

THE SECRETS WE KEEP

MIA HAYES

THEN

SURVIVING THE SUBURBS

HERE'S A FACT: IN MY SUBURB, EVERYTHING YOU SEE – THE PERFECTION, THE picket fences, the perky boobs – is fake.

Another fact: Popularity matters here. It's the key to everything.

Last fact: My husband and kids love this place, so I'm toughing it out because the schools are excellent, the lawns are pristine, and my kids can bike to the local pool. Really, if I were a kid, I would think I lived in Nirvana, too.

As for me, I'm making the best of it. Or so I tell myself. I have "friends," I go to parties, I have lunches. But real friends? Ha! This is the suburbs. You don't have friends. You have people you hang out and get drunk with.

I have plenty of those.

So who do I get drunk with? Who spills their guts to me? That's easy. Everyone. But you're not interested in the ordinary folks. No, what you want to hear about is the Bitch Brigade aka the Plastics, The Barbies, The Heathers. Whatever you want to call them, they're still bitches. Sweet to your face, knife in the back. And ruthless to each other.

The head bitch in charge is Karen Newbold. It's widely known that there are three women who run Waterford, and she's the one who runs them all. These women chair every committee and seem lost when Karen isn't around to tell them what to do.

Which brings me to Alexis Frond. According to Karen, she has a drinking problem. Carries a tall Starbucks tumbler of vodka with her wherever she goes and has an obvious eating disorder in that she never eats. Poor thing lives on secret cigarettes and booze. Her three kids are monsters, and her husband is on the golf course all the time, which may be why she drinks so much.

Karen and Alexis both wish they looked like Veronica White. She of the glowing skin and flowing butter-blond locks. There are rumors her husband has been cheating on her. In fact, while drunk one night, Karen strongly hinted he's cheating with someone in the community – but no one knows with whom. I'm not sure the rumors are true, but I've met him, and he's charming as sin. So maybe.

And then there's me. Your anonymous, snarky narrator. I collect secrets - marital, financial, sexual. The dark ones people can barely admit to themselves. And I file them away here. Aren't I sweet?

Welcome to Waterford, bitches!

* * *

Piles of gray snow blocked the path to my car, and slush stuck to my Uggs, but I kept my eyes trained on my phone as I walked. The familiar face – brown eyes and stylish chestnut hair and too-wide smile – staring back at me made my heart pound, and I inhaled deeply before exhaling for a seven-count, something my therapist assured me was the fastest way to fight anxiety.

“Elizabeth!”

I jerked my head up, lost my balance, and collided into the car next to me while sliding to the ground and sprawling flat on my back. My giant handbag landed on my head, and my Coke slammed into the car before splashing back out all over me.

“Oh my gosh! Are you okay?” Sarah Cole peered down at me. “Elizabeth?”

I shoved my bag aside and blinked up at her as stars sparked behind my eyes. “I think I’m okay.”

“Can you get up? I’d help you and all, but if you have a neck

injury...well Kyle says it isn't a good idea to move people who've fallen." Kyle had a reputation for being a dick, so I wasn't surprised he'd tell Sarah not to help people when they were down.

"I'm fine," I said as I attempted to roll over in the dirty, Coke-stained slush and onto my side. I was so going to hurt the next day. "How are you?"

Sarah squatted next to me and picked up my phone. She glanced at the screen before handing it to me. "A friend from Portland?"

"Yes." I shoved the phone into my bag. "I was just catching up on Facebook."

Sarah flashed a white smile before lending me her gloved hand, which I gladly accepted. "Did you see the blog? The one about Karen?"

Thankfully, that's what she wanted to talk about. "I did. It's pretty bad, isn't it?"

I expected Sarah to jump to Karen and her friends' defense – that's what I would have done - but Sarah giggled. "Yeah, but it's kind of funny, isn't it? I mean, everyone knows Alexis keeps vodka in that water bottle of hers. And Pete is totally cheating on Veronica."

"Allegedly," I answered. "No one has proof about that."

"Who do you think wrote it?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of their husbands?" It was so ridiculous it almost made sense.

