, and I hope you feel the same way.”

My eyelids are moist when I nod my head because he finally said it. All that time, when we were dating before, he never once said those words. And now, it’s finally coming out. I know it’s not because we’re about to have sex. And he’s certainly not saying it to try and “get in my pants”. Brett would never throw those words out so casually, and he’d never say it if he didn’t mean it. It’s special, truly special and my body feels all warm and tingly as the impact of his words takes hold over me. Tears streak down my cheeks, but this time, it’s not because I’m sad. For the first time in my life, I know what it’s like to feel loved by someone on a level that goes much deeper than friendship. I’ve had many boyfriends, but I’ve never had a connection with any of them the way I do with Brett. “I love you too,” I say, my voice coming out in a whisper.

His lips are on mine again, and before we tumble onto my bed, I stop him and head over to my dresser to grab a condom.

When Brett and I were together the first time, I kept a stash in case he came over on short notice. Brett slides his underwear off and waits on the bed for me while I rummage through my dresser. My hands fumble around in my drawer, landing on some box-like shape. What the...? I've never kept anything other than condoms and a few pairs of socks I never wear in here. I pull out the box and turn it over in the shaft of light coming in from the hallway. A booming laugh escapes my lips.

“What is it?” Brett asks, propping himself up with one arm under his head. I toss the box over to him and he studies it. I can see the questions in his eyes. He's probably wondering what the hell I'd be doing with something like this.

“I gave that to Julie once as a gag gift when she and Dustin stayed the night together the first time. It's a soap ring to wash your penis. Apparently, they never had reason to use it.”

Brett places the box on my nightstand. “Maybe I'll have to try it out once we're done here.”

I chuckle at that and toss him what I really came to my drawer for—a condom. When I get back to the bed, he's kissing me, I'm kissing him, and our hands are roaming once again. Before Brett enters me, he looks down at me and plants his lips on mine. He doesn't have to say he loves me again—his eyes say it all. And then he's inside me, our bodies are intertwined, and before long, I'm there.

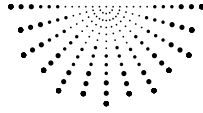
Afterwards, we lay together in a post-sex haze, cuddling in each other's arms, neither one of us wanting to let go.

“Are you staying here tonight?” I ask, hoping he'll say yes.

He kisses the top of my head and pulls me closer to him. “If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay.”

I smile, even though my back is to his chest and he can't see me. “I'd like that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The next morning when I wake up, Brett is there with his arm still draped around me. At some point during the night, we did get up and get clothes on, use the bathroom, and all the necessary bedtime things. Since Brett didn't have any spare clothes here, he's in his underwear, and I thought it was only fair if I only had my underwear on too.

I don't think we split apart at all last night, preferring to sleep in each other's arms the whole time. Being here with Brett feels like this is exactly where we're supposed to be. I sigh with contentment because I don't know that it's possible for me to be happier right now.

"Is that a sigh meaning *get off of me* or a happy sigh?" Brett asks.

I flip over to face him and there's a grin on his face. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not too long. But I didn't want to move too much in case you weren't awake."

I lean in for a kiss, and he doesn't let me get away with just a small peck. He keeps his lips firmly against mine, and just when I think we might be going for another round of sexy times, he breaks away with a couple of small kisses. "It's a happy sigh, in case you couldn't tell," I say with a smile.

"Well, did you have anything you needed to do today since laying around in bed with me wasn't part of your plan?" he asks.

“I don’t have anything I need to do. Julie saved me from having to go to the store, so really, the only thing I need to do is put in a load of laundry. Should we go do something?”

There’s a hesitation there, and with how comfortable he looks, it doesn’t look like he’s ready to go anywhere. “Only if you want to. I’m perfectly happy just staying here today,” he says, snuggling back down into the covers.

I look up at the window in my bedroom and I can already tell it’s going to be one of those days where there’s no real distinction between daytime and nighttime. The clouds are so thick and heavy, it’ll look the same all day no matter if it’s eleven in the morning or five in the evening. It’s making me feel very lazy. “We can stay here. I don’t mind.”

“Good. That’s exactly what I wanted to do.” He pulls me close and closes his eyes. Before long, he’s fast asleep and I don’t waste time following behind.

A few hours later, I flip over to check my phone for the time and it’s after nine in the morning. I have a missed text from my mom, and there’s also a text from Julie. According to her text, they made it to their intended destination last night, and are on the road again this morning. I should’ve called to check on her, but I was a bit...preoccupied. I wriggle out of Brett’s arms and throw on some clothes to remedy that.

In the kitchen, I start the coffee maker and rummage through the fridge and freezer for something to eat. I spot some pancakes in the freezer and set them out on the counter to thaw. They’ll probably be ready by the time Brett wakes up, but in the meantime, I sit down at the table and dial Julie’s number.

“Hey, Fern! How are you?” Julie asks, her tone cheery.

“I’m doing fine,” I say, matching her tone with an equally chipper one of my own. It seems that both of us have something going for us: she’s going home and I’m back with Brett. “How’s the drive? Any problems along the way?”

“Other than a few spots of traffic, there’s been nothing. Did you find all of my surprises?” Julie asks.

“I did. I even found the one you left in a certain dresser drawer of mine.”

“Oh?” she says like she doesn’t know what I’m talking about. “Why would you have a reason to go in that drawer? What are you not telling me?” I can hear the smile in her voice.

“A certain someone stayed over last night.”

“Does that certain someone’s name begin with a B and rhyme with Brett?”

“Mmhmmm,” I say, trying to not be too loud since Brett is still asleep.

“You wasted no time in getting down to business,” she says with a chuckle. “Were you so upset about me leaving that you had to have him over to console you?”

“Something like that,” I say. “I did find your other surprise with all the bath soaps. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. So when is Dahlia moving in?”

“We’re thinking this upcoming weekend. We still need to work out the details for that.”

“And how are you going to get through work this week?”

It’s something that’s been on my mind: how are we going to pretend like nothing happened between us? Lindsay listens in on dang near everything we say to one another, so we’re going to have to act like the other one doesn’t exist. “I don’t know. Same as last week, I guess. We don’t really have another option right now.”

“Don’t let that bring you down. You’ve got a good thing going and things will work themselves out,” Julie says so confidently, I almost believe her.

“Yeah,” I say less confidently. Because I’m not sure if things will work out how I want them to. I guess I need to ask myself if I’m really willing to give up my job for Brett, should it come to that.

There's a silence, and I hear some commotion in the background. Then Julie's talking once again. "We're getting ready to stop for gas. Can I talk to you later?" she asks.

"Sure. Call me when you get stopped tonight."

After hanging up with Julie, I check my mom's text and she's asking when we can move Dahlia in. I don't feel up to another phone call this morning, especially not with Brett here since my mom's phone conversations can last upwards of an hour. I send her a quick reply letting her know that this weekend looks good, and as soon as I set my phone down, Brett is standing in the doorway. He's leaning against the doorjamb to the kitchen, wearing his jeans and no shirt. And I can't stop my eyes from focusing on how hot he looks in the daytime when it's light enough that I can actually appreciate what's in front of me.

"You weren't going to wake me up?" he asks, a mischievous grin on his face.