Sarah shrugged. "Anyway, I just ran into Karen. She likes my new gloves."

There was no concern about how Karen felt about the blog – and I'm positive she gave Sarah an earful. No, there was just delight over the fact Karen had noticed her gloves. They were a deep berry color, but other than that look like normal leather gloves.

"They're pretty," I said.

"Kyle picked them out for me as a thank-you gift for holding down the fort." Sarah admired the gloves. "He's been super busy at work, so we don't see him much, but it's okay. Letitia and I have the kids on a tight schedule." I didn't know who Letitia was, but I

assumed Sarah meant her nanny. Most women - even the stay at home moms - had one.

Wet snow clung to my jeans and seeped through the fabric and onto my skin. When I adjusted my hat, it was sticky from the Coke splattering into it. Wonderful. I hated everything icy and cold. Like winter. I was from the West Coast, land of...well, I was from Portland, land of rain and fog. But still, we rarely had snow.

“You know what? Let’s have lunch soon, okay?” Sarah said. It was like my fall never happened, and I wasn’t standing in the cold with soda dripping off my hat. She whipped out her iPhone. “Do you like a good, greasy burger? I do, but Kyle gets upset if he catches me eating one. The man doesn’t understand that I can’t help myself. I’m a Southern girl. I’m not allowed to say no to food...especially dessert.”

We had never interacted much beyond the occasional party. She’d be there, I’d be there, and we’d both say ‘hi’ and make the necessary small talk. Sarah and I were Facebook friends and social acquaintances, but that’s all.

So, her asking me to lunch was a huge deal. Huge. Like we were on our way to being friends huge. And pathetic, shadow of herself me was desperate for a friend.

“I love burgers,” I said while trying not to sound over eager. “The greasier, the better.”

“How does this Wednesday look? We could go to a new place out in Lodi where no one will catch us.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Because if it isn’t a salad, it isn’t Waterford approved.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m free,” I said as I fished my phone from the cavernous depths of my bag. When I found it, I clicked open the calendar for show. If I wasn’t with Karen, I was always free – and I had no plans with Karen.

Sarah smiled brightly. “Perfect! I’ll pick you up, okay?”

“That’ll be great. I really hate driving in the snow.”

“Oh, Elizabeth. You’re going to have to get used to it at some point.” Sarah air kissed my cheeks before hurrying into the warmth of Panera and leaving me alone in the parking lot with wet jeans and a bruised backside.

The Secrets We Keep

I gathered my things and tossed them onto the passenger seat. When Jason bought me this car, I thought the seat warmers were a funny novelty, but I quickly learned they're essential. Especially when your pants were drenched.

My house was only a few blocks from the Town Center, but it was enough time to ruminate. How awkward was I? Did Sarah think I was socially inept? Had I air kissed the right way?

But mostly I wondered if I had done enough that day. Had I really? I hung-out alone at Panera eating food I shouldn't and spoke with Sarah while dirty dishes sat in the sink and clean laundry waited - not in the basket, but on the counter - to be folded. The boys hadn't done their chores the night before, which made me look bad, but if I got through those, maybe Jason would give me a gold star instead of the usual high-five.

Jason.

Sometimes...

No. I needed to take that thought and push it aside. We were trying, and that's what mattered.

I pressed my hand against my bag and could feel the outline of my phone. Part of me wanted to smash it so I'd never have to see it again, but what good would that do?

It wouldn't change things. Nothing would.

Nothing ever could.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

JASON WAS LATE. AS USUAL. I HAD FED THE KIDS AND GOTTEN THEM ready for bed, and he still hadn't arrived. He wasn't answering his phone either which drove my mind to the absolute worst places. He knew not being able to reach him was one of my triggers, and yet it seemed to be happening more and more.

I clenched my phone before pulling up Facebook on the web browser. Just to be safe, because Jason liked to check up on me, I cleared the search history and closed my secret account before setting the phone on the counter.

My stomach grumbled, and I rewarded it with leftover chicken fingers from the boys' dinner. Nothing like cold, processed chicken parts to make me feel better about the shit way I ate.

After I finished inhaling my dinner, I tried Jason again. On the third ring, the garage door opened, and I hung up.

"Hey," I said as Jason walked in the door. His tie was loosened and his hair disheveled, but I tried not to think about what it may mean. What it could mean. "I've been calling you."

He placed a peck on my forehead. "Sorry. My phone ran out of juice in the tunnel. I had to make most of the ride with nothing to read. And of course, the Red Line was on fire again."

“That sucks.” I waited for Jason to notice that my hair was curled, and my lips were a plummy-berry color. I waited for the compliment on my fitted LBD and stiletto heels. I thought maybe we could salvage the evening.

I waited, but he said nothing, so I swept past him, disappointed, and into the kitchen. Maybe his mind was too distracted from the ride home? Even with the metro, Jason’s commute was hell. The traffic around DC made it impossible to get anywhere easily. We only lived twenty-five miles away, but it took an hour and a half some days for Jason to make the trip. “Since it’s too late to go out, do you want me to heat up some leftovers?”

Jason dropped his bag on the ground near the counter. His hand brushed my phone, but he didn’t pick it up. “Go out? What are you talking about? We never go out on weeknights.”

“You said - when we talked this afternoon - that you’d be home early, and we could go out to dinner if I fed the kids first. Just you and me.” I stopped fussing in the fridge, turned around, and gestured to my outfit. “Don’t you remember?”

My husband scrunched up his face. He had such an expressive face and could never hide his thoughts. “I wouldn’t have. I had a meeting at six, so why would I say I’d come home early?”

It was so typically Jason. Nothing was ever his fault. “I don’t know. Maybe because you forgot about your meeting?”

“Elizabeth, don’t. I think you misunderstood me. Don’t go getting mad.”

“I’m not mad. I’m frustrated. I clearly remember this conversation, and you’re telling me it didn’t happen. I even dressed up for it.”

Jason wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a suffocating hug. His biceps were solid and thick, the result of gym time that came at the expense of ‘us’ time. “Sweetheart, maybe you need your meds adjusted again. You’ve really been struggling with your memory lately.”

I leaned back and looked up at Jason. “No, I..”

The wall clock ticked steadily, and seconds slid into minutes. My shoulders heaved as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

Was Jason right? Did I invent the whole conversation? Had I imagined running into Sarah today, too? My sore ass said no, but my brain wasn't so sure.

When Jason released me, I turned toward the double oven, and my reflections stole my breath. My hair was pulled back, and I had lipstick on. I was pulled together, but it was there in my eyes. The panic and the confusion.

Breathe, Elizabeth, breathe. It's going to be okay.

"Hey," Jason said. "Where are you going in that brain of yours?"

Did I wear my thoughts like he did his? "We really didn't talk about this?"

"We really didn't."

I wandered into the family room and curled up on my favorite arm chair. Weight pressed down on my shoulders, and I hung my head while blinking back the sting of tears. "Do you think I'm starting an episode?"

"Hey, don't cry. There's no reason." Jason held my hands between his and kissed them. "Call Dr. Carter. Get in and be seen before things get worse."

He was right. Dr. Carter always knew what to do. "I'll call her in the morning."

Jason brushed my cheek with his fingertips, and I put on my brave smile. The one that told him I would be fine and was moving forward. "Good," he said. "Now what about those leftovers?"

"Oh, shit, I forgot about that. You're starving, aren't you?"

"Very." Jason plopped down on the couch and kicked his feet up on the cement coffee table.

"If you were one of the boys, I'd smack your feet down."

"You better not." Jason narrowed his eyes and gave the kind of laugh you have when you're about to make a half-serious joke. "Now, if you were a good wife, you'd fetch me a beer."

"Of course," I replied, making sure to keep my voice light. Little things, like getting Jason a beer, made him happy, and I needed to keep him happy. If I didn't...well, we'd be down that road once already. I couldn't do it again. "Do you want parm on your noodles?"

“You know I do.”

I grated cheese on Jason’s pasta, grabbed a beer from the drink fridge, and presented it all to him as he sat on the couch. He didn’t bother to thank me, just took the plate and fixed his attention back on the television.