"You looked peaceful, and I thought I'd catch up on some phone calls while you were sleeping."

He strides across the kitchen and gets two mugs down from the cupboard, which pleases me that he remembered which cupboard the mugs were in. He fills them up with coffee and sets one down in front of me while setting the other across the table. Does he also remember how I take my coffee? It only takes him a few moments to bring the creamer and sugar to the table.

My lips twitch as a grin tugs at them. "You remembered how I take my coffee."

"Of course. We haven't been apart that long."

He passes a spoon to me, then sits down across from me and takes a sip of his coffee. "Now that you've had more sleep, did you change your mind about going anywhere?"

"Nope. I'm fine with just staying here today. Is that okay with you?" I ask. I don't want to go out because I'm feeling selfish and don't feel like sharing Brett with the general

public. I want to savor every moment today because tomorrow we'll have to go back to ignoring each other at work.

"I think that's a good plan," he says.

We spend the day watching movies and don't move much from the couch. And even though Julie left a fully stocked fridge, we end up ordering pizza and have it delivered. It feels good to be snuggled in his arms, not caring at all that there's a whole bustling world outside of this house.

The entire day has been nothing short of amazing, but soon, it's time for Brett to leave, and I feel myself dreading the return to the office tomorrow. This time, it's not because Brett is going to be there, and I have to pretend like he doesn't exist because we just broke up. No, this time it's because I have to pretend he doesn't exist so I can keep my job because I love him. I hate that other than a *hi* or *hello*, I can't even acknowledge Brett. Lee is keeping tabs on us, and Reed is already suspicious.

Brett stands by the front door, holding me in his arms with me hanging onto his waist a little tighter than usual. He kisses the top of my head. "I know. I don't like it either."

Somehow, without saying anything, he picked up on my hesitation about returning to work tomorrow. "Everything we do now is under scrutiny. I feel like all I have to do is look at you a certain way or lean in a little too much to ask you a question and people are going to know."

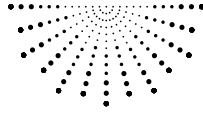
"Don't stress about it. We'll just do like we did last week."

But last week was different. Last week, things were still new between us. Last week, we were still navigating what a second chance between us looked like. Things are different now, more serious. I don't say any of that though. There's no point. "Okay. I'll try not to stress over it."

Brett leans in and kisses me, long and sensual. If he doesn't leave soon, I'm going to haul him back to the bedroom where we can have seconds of what we did last night. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says.

"See you tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



We did it. We survived the work week and made it to the weekend. To be honest, it wasn't that difficult to act like there was nothing going on between us. Other than a few glances and a couple of subtle touches, we really didn't do anything to alarm anyone. We didn't even go to lunch together once during the week. I wanted to, and even brought it up to Brett once, but then Lee gave me a look from across the office. That look said everything. It was a look that said we may have been able to get by him once, but not again.

But Lee is far from my mind now. It's Saturday morning, also known as move-in day for Dahlia. We've been at it since eight this morning, and every box that's brought in is another reminder that I'm no longer going to be living alone here. Brett and I should've utilized this house more during the week. If I had played it smart, I would've had him over every day after work because then we wouldn't have had to worry about someone listening in on our sexy times.

But I didn't.

In fact, he didn't come over once after work. I ended up spending most of my evenings shuttling some of Dahlia's belongings over to my house. I thought by moving some of her stuff over during the week, it would minimize the weekend time spent on this. But for someone who was supposed to have kept things minimal, Dahlia sure has a lot of stuff. It seems like the boxes are never ending, and there's still a small storage unit that needs to be moved.

From the front of the house, I hear my mother speaking to someone in an excited tone. It's probably Brett. He offered to help out today and my mother has been fawning over him ever since he arrived. "*Oh, Brett. It's such a nice thing you're doing. It's so kind of you to help move Dahlia in. Are you sure you don't need more water, Brett? Moving is tough work.*" My dad actually told her that if she would quit talking to Brett every two seconds, they might be able to get more done.

"All right. Who wants to go with me to the storage unit to get Dahlia's things?" my dad asks from the living room.

I leave Dahlia's new bedroom and join everyone at the front of the house. "I think it's only fair that Dahlia goes, since it's her stuff," I say, letting my annoyance show. In all of this, Dahlia has barely lifted a finger. My dad and Brett have been doing most of the work while I've been bringing in some of the boxes. That doesn't even include all the crap I moved over here during the week.

"I told you, Fern. I'm not strong enough to lift a lot of the boxes. Look at me," she says, gesturing toward her body. "Would you really want this body lifting a dresser or a mattress?"

"I didn't say you had to lift a dresser. You could lift some of the boxes that seem to be never ending," I retort. But Dahlia's right. I think a stiff breeze is all it would take to blow her away, but that still doesn't excuse her from not helping. She could carry *something*, even if it isn't much.

"Girls, let's not fight," my mother says, coming in from the kitchen where she's been making lunch for us. She must be preparing an entire buffet with how long she's been in there. "Dahlia, you can stay here and help me. Fern will go with Brett and your dad."

My mouth gapes open, ready to unleash a whole string of complaints, but when I see the look on my mother's face, I know I'm not going to get anywhere. I may be an adult, but my mother still has the final say.

My dad casts me a sympathetic glance, like he knows all too well what I'm going through. There are sometimes you

just don't argue—and this is one of them.

Fine. If I can't get out of moving all of Dahlia's shit from her storage unit, I at least want to use this as a chance for Brett and I to be alone. "Actually, Dad, Brett and I can take care of Dahlia's storage unit. Right, Brett?" I give Brett my best just-do-as-I-say look. I even throw in a wink for good measure.

Brett nods along with me. "That's right. Dahlia said there's only some boxes and totes over there, so we probably don't need three people. You should take a rest, Mr. Davis. Fern and I can take care of it." My dad looks more than pleased to get out of something for once today and crosses the room to hand Brett the keys to his pickup truck.

Dahlia raises a brow, like she knows something's up. "Who's going to help you carry all the furniture in there?"

Brett casts me a quick glance, signaling for me to do the talking. "What furniture are you talking about? We've already brought the heavy stuff in. What else is there?" I ask.

Dahlia hesitates. I assume she's trying to come up with something clever. "Well...now...I can't remember what's in there anymore. There's probably some heavy stuff in there though. You should have Dad go with you."

What is she? Twelve? Is she seriously trying to keep Brett and I from spending time alone together? Is she worried we're going to have sex in her storage unit? Now that I think about it, that's not a bad idea.

She used to do this, though, when she was younger. If I had a boyfriend over, she would find ways to be in the same room as us, and casually sneak glances our way. She was trying to catch me kissing him so she could tell Mom. Like I would even bother kissing someone in front of her. There were plenty of other places where that took place.

"Aren't we a little old for this?" I ask, pointing my question her way.

Dahlia glares at me, her gaze never leaving mine like we're having one of those staring contests we used to have when we were kids. I used to let her win because I didn't want

to hear her complaints when she lost. Not today. I'm not backing down, and for a few seconds we're silent. Dahlia blinks first and turns away. "You're right, Fern. I think the two of you can handle it," she says sweetly. She turns on her heel and heads toward her bedroom.

"What was that all about?" Brett asks me once we get in the truck.