“Funny thing happened today,” I said as I battled for my husband’s attention. I’d gotten better over the course of the year of letting go of not reading into every little thing Jason did, but some days it was tougher than others.

“Yeah? Let me guess, Karen got her hair highlighted?” Jason shoveled pasta into his mouth. His honey brown eyes didn’t leave the TV. He was watching CNN like he did every night because working in D.C. with politicians didn’t fill his political news fix.

“No,” I answered. “Someone started a blog called *Surviving the Suburbs*. They wrote some bitchy stuff about Karen Newbold, Veronica, and Alexis, and Stacey McLeod posted it on the Women of Waterford Facebook page.”

“Wait, what?” Jason turned away from the TV. “Someone did what?”

“Wrote an unflattering blog post about Karen and her friends.”

Jason chuckled. “Good. It’s about time someone brought those women down a notch. Who’s writing it?”

I shrugged. “That’s the thing. It’s anonymous.”

“Awesome. Looks like the Women of Waterford will have more to gossip about now.”

“I guess.” I positioned myself at the other end of the couch and tucked my feet beneath me. “I mean, I hope I don’t show up on there.”

“It’s not that hard, Elizabeth. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

“I don’t plan on it.” Jason’s faith in me was less than zero. Sometimes, it felt like I was expected to do all the work on our marriage while he unfairly reaped the benefits.

As I sat on the couch, watching my husband watch television, a niggling thought assaulted me. Did I really make up the conversation

with Jason? Was that possible? Was my medicine so strong that it caused me to hallucinate?

Curious, I retrieved my phone from the kitchen and googled my medicine side-effects for the hundredth time and began reading.

“What are you doing?”

“Research,” I answered. “I’m so confused over our non-conversation today.”

Jason held out his hand. “Let me see.”

I paused. I wasn’t always a doormat, but now, now I did everything I was told. Unlike Jason who needed a password on his phone for work security reasons, I had none. My life – who I spoke to, where I went, and what I searched – was exposed to anyone who cared to look. And Jason looked often. He read the screen before tapping on a few things, and I held my breath.

“No browser history? Elizabeth, you can’t keep doing this to yourself. You need to let it go. Nothing will get better if you keep torturing yourself.”

The disappointment in his voice tore at me, but I shook my head. “No. I fell in the Panera parking lot, and I think I accidentally deleted things.”

Jason studied me closely. “Jesus, Elizabeth. Are you okay?”

“Sore, but I’ll be fine. Just an embarrassing accident.”

He handed back my phone and spread out on the couch. “Anyone notice?”

His words felt like a test. Like something I needed to pass. “Just Sarah Cole. But she asked me to lunch on Wednesday, so I must not be a total freak.”

My husband flinched.

“What?”

He glanced at me before focusing back on Anderson Cooper. “I hate her husband.”

“I know, but I’m not having lunch with him.”

“Fair point.”

“Anyway, she asked me to lunch, and we’re going out on Wednes-

day. Should be fun. I really like Sarah. She seems different than the other women in Waterford.”

A yawn roared out of Jason’s mouth, and he stretched with his arms and legs going in every direction. Sometimes, I could still see the young man I married underneath the middle-aged veneer. “I guess. They all seem the same to me: Blond hair, big boobs, and pea brained.”

“Except Sarah,” I said grabbing his toes and yanking off his obnoxiously patterned socks. “She has dark brown hair. Brains to be determined.”

Jason scooted over on the couch. “Lay down. I want to cuddle with you.”

I dropped the socks to the ground and placed my phone on the coffee table before molding into Jason’s side. Tension rippled through me, and I braced for Jason’s commentary, but he simply rubbed my back.

“It’s going to be okay, Elizabeth. We’re going to get through this.”

I wanted to believe it was possible, but nothing was working. Therapy, drugs, talking...none of it seemed to fix anything. At least not in a significant way. For the better part of a year, I had struggled to get through most days without crying or beating myself up. Jason was right, I couldn’t keep torturing myself. The past was the past and unchangeable.

But the future – that I could control.

I needed to.

THESE BITCHES ARE JUST LIKE ME

LET'S PLAY TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE. READY?

Statement One: *I write the things you wish you could say*

Statement Two: *I only write what's true and verified.*

Statement Three: *We're going to have so much fun together!*

If you guessed true to all three, you're the winner!

And now, for your reading pleasure, I'll introduce Sarah Cole, a Periphery Girl who is always just on the outside of the inner group. Karen and the others don't really pay her much attention because they think she's a little forgettable and plain. But I know she has more edge than they give her credit for.

Take, for example, this little goodie: Southern, conservative, religious Sarah told a mutual friend she once arranged a three-way in France for her husband's thirty-fifth birthday.

But that's not the scandal. Oh no. She also confided she would leave her husband if it wouldn't destroy her father. She hates him. Her husband, not her father. She said that if he cheated, she'd have a reason to go, and she'd take it. She also said if he died she wouldn't be too terribly sad.

So, picture perfect Sarah wants an out, but she doesn't want to be the one to initiate that out.

How's that for a little gossip? Good, right? Told you we'd have fun!

* * *

“You need to eat more, honey. You’ll be nothing but bones if you don’t.” Sarah pushed the half-full tray of fries toward me and tossed a couple packets of ketchup after them. “Eat.”

It was like she didn’t see today’s blog post, but I knew that wasn’t the case. Everyone’s had seen it. At six A.M., Karen was blowing up my phone with, “OMG!!!” and “I’m dying!!!” and I had to turn my phone off once she looped me into a chat between her, Alexis, and Veronica because my phone was dinging incessantly, and Jason was about to kill me.

When I didn’t make a move toward the fries, Sarah tightened her lips. “You know, I’m the one who shouldn’t have an appetite after that blog post this morning.”

“You saw it?”

Sarah blinked, looked away, and blinked again. My hand rested on my bag, ready to grab a tissue if needed. “Hey, Sarah. It’s okay. The posts are stupid. Everyone says so. Take that post about that Kelly woman grocery shopping. Who cares if she wasn’t buying organic food?”

“She’s a personal trainer, Elizabeth. Practice what you preach and all that.”

“But still, it was stupid and probably made up.”

Sarah flipped her phone over and stared at it as if waiting for answers to spring forth from the screen. “Why me?”

“I don’t know. Is anyone upset with you?”

“Not that I know of, and only a handful of people knew that story. I kept it close – or I thought I did. Maybe Kyle told some of the guys, and they told their wives?”

“Guys like to brag, and women like to gossip. Or at least whoever is writing that blog does.” I dragged a fry through ketchup, but didn’t bring it to my lips. There were probably fifteen hundred calories worth of fries sitting between Sarah and me, and if I wasn’t careful, I’d eat them all.

“Oh, Elizabeth. Everyone likes gossip. Don’t trust anyone who

says they don't." Sarah wagged her finger before taking a long draw on her Diet Coke. "Besides, it isn't all bad."

"It isn't?" Sarah was too calm.

"Well, you know what they say, all publicity is good publicity."

"So, you're not upset?" I didn't understand her lack of tears or outrage. "Aren't you worried about what Kyle is going to say?"

"If he gets mad, then according to the blog, I may get my wish." Sarah giggled. "Anyway, if anything, this just moved me up the social ladder. I'm edgy now, didn't you hear? Karen even called this morning to make sure I was okay."

Everything clicked. The salacious post had somehow raised Sarah's social standing. The workings of Waterford made me want to vomit.

I groaned and shoved my burger aside. "These things are huge!"

The grease-scented air clung to everything like cigarette smoke and threatened to give away my dirty secret to Jason. As soon as he kissed my forehead, he'd smell cheeseburger all over me, and he'd know I've been cheating on my diet again.

The buttoned-up lunch crowd rolled in around us, and Sarah and I had a prime, people-watching high-top near the windows. Sarah kept eating her burger as if nothing was wrong. The way she had embraced the sex scandal amazed me. Was it really not that big of a deal?