I roll my eyes. "Nothing. Just Dahlia being difficult. I think she's pissed at her situation. I'm sure living with me wasn't high on her list, but it beats living with my parents. She probably feels like her hand is forced."

Brett grimaces and pulls away from the curb. "Are you sure moving in together is the best thing for the two of you? I know you two don't get along super well, as evidenced by what happened in there just now."

"I don't know," I say with a shrug. "I think the first few weeks will be tough, but soon enough, we'll settle into a rhythm. Julie was the same way at first."

"I hope so, for your sake. I'd hate to see you miserable," he says, looking my way when we're stopped at a stop light.

I smile at that. "I can't be too miserable. I have you." I reach over and take his hand in mine, lacing my fingers through. Brett leans over like he wants to kiss me, but then the light changes and his attention is pulled back to the road.

"So...how are things going to work with Dahlia there?" Brett asks.

"What do you mean? Like is she going to stay out of our way like Julie used to?" That was one of the great things about Julie. If she knew Brett was coming over, she would either stay in her bedroom as much as she could, or she would leave altogether. I would do the same for her too. I always tried to be around as little as possible when Dustin was around.

But I don't think Dahlia is going to extend the same courtesy to me. She might, if she had a boyfriend and wanted the same level of privacy, but to my knowledge, there's no one in her life that she likes in that way.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. Is she going to allow us time to be alone? I’d take you to my place, but...you know.”

Yeah, I know. Brett lives in a house with two other guys and at least one of them, Ryan, is home all the time because he telecommutes. The other one, Jake, works a couple of different jobs, so he works weird hours which means he sleeps at weird hours. I went over there one time and that was enough for me. It was a time when Jake had his girlfriend over, and Brett and I were watching TV in the living room. We heard everything coming from Jake’s bedroom—and I mean *everything*. The foreplay, the thrusting, all the groans and moans, and eventually, the climax. I will say this though, at least I now know how thin the walls are in that house, and it wasn’t me in the bedroom making those noises for all to hear.

“I guess we’ll have to see how it plays out. I think for now we’ll just spend as little time at the house as possible, and make a point to go out a lot,” I say. That’s really all we can do until I know how living with Dahlia is going to shake out. After her display today, I’m worried she’s not going to make it easy for me.

Brett pulls up to the storage unit and shuts off the truck. He turns his body toward me. “I do wish we would’ve spent more time together this week. We could’ve christened every room in the house since we had it all to ourselves.”

I wish the same, and if I had to do this week all over again, I would. I would’ve told Dahlia that she can take her own shit over to the house if she wanted or save it all until today. I can’t believe I wasted all that time trying to help her out. “I know,” I say, glancing toward Dahlia’s storage unit. That thought I had earlier about having sex in her storage unit is fresh in my mind, and this is probably the last time Brett and I will be alone for a while. “But if you’re up for it, we can christen this storage unit instead.”

His lips turn up in a devilish grin, sending my insides aflutter. “What if there’s no furniture in there?”

“We’ll find a way,” I say. Brett leans over and presses his lips to mine. Soon, we’re kissing in a frenzied state, wanting to

make the most of this time we have together.

We exit the vehicle, both of us giggling like teenagers about to have sex for the first time. I have the key to the storage unit, and I unlock the door and lift it up. The unit is small, but spacious enough for what we're going to use it for. Dahlia's belongings are stacked up along one side of the unit, and there's nothing more than some boxes, a nightstand, and, to my delight, a futon. I turn toward Brett and his gaze is fixated on the futon. He strides across the unit and lowers the back of it so that it lays flat.

"You still want to do this?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

"You won't hear any complaints from me," I say.

"Okay, let's look for something small to shove under the door to make sure we won't get stuck in here."

Good point. I can't believe I didn't think of that. I don't want to imagine what that phone call would look like.

Since Dahlia is my sister and I'm sure she wouldn't want Brett going through her things, I take the liberty and open the first box in front of me. It's full of all kinds of books like novels and textbooks from college. I pull out a thin book and place it on the ground so it'll keep the door from closing all the way down.

Brett lowers the door, his eyes on me the whole time until soon, we're cloaked in darkness, the only light being the thin strip at the bottom of the unit. But I don't need light to know where his body is. All I have to do is reach out in front of me and I can touch him.

Brett takes a few steps forward and places his hands on my waist. "I gotta say, this is definitely a first for me."

"You mean you don't have sex in storage units all the time?" I say, my voice lowered so as not to alert anyone who might be around. I didn't see anyone else here at the storage facility, but you never know, and I'd rather be cautious.

He laughs, the sound echoing off the walls, and brushes his lips against my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine.

“No. Definitely not.”

His lips find mine, and he presses them against mine with enough force to part them. His tongue darts out to seek mine, and I can taste the salt on his lips, no doubt from him sweating this morning. Normally, I’m the type that would’ve liked to shower first before doing this, especially since we have been moving all morning so far. But today, I don’t care. I’m caught up in the moment and Brett doesn’t seem to mind that we’re probably both a little sticky, and a bit dirty from the day’s activities.

He grabs the hem of my shirt and lifts it over my head, his fingers rubbing my breasts through my bra. I reach for the waistband of his pants to hurry this along. Brett gets the hint and walks me back toward the futon, a dangerous thing to do since we can’t see. The back of my calves hit the edge of the futon, letting me know we reached our intended destination. I strip out of my athletic pants and underwear, saving him the trouble, and lay back on the futon.

“I’m ready if you are,” I say.

Nothing more needs to be said. He drops his pants, not bothering to remove them completely, and a few seconds after I hear the telltale rip of a condom wrapper, he joins me on the futon. Our bodies intertwine together, and before long, we’re both finishing, his lips on mine the whole time.

“Where the hell did you get a condom?” I ask, his body still on top of mine.

“My wallet. I was feeling hopeful today,” he says, his tone conveying the grin I know he’s wearing.

He shifts off me and we sit on the futon, me with my underwear still off and him with his pants still down around his ankles. To say that we did this in a hurry is an understatement. But time is not on our side. I’ve already received two texts from my mom wondering where we are.

He lets out a sigh. “I suppose we should get this unit taken care of?”

I pout, even though he can't see me. "Do we have to? I was enjoying being away from my family."

He presses his lips to my forehead. "Yeah, I'm afraid we must."

WE ARRIVE BACK at the house and my dad, who must've been watching for us, comes to greet us at the curb. Brett rolls down the window and my dad leans in. "Hey, there. Your mother sent me out here to see if you two needed a hand with things," my dad says with a smile.

I glance over at Brett and he returns my dad's smile. "Actually, we'd love your help. It would go a lot quicker with another person."

A lot quicker so maybe we can move on to doing something else besides moving Dahlia's stuff around.

"Fern, your mother told me to send you inside when you got here. She and Dahlia are setting up some things and wanted your opinion."

I nod in response and head inside the house. Dahlia and my mother are standing next to one another in the living room, and from the sound of things, they're discussing where the furniture should go. Great. Dahlia has been here all of half a day and she wants to take over not only one of the bedrooms, but the whole house.

"Fern, where do you think the couch should go?" my mother asks me. "Dahlia and I thought that maybe the room would flow better if it were over here instead of there," she says, pointing to different spots in the room.

"I think the couch should stay where it is. The room seemed to flow just fine before today, so I don't know why we need to change things," I reply.

When I first moved into this house, Julie was already here and settled. I was the interloper and I respected where she had things. Over time, we moved things around in a way that

suiting both of us better, but it was a mutual agreement. I expected this arrangement with Dahlia would function the same way—that she would come in and respect my space, and over time we’d move furniture around if necessary. But it seems as though Dahlia, for whatever reason, is hellbent on antagonizing me today. Is she not grateful that I agreed to let her move in?

“But don’t you think it would look better along that wall? Then you could put your sofa table along the other wall,” Dahlia says, her voice carrying an edge. She’s acting as though the arrangement is already settled and asking me my opinion is just a courtesy.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just leave shit alone,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “Just move in your stuff and let that be the end of it.” I turn toward the front door and am halfway out before I say, “Maybe having you move in was a mistake. I didn’t realize you’d be such a pain in the ass to live with.”

I don’t slam the door because that feels too childlike, but instead head out to the curb where Brett and my dad are unloading the boxes from the truck.

My dad, having overheard my outburst, takes one look at me and pats me on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, honey. I know Dahlia appreciates you letting her move in. She just has a funny way of showing it.”

“I don’t understand why she has to be so difficult today,” I say, throwing my hands up.

“I’m not asking for her to grovel, but would it be so hard to maybe show some appreciation for letting her move in? And I can’t believe Mom isn’t doing more to ease the transition. Just now, they were in there deciding how to rearrange the living room furniture. Can’t she see how disruptive that might be?”

“I’ll go talk to them. You just hang out here for a bit.” My dad vacates the area with a box in hand, leaving Brett and I alone.

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” Brett says, pulling me in for a hug.

“I can’t do that to her, even though I really want to. I just want the two of them to realize that rearranging the entire house isn’t what needs to be done today.”

“I agree with you. And I’m surprised your mom is going along with it.”

“I think it’s probably because she wants Dahlia to be happy and comfortable in her new surroundings even though it might irritate me. I guess she thinks that I’ve got a lot of things going for me in my life now, whereas Dahlia doesn’t.” I give Brett a peck on the lips, then bend down to pick up one of the lighter boxes. “Anyway, we could stand out here all day and talk about reasons for it, but really, I just want to get this over with.”

Brett nods and picks up a box of his own. “You lead the way.”

Brett and I walk up the stairs and carry the two boxes we have back to Dahlia’s bedroom. When we come back out in the living room, the rest of my family is there and they’re awkwardly standing around.

“Fern, Dahlia and I had a chat and we’ve decided that what we need to focus on today is just getting her stuff in. Everything else can wait,” my mother says.

Hmmm...I wonder what led her to come to that conclusion. Could it be my father’s influence? I glance his way and he throws me a wink.

“In fact, you two haven’t had lunch yet, so go in the kitchen and grab something to eat. We can take care of everything that’s left outside,” my dad says.

I’m not going to argue there. It’s late in the afternoon and my stomach quit grumbling long ago, probably deciding that food wasn’t going to come for some time. I can only imagine how Brett feels since out of all of us, he’s been doing the most work.

We go in the kitchen and help ourselves to some sandwiches, potato salad, and veggies with dip. My mom even made brownies for dessert. Afterwards, Brett and I walk out to my dad's truck where it looks as though there's nothing left for us to do.

"It looks like they got everything after all," I say, feeling a sense of relief that this whole moving day can finally be put behind us.

Brett pulls me close to him and plants a kiss on my forehead. "Do you want me to stay and help with anything else?"

"No, I think we've got it from here. Will I see you tomorrow?"

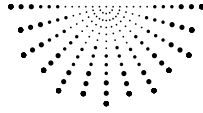
"My dad wanted me to go out to lunch with him. But if you need me for something, I can reschedule."

"That's okay. You should go out with your dad since it's been a while since you last saw him. I'm sure my mom will be over tomorrow to help Dahlia unpack all her things since she knows that I probably won't help her out."

Brett chuckles at that. "I really hope you two can work out your differences." He places his finger under my chin and tilts my lips toward his. His lips press against mine in a sweet goodbye kiss that'll have to hold me over until I can see him again. "I guess I'll see you at work then," he says once he breaks away.

"See you Monday."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“**W**here are you headed?” Dahlia asks while poking her head into my bathroom. She’s wearing a pair of baggy sweatpants and a T-shirt, so it looks as though she’s staying in tonight. Which is exactly why I’m leaving.

“I’m going out to dinner,” I say while swiping mascara across my eyelashes. Not that it’s any of her business.

Brett and I are going out to dinner tonight to spend some time together and celebrate us making it through another work week going undetected. We’re keeping it fairly low-key tonight, opting for a casual burger place instead of something more formal. I guess after spending all week where we had to watch everything we did and said, we just want a place where we can sit in a booth next to one another and not raise any brows by doing so.

“What restaurant are you going to?” She’s probably asking because I’m wearing a hoodie and skinny jeans—generally not what I’d be going out to dinner in.

“Spots Burger Place in Ballard. Ever been?”

She shakes her head no. “I’ve heard of it though.”

I return to the task at hand and swipe mascara across the other eye’s lashes, expecting that Dahlia will get the hint and leave me to finish getting ready. But she doesn’t. In fact, she’s still standing in the bathroom, picking at the hem of her T-shirt.

I place my mascara wand back in the tube and turn toward her. “Do you need something else?” I ask, keeping my tone cordial. I’m not looking to start a fight tonight. We’ve had enough of those this week.

“Yeah, there is something else. I just want to say that I’m sorry I’ve been such an ass lately. I’ve been difficult from the start, and I guess I was just trying, very poorly, to make sure my opinion was heard. I want to have a say in what happens in this house, and just because I’m your little sister, I don’t want you to make decisions without me.”

This might be the first time in history that Dahlia has ever apologized to me. It’s a huge step in the right direction and shows that she’s willing to set aside our differences in order to have a more peaceful living arrangement. “Thank you for your apology. I appreciate it. And I want you to know that I won’t make decisions without you. You’re a part of this house now, and your opinion matters. I’m sure we’ll change things up and move things around in time, but you just got here. Let’s just get used to living with one another before we do anything drastic.”

Dahlia nods. “That’s fair. And I also wanted to say that if you want to bring Brett over after dinner, I’ll do my best to make myself scarce. I know you guys can’t spend time together at work, and I don’t want to be the reason you don’t get to see one another.”

“How did you know about work?” I’ve never said anything to her about it.

“I’m not an idiot, and these walls are pretty thin. I can hear bits and pieces of your conversations with Julie in the evenings. And since you talk about the same thing most days, it’s not hard to piece it together,” she says with a grin.

I grin back. “Maybe I’ll have to start texting more.” Speaking of texting, I check my watch because I just received a text from Brett. “That’s Brett,” I say to Dahlia. “He just parked his car and will be at the front door soon.”

“I’ll go get the door while you finish up.” Before she leaves the bathroom, her eyes meet mine once more. “I meant

what I said about him coming over. You won't even know I'm here."

Now alone, I check over my reflection in the mirror and take the brush through my hair again. I overhear Dahlia greeting Brett and join them in the living room. Brett, who's dressed much like me, in a hoodie and jeans, smiles when he sees me.

"You ready to go or do you still need more time?" he asks.

"I'm ready. I just need to grab my purse on the way out," I say. Brett nods and opens the front door. I grab my purse off the sofa table and before I step outside, I meet Dahlia's gaze. "Do you want anything from the restaurant? We can bring something back for you."

"No thanks. There's plenty for me to eat here. You two go out and enjoy yourselves."

"That's quite a different attitude from you than what I've seen this week," Brett says once we get into his car.

"Dahlia apologized today for being awful, and I think we've finally turned a corner. She even said that if you want to come over after dinner tonight, she'd do her best to make herself scarce." If I would've known Dahlia was going to be so accommodating, I would've had Brett over to the house for dinner instead of going out.

"It's good to see the two of you finally getting along. You did say the first few weeks would be rough, so it looks like you're ahead of schedule," he says, then reaches across the center console for my hand.

On the ride to the restaurant, we hold hands and when we're stopped at traffic lights, even sneak in a few kisses. It's nice that we're finally in an environment that we can do this. Not being able to touch Brett, even something so miniscule as touching his hand, is getting really hard for me to tolerate. We manage to catch up on all the things we can't talk about while at work: what Julie's been up to, how my family is, and how his family is coping with the divorce.

When we arrive at the restaurant, we choose a booth at the back of the dining room where we can be by ourselves. We sit next to one another, so we can be as close as possible this evening. Our server arrives to take our drink orders and once she leaves, Brett and I glance over the menus which are already on the table. I'm keeping it simple tonight with a cheeseburger and fries, while Brett opts for a barbecue burger that has crispy onion straws on top. When the server returns with our drinks, we give her our dinner order and are told that it'll only be about fifteen minutes for our burgers to be done.

"So, what should we do with all the time we have?" Brett asks with a chuckle.

"I know. Fifteen minutes is not long at all. I thought the kitchen would be backed up tonight since it's Saturday. Then again, it's a burger place, so they don't take that long to cook."

He shifts his body so he's facing me. "It's okay. We can always take things back to your place once we finish up here. Dahlia said she was going to make herself scarce. I guess we can see what she means by that."

I lean in and give him a kiss on the lips, but Brett doesn't let me get away with just one kiss. He palms the back of my head and keeps his lips against mine, then grazes his tongue along my bottom lip. Yeah, we'll definitely be taking things back to my place.

True to her word, our plates are set in front of us roughly fifteen minutes later, which is too bad. I was really comfortable with Brett's arm draped around me and me settled into the crook of his body. When we're asked if we need anything else, my gaze flicks up because it doesn't sound like the person who had been serving us.

"Hey, you two. It's so good to see you here of all places." The woman sneers at us, and it's none other than Marissa, Lee's girlfriend.

This can't be. By selecting a restaurant that's far away from the office, I thought we were being smart and doing enough so we didn't get caught. But we've spent the whole

evening cuddling up next to one another and sneaking kisses. There's no way we can talk ourselves out of this one.

Words die in my throat, and I sit up straight, putting some distance between Brett and me, making Marissa smirk all that much more. She knows she has the upper hand here.

"I wouldn't have expected to see you working in a place like this," Brett says, managing to get in a little dig. Marissa is a pompous person, and this kind of place seems beneath her.

"My uncle owns this place, and I help him out on weekends when he's short staffed," she replies, not bothered at all by Brett's remark. "Is there anything else I can get the two of you? As much as I'd love to stand here chatting, I have other tables to check on."

"We're good here," Brett says, because I still can't seem to be able to speak. Once she leaves, Brett touches my shoulder. "It's okay. We don't know what she's going to do yet. Don't let this ruin our evening together."

"I'm sure she's probably been watching the whole time, gathering evidence to use against us."

"You can't be sure of that. She probably came over here to get a rise out of us. And she succeeded." Brett pulls his plate further toward him. "Come on. Our food is getting cold."

With my stomach all swimmy with nerves, eating is the last thing from my mind. "I can't eat right now. I've got too much going through my head." I push my plate away and turn to face Brett. "I'm sorry. I really wanted this to be a fun evening for us. Don't let my inability to eat stop you though. You should eat before everything gets cold."

"I'm not going to eat if you're not. Let me get someone to box this up for us."

Brett manages to flag someone down that's not Marissa, and gets our food put in to-go boxes. He pays the bill, and we leave the restaurant without any further contact with her. Thank goodness. I don't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing our hasty exit.

Brett must sense that I'm not up to doing anything else tonight because he takes me straight home. I don't ask him to come in. I wouldn't be good company anyway.

"Try not to worry," he says, planting a few kisses against my lips. "Everything will work out."

"I wish I could believe that."

When I step inside, Dahlia, who was laying down on the couch, sits up and looks at me. "You're home early. Where's Brett?"

"He went home. I'm not up to doing anything else tonight. And here," I say, showing her the to-go box, "you can have this if you want it. I'm not hungry."

"What happened? You seemed so excited to go out. Did you guys get in a fight?"

"No, it's nothing like that. We saw one of my coworkers at the restaurant. And I know she's going to rat us out."

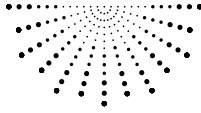
Dahlia's mouth turns down into a frown. "You don't know that. You might be overthinking this."

"This is a coworker who lost her job because of my boss' stupid rule. And her boyfriend hates me. Of course she's going to say something. Why should I get away with it if she couldn't?" I say, my voice raising.

"I'm sorry. But I wouldn't spend all night worrying about it. You won't know anything until you go back to work. Go put your food in the fridge and come join me on the couch," Dahlia says, patting the couch cushion next to her. "I was just about to start watching a John Wick movie. It might be just what you need to take your mind off it."

I smile at that. "I think you might be right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Somehow, Brett and I manage to get through Monday and Tuesday without so much as a whisper of there being anything wrong. But it's no surprise to me that Wednesday morning I find myself in Reed's office.

When the email from HR came through this morning telling me that Reed had scheduled a meeting with me, I was almost relieved because I'd been expecting it since Monday and stressing over it ever since. Just ask Brett, my mom, Julie, my dad, and basically anyone else who would listen how much I've stressed over it. They'll tell you.

Brett already had his meeting with Reed, and when I asked him how it went, he was very cryptic. He just told me not to worry and that I'd be fine.

Reed sits across from me wearing a dark gray polo shirt. Is this some kind of omen? It has to be, right? Because I'm definitely losing my job today.

I uncross and cross my legs again, trying to get comfortable. A skirt was the wrong choice today because my thighs are sticking together, and every exposed piece of skin is stuck to the pleather on this chair. My turtleneck sweater is feeling more and more like a hand wrapped around my neck, slowly choking me. I tug at the neck, trying to alleviate its vice-like grip. It's no use. This sweater is form fitting, so the neck just snaps back into place. I just hope I don't have pit stains after this because it feels like it's eighty billion degrees in here.

Reed leans forward and rests his arms on his desk. “I’m sure you have an inkling of why you’re in here today, so I won’t waste time dancing around the issue. Tell me, Fern, how long have you and Brett been in a relationship? And this time I want the *truth*.” He emphasizes that last word, as though I’d been lying to him all along.

In order to give him the full truth, I guess I should start from the beginning. Here goes... “The last time we were in here, we *were* telling the truth. Brett and I used to date, but we broke up right before he got hired. When he started here, I was dating someone else. So, I certainly wasn’t looking forward to working alongside my ex. And then having to narrate that audiobook with Brett was really awkward.”

Reed nods. “Yeah, I can see how that would’ve been an issue, and I would’ve understood had you brought it to my attention then. Even though you weren’t upfront with me, I still appreciate the job you did in there. You were able to keep things professional between you two.”

Once I determine that Reed is done talking, I continue. “But then when things didn’t work out between me and that other guy, Brett told me he still had feelings for me. And I still had feelings for him too. We thought we could hide it, for a while anyway, because I was worried about losing my position. But when we went out this past weekend, Marissa saw us and I’m sure she told you about it. And if she didn’t say anything, then she would’ve told Lee and he would’ve said something.”

“So the last time you were in here, after the hug, you weren’t together then?”

“No, we didn’t get back together until that evening when he told me he still had feelings for me.”

Reed steepled his fingertips. “You understand the position this puts me in, right? I have rules in this office that need to be followed by everyone.”

I do know. I’ve had a lot of time to think about our situation. I’m fully prepared to leave my job and, God forbid, possibly get moved into Lee’s group. Yes, I love my job, but I

love Brett more. What Brett and I have isn't just a casual relationship. We understand each other and that's not easy to come by. Jobs come and go, but true love sticks around. I lost Brett once because of my own stupidity, and I'm not going to let that happen again. "I understand if you need to move me to a different group. I've worked really hard to get where I'm at today, but my relationship with Brett means a lot to me. I'm willing to do what it takes to ensure its success—even giving up my job."

"Relax, Fern. You're not losing your job today," Reed says, leaning back in his chair.

"I'm not? But your rules about dating...we broke them."

"I know. Your group needs you though. Even Brett could see that. In his meeting with me today, he told me that he wanted to give up his position in your group because that group wouldn't function without you. And I have to agree with him."

"You mean Brett sacrificed his job for me?" Warmth blooms in my chest at his sweet gesture.

"Yes, and it appears you were willing to do the same for him. But the truth is, I was already considering moving him to audiobook narration full time. It seems that the job you two did for Trixie Skye is making a lot of waves in the romance world. A lot of Trixie Skye's author friends are also moving their audiobook production to us. Our schedule is filling up fast and we need people over there full time. It also appears that a lot of authors like Brett's voice and have asked specifically for him," he says with a slight grin.

I smile at that because I can just imagine a bunch of romance writers wanting to book "the guy with the hot voice." "I think he'll do well over there. He handled reading Trixie Skye's book without issue, so I can't imagine he'll come across anything else that would shock him."

Reed nods in agreement. "I'm letting Brett finish out the week with your group, and then he'll move into his new position Monday. Does this work for you or do you need more time for him to finish up any ongoing projects?"

“That timeline is fine. Even though Brett is in my group until the end of the week, do we still have to keep things under wraps for the sake of the rest of the group?” Reed already knows about us, but I want to know what his expectations are. I really dodged a bullet here, and I don’t want to do anything that would further damage my reputation with him.

He smiles at me. “No. I expect you’ll keep things professional, but I already have HR working on a memo to congratulate Brett on his promotion. This way no one else should feel the need to come talk to me in case they see the two of you together.”

“His promotion?” Is that what we’re calling this now?

“Yes, because of him, my little foray into audiobook narration has proved to be a very profitable endeavor. It’ll definitely be taken into consideration come review time. And not just for Brett, but for you as well,” Reed says.

So not only do I not lose my job, I’m possibly getting a raise too? This day just keeps throwing me more curve balls. “Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

“Unless there’s something else you want to talk to me about, I think that about covers it.”

I shake my head no. “I don’t have anything else for you,” I say, then stand up from my seat and adjust my skirt. “Thanks for your time this morning.”

“Anytime. My door is always open.”

I leave Reed’s office and head to the bathroom first to make sure my complexion looks okay. And to be honest, I really just need a moment to myself to process what went on in there. I’m relieved. All this time I was worried about my future with the company, and I had nothing to worry about. I have a fantastic man at my side who put me first. A smile tugs at the corners of my lips when I think of Brett. He’s amazing, and I’m so in love with him.

Deciding that I look okay, I leave the bathroom and head back to my group. Along the way, I pass by Lee’s group and he gets my attention, causing me to stop in my tracks.

“I can’t wait to see what you’ll bring to our group over here,” Lee says with a sarcastic chuckle.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, which earns a raised brow from Lee. “That’s right. Brett gave up his position for me. Because that’s what a man does. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” I say, referring to the fact that he wouldn’t leave his group for Marissa. In fact, if I have things correct, he actually told Reed that Marissa would probably do best in another group.

Lee stares blankly back at me, and I’m sure he probably expects me to leave at this point. But I’m not quite done with him yet. I lean in close to his ear and lower my voice so the whole office doesn’t hear. “You’re just a passive aggressive little shit, and that’s all you’ll ever be.”

His mouth gapes open, and I’m so close that I can hear the gasp that escapes his lips. If he can’t stand me, well, I want him to know the feeling is mutual.

I continue on, walking a little taller and with my head held higher, back to my desk. Lee tried so hard to bring me down, but he failed. And with Brett leaving the group anyway, I don’t have to worry about him anymore.

Brett smiles when he sees me approaching our table. “How did it go in there?”

After I sit down, I take his hand in mine and give it a squeeze. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that. I was prepared to leave.”

“I meant what I said. This group needs you. And you deserve to be happy. This group and the content you write about here makes you happy. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do something to try and preserve that for you.”

“It’s not just my job that makes me happy. You also make me happy.”

Brett grins and brings my hand to his lips. “You make me happy too.”

“Geez. Get a room you two,” Lindsay says, leaning over toward us. “I had a feeling there was something going on

between you two.”

“Oh, yeah? What gave it away?” I ask.

Lindsay smiles. “It’s the way he looks at you. He looks at you like you’re the only person in the world.”

Brett shrugs. “She’s not wrong.”

“Please,” I say with a laugh. “I think you’ve been reading too many Trixie Skye books.”

“Maybe. I did reread one of her eBooks last night,” Lindsay says. “And thank goodness I don’t care for audiobooks. When Lucy and Donovan’s book comes out, all I’d be able to picture is the two of you...you know,” she says without elaborating. She doesn’t need to. We all know what happens in those books. “No offense, but I just don’t want to think about the two of you in that way.”

I wave her off. “None taken.”

Lindsay returns to her work, leaving Brett and I alone.

Brett glances at his watch. “It’s almost lunch time. Do you feel like going out?”

Today is definitely a reason to celebrate. “I do. Let’s go someplace new this time. I heard there’s a new Thai place that just opened up around the corner.”

“Sounds like the perfect excuse to check it out.” Brett stands up from his seat and helps me into my jacket. “After you,” he says.

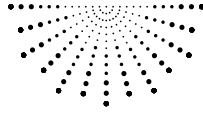
On our way out of the office, we walk close together, our shoulders touching. When we pass by Lee’s desk, Brett snakes an arm around my waist and gives me a little squeeze. I don’t turn back to see the glare I’m sure Lee is giving us. Once we reach the front double doors, Brett gets the door for me and we stand together on the sidewalk under the awning, preparing ourselves for the gentle mist that’s currently falling from the sky. Before I pull my jacket hood up, Brett tucks a lock of hair behind my ear and runs his hand along my jawline. He looks down at me, and his eyes take on that intense gaze I’m getting used to seeing.

“I love you so much,” he says, holding my face in his palm.

I look up at him and hope my eyes convey the emotion I’m feeling. “I love you too.” I rise up on the balls of my feet and plant my lips against his.

This time, I don’t care who sees. This time, we don’t have to hide anything.

EPILOGUE



“Are we going with red napkins or green napkins this year?” I ask.

“Why not do a mix of both?” Dahlia says.

It’s the night before Christmas and Dahlia and I are setting the table for the annual Christmas Eve dinner at my parents’ house. My parents’ house is all decked out in Christmas decorations because this is my mom’s favorite time of the year.

Brett is here too, but he’s in the living room having a beer and chatting with my dad. The last time I checked on them, they were discussing Brett’s role at work. He’s still an audiobook narrator, which keeps him very busy. In fact, he’s so popular among authors that he has a months-long waiting list for new clients. And he did get that raise Reed had talked about—as did I.

“Girls, is the table ready? Because the roast has rested and it’s time to put it on the table,” my mother says, leaning under the cabinetry to look at us.

“We’re all set here,” I say while placing the last napkin down on the table.

My mother nods. “Dahlia, start bringing the sides to the table and Fern can get the roast.”

Dahlia heads toward my mom and comes back with mashed potatoes, green beans, homemade rolls, garlic butter mushrooms, and gravy for the roast, which takes her several trips to do.

I like having Brett over for Christmas Eve dinner. Usually we get ham, but I guess my mom wanted to impress tonight. And her wanting to impress doesn't stop at dinner. Normally, we just have leftover cookies and candy from batches we make earlier in the month. This year, though, she made two different kinds of pie and a chocolate Swiss roll filled with sweetened whipped cream and covered in a chocolate ganache. Yum.

"Should I call the guys in to eat?" I ask after I bring the roast to the table.

"Go ahead," my mom replies.

I walk into the living room where my dad and Brett are in the side chairs still talking to one another. They're leaning in close, and Brett is showing my dad something. Brett sits up straight when he sees me and stuffs something back in his pocket. "What were you doing?" I ask.

"Nothing, honey," my dad replies. "Brett was just showing me something on his phone."

I nod, not really believing what my dad is saying. "I wanted to let you know that dinner is ready."

"Okay, we'll follow you in," Brett says.

"What were you showing him?" I can't resist asking once I get close to Brett.

"You'll see," he says, glancing my way.

At the table, we all take our seats. My parents are sitting at opposite ends, Dahlia is on one side, while Brett and I are sitting next to each other on the other side. My dad carves the roast and passes a slice to each of us, and once all of our plates are full with sides, it's finally time to eat.

"This looks really delicious, dear," my dad says to my mom.

"I agree," Brett says.

"You've really outdone yourself this year, Mom," I say.

“Can we have Brett over every Christmas? Everything here looks amazing,” Dahlia chimes in.

“Come on,” Brett says. “I really can’t be the reason for all of this.”

“Oh, but you are,” my dad replies. “She’s been planning this dinner for weeks because she wanted it to be special.”

My mom rolls her eyes. “Are you guys finished talking about the meal? Can we just eat it now?”

I slice into my piece of roast first, and once that first bite hits my tongue, it’s amazing. It’s rich, tender, with fantastic flavor. When paired with the garlic butter mushrooms, it might as well be heaven on a plate.

“Brett was telling me how work has been for him, but how’s work going for you, Fern?” my dad asks.

“Work is good. There have been a lot of coach changes this offseason for the Mariners, so I’ve been writing about that. And I’m excited about the new pitcher they’re bringing in. They’re saying he’s going to be the next Randy Johnson,” I reply.

As for my group at work, other than Brett leaving, there haven’t been any changes. I’m still loving what I do, and Lindsay and I are actually becoming friends. In fact, when Brett is too busy to get together for lunch, she and I often do. And that passive aggressive little monster ended up leaving the company recently, and took his girlfriend with him, so the atmosphere has improved dramatically. I guess Lee found a better opportunity somewhere else, which is good, because the company is better off without him.

My dad’s eyes brighten with mention of the new pitcher. “He’d better be good for the obscene amount of money they’re spending on him.” He scoops up a bite of mashed potatoes with his fork and brings it to his mouth. “How’s work for you, Dahlia?” he asks once he’s done with his bite.

Dahlia shrugs. “It’s okay. I work at a chiropractor’s office, so not exactly riveting stuff. Although, last week there was

someone who went into labor during her chiropractic adjustment, so that was kind of exciting.”

My mom’s eyes widen. “Gosh, that *is* exciting! Were they able to get her to the hospital?”

Dahlia nods. “Yeah, her husband was with her and drove her there. I guess they had a little girl that evening.”

“I just adore babies. I’d love to have a house full of grandchildren someday,” my mom says, throwing a look my way. She can keep on looking because it’s not happening...at least not for a long while. I’m definitely not ready for that in my life yet, and it’s too soon for Brett and I to discuss it.

I ignore her comment and focus my attention on the last few bites that are left on my plate. Once I finish, I use my roll to sop up the last little bits of gravy that linger.

“So, how was everything?” my mom asks once everyone’s plates are empty. “Don’t hold back with any complaints. I want to know what I did wrong so I can fix it for next year,” she says.

“I’ve got nothing,” I say, because really, the meal was amazing. No one else offers up any complaints either.

“Let’s clear the table and make our way into the living room so we can do the gift exchange,” my mother says. “Then we can come back in here for dessert.”

Dahlia helps my mother put the food away, while I clear the side dishes from the table. Brett and my dad clear the dishes and load the dishwasher for my mom. My mother insists that Brett doesn’t need to do anything, but he helps anyway.

In the living room, Dahlia sits on the floor in front of the tree, my mom and dad take the two side chairs, while Brett and I sit together on the couch. For our gift exchanges, as soon as we turned eighteen, our gifts became less about things and more about money and experiences to help us out as new adults. As we’ve progressed further into adulthood and have jobs of our own, the gifts from my parents have been experiences rather than money.

“Dahlia, let’s do your gift first,” my mother says.

Dahlia turns around and grabs a small box out from under the tree. She tears open the paper to reveal a small envelope. Really, the boxes are just for show. My mom doesn’t like the idea of handing someone an envelope to open. She says it’s not as magical. I think she’s just sad that we’re not little kids anymore and don’t have piles of presents to open. Dahlia opens the envelope, and a smile crosses her face.

“Well, honey, what did you get?” my dad asks.

“I got private art lessons with Marlene Pickett, my absolute favorite local painter here,” Dahlia says. “Thank you so, so much. This really means a lot to me.”

“I offered to buy your supplies when you’re ready to take them,” I add. “I just didn’t know what you would need, so I thought we would shop together once you know more.”

“Thank you, Fern,” she says genuinely. Dahlia and I may not have gotten along great at first, but over time, we’ve really come to understand each other. I’ve even come to rely on her when I need to vent. We’re still ironing out the division of household duties, but that’ll come with time—I hope.

“Okay, Fern, now it’s your turn. I hope you don’t mind we lumped yours and Brett’s together,” my mother says.

Dahlia reaches under the tree and hands Brett a medium-sized box. “Do you want to do the honors?” Brett asks me.

“You go ahead,” I say.

Brett tears off the paper and opens the box, but I’m surprised there’s not an envelope inside. Instead, Brett lifts out a small toy airplane. He looks at me to explain, but I’m just as lost as he is.

“Your mother and I thought you two could use a little vacation,” my dad explains. “So we got you airplane tickets to go see Julie and Dustin in Texas.”

“We were going to get you hotel lodging too, but when I called Julie to make sure she’d be okay with it, she insisted that you guys stay with them,” my mom says. “And she said

she got your care package and wanted to thank you for sending it.”

For Christmas, I sent Julie a package with a bunch of cookies and candy my mom, Dahlia, and I made together. I figured it would mean more to her than anything I could buy. “This is really generous. Thank you so much,” I say, getting up to give my mom and dad a hug.

“Saying ‘thank you’ doesn’t feel like enough, but I really don’t know what else to say,” Brett says. He gets up off the couch and gives my parents a hug, then returns to his seat.

“You’re welcome. We thought you could use a chance to get away for a while, just the two of you,” my mom says.

“If you’re saying that I’m not giving them enough time alone, nothing could be further from the truth. But there are only so many trips to the library, the mall, the grocery store, and anywhere else that’s open, I can handle,” Dahlia says with a chuckle.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” my mom says with a slight shake of her head.

Dahlia’s right. She *has* been doing a great job of making herself scarce, but I understand her frustration. I’d love to spend all my free time with Brett, and try to when possible, so he’s over a lot. “You don’t have to leave every single time. Sometimes Brett and I just want to be together, and it’s okay that you’re there too.” I look to Brett and he nods in response.

“It’s your house too, and you should be able to come and go as you please. Don’t let us force you out. That’s not what we expect at all,” he says.

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, it’s time for my gift,” my dad says.

My mother cocks her head. “But we don’t exchange gifts.”

“I thought that this year we should. It’s something you’ve been waiting a long time for, and I think it’s finally time,” my dad says, handing my mom a card.

My mom opens the card and reads the inside. She looks up at my dad, her mouth agape. “Are you serious?”

“What is it?” I ask.

Tears rim my mother’s eyelids. “Your father is finally getting me that kitchen remodel I’ve been wanting.”

“That’s amazing! And she didn’t even have to give up cooking again to get it done,” I say with a grin.

My dad gives me a stern look and continues explaining. “Now that our family is growing, I think it’s time to get you a bigger space to accommodate all of them. Fern has Brett—”

“Yeah, and I have no one,” Dahlia interjects with a laugh.

“Eventually you’ll find someone too,” my dad says in a soothing tone. “But our current kitchen isn’t big enough to hold everyone. And if you need another reason, it’s because you deserve it.” He leans in and gives my mom a kiss, and it pleases me that they’re still so in love after all these years.

“Thank you,” she says to my dad. She then turns and looks at the rest of us. “Well, I don’t think anything can top that, but I think my Swiss roll might. Shall we head into the kitchen to see?” She gets up from her spot and the rest of us follow behind.

As it turns out, the Swiss roll doesn’t top the gift of a kitchen remodel, but it comes pretty darn close.

Later, when Brett and I are in the car heading back to my place, I reach over the center console and give his hand a squeeze. “I hope seeing my parents tonight didn’t make you sad since your parents’ divorce was finalized recently.”

“Absolutely not,” he says, bringing my hand to his lips. “I like seeing your parents together because it shows me that not all marriages have to end in divorce, like what happened with mine. It gives me hope actually.”

“Good. Because I’m sure attending two Christmases tomorrow wasn’t high on your list.” Brett is staying the night at my place, and we’ll be having two Christmases tomorrow, one at his dad’s place and one at his mom’s. Dahlia is staying

the night at our parents' house, so it'll be just the two of us in the house tonight.

"I don't let it bother me. It's better this way, and I've got better things to think about," he replies, turning to look at me.

Brett pulls the car to a stop along the curb, and I look around at my surroundings. We're at T-Mobile Park, parked along the side of the stadium. "What are we doing here?"

"I thought we'd take a walk, since we're going to be spending quite a bit of time here over the next baseball season," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I never gave you your gift," he says. "Let's get out and check out the stadium. I always like looking at it when there's not a game going on because everything is so quiet. And the lights are really lighting up the night right now."

He gets out of the car and comes around to my side to get my door. I step out onto the sidewalk, and we walk hand-in-hand around to where the home plate entrance is.

"For Christmas, I thought you might like a ten-pack of tickets to some home games. I haven't selected the games yet, so you'll have to let me know which ones you want to go to," he says.

"Oh, well that's kind of perfect actually," I say with a smile. "Because I also got you a ten-pack of home-game tickets."

"Great minds and all that," he says with a grin. We stop in front of the Ken Griffey Jr. statue, close to where the street sign for Edgar Martinez Drive is. Brett drops to one knee in front of me. "There's something else I got for you, but first I need to ask you a question." I suck in a breath and clasp my hand over my mouth. My eyelids well up with tears as he pulls out a jewelry box with a stunning round-cut diamond on a silver band. It's not the diamond making me cry, although it is beautiful. It sparkles, even sitting in the box. It must be what he was showing my dad earlier. "I know we haven't been together long, but I don't need a lot of time to know that I

want to be with you for the rest of my life. You make me so very happy, and I'd love it if you would be my wife. Fern, will you marry me?"

I don't hesitate for a second when I reply. "Yes," I say as tears streak down my cheeks. "I would love nothing more than to be your wife."

Brett takes my hand in his and slides the ring on my finger—a perfect fit. I glance at it on my hand, loving how it looks already. He rises from his position, brushes the tears off my cheeks, and plants his lips against mine. Weaving my hands through the hair at the nape of his neck, I press my lips harder against his, wanting this kiss, this moment to last forever. I break away first, leaving my arms draped over his shoulders. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds me tight, staring at me as if, dare I say, I'm the only person in the world.

"I love you," he says, planting another kiss against my lips.

"I love you too," I say with a smile.

As we're standing there, droplets of rain begin to fall, interrupting our perfect moment. At first, we ignore them, but the longer we stand there, the harder the rain falls. Brett breaks away first and takes my hand. "We should probably get out of here before we get soaked."

On our walk back to his car, I can't help but ask, "Do you think we could get married here at the stadium?"

He chuckles. "I don't know, but we should definitely look into it."

Thank you for reading! If you liked this story, please consider taking the time to leave a review. Reviews are important for both authors *and* readers.

Stay tuned for Dahlia's book, **Not My Finest Hour**, where a one-night stand with a med student leads to a surprise pregnancy. *Oops*.

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Not Supposed to Happen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lizzy Barlow loves writing books filled with sassy heroines and the guys they fall for. She considers herself not too shabby in the kitchen and wishes the rest of the house would clean itself. When she's not writing, you can usually find her outside trying to nurse the plants she swore she wouldn't kill (this time) back to life.

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