"Am I going to have to eat your burger for you? Am I?" she teased as she shoved my half-eaten burger back toward me.

"Pry it from my hands first," I said, and Sarah laughed as I took an exaggerated bite of greasy deliciousness. Everything flowed easily with Sarah. I wasn't constantly stressed about saying the wrong thing or talking to the wrong person. She was, as far as I could tell, authentic. What I saw was what I got.

"So, what made y'all move here? Waterford isn't exactly on most people's radar."

My heart stopped. That was the one question I had hoped to avoid because if I told her the truth, I risked ruining everything Jason and I were working so hard to leave behind. I wanted to be honest,

and I would have loved to have someone to talk to when things weren't going well, but that wasn't not an option. I didn't know her well enough.

"After London, I wanted something different and my college friend, Amanda, put me in touch with Pete White – an old classmate of ours. Pete said this was *the* place to raise kids in the DC metro area, so we decided to go for it. Jason found a job, we found a house, and we packed up our life and moved here."

"I didn't know Pete was an old friend. Does that mean you knew Veronica, too?"

I shrugged. "He was more of an acquaintance," I said. "By the time he met Veronica, Jason and I were already on the West Coast, and Pete was off my radar."

I lied again. Only this was a deeper lie. One I have never admitted aloud to anyone. Not even Amanda.

"Elizabeth, is something wrong?" Sarah leaned across the table and worry filled the slight crinkles around her deep, brown eyes. "You've gone sheet white."

"It's just Pete," I blurted. "We kind of secretly dated in college."

Sarah's mouth dropped open. "You what?"

Oh my God. I hadn't wanted to say that. I hadn't. "It was nothing. Just a quick fling." I blinked and shook my head. "Please don't mention it to anyone." Desperation seeped into my voice. "Please. If Jason found out, I don't know what he'd do."

"Honey, that's an awfully big secret to be hiding from your spouse. Especially when the person in question is his friend."

I bit my lip. I needed to do some serious clean-up. "I know. That's way you can't say anything. Please. Jason wouldn't understand."

The restaurant buzzed around us, and the din of diners made hearing difficult, so I leaned into Sarah. She patted my hand. "I won't tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me." She locked her lips with a pretend key. "I promise."

Some of the panic oozing from my heart eased, but then it raced again because if my secret ended up going public, Jason would lose it. "The blog..."

“I’m taking this one to the grave.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“That’s what friends do. We watch out for each other.”

Friends. I had trusted one of my biggest secrets to a woman I was just getting to know, but something told me I could trust Sarah. Maybe it was her earnestness, or just the calming way she has about her, but I believed her. More importantly, I believed she was my friend.

I could trust her.

“The burger is awesome, but I. Am. Full.” I was obviously changing subjects.

Sarah pivoted the conversation with me and grinned. “Don’t tell me you’re going to turn into one of those stick figure bobble heads with fake boobs and a tummy tuck.”

I laughed. “My boobs are large enough. And perky.” I pushed out my chest. Sarah and I had also bonded over our breast reductions. Neither of us had implants unlike 95% of the women at our country club, and we kind of gloated about it. “But I won’t rule out a tummy tuck.”

“Oh, me too. I want to wear a bikini again. Three kids and a love of burgers haven’t done me any favors.” Sarah wasn’t the thinnest woman, but she looked average to me. Like a normal middle-aged woman with jiggle bits and stretch marks.

I solemnly nodded my head. “I wear a bikini, but probably shouldn’t. I don’t have much to strut these days.”

Sarah raised her eyebrows. “You are tiny. Please don’t tell me you have body image issues because I think you look amazing.”

“You should have seen me when we lived in London. I was a size 0 or 2.”

She gave me a funny look.

“What?” I asked.

“Honey, I’ve been all over your Facebook, and you did not look better. You looked emaciated.”

Her tone wasn’t harsh, but the words were.

“Really?”

Sarah dipped a French fry in ketchup. “You and Jason were so cute in Portland with all your friends and parties, but something was missing in London. You looked...sad. More like you do now.” She swallowed a bite of fry. “Do you miss Portland?”

Why had it never occurred to me to remove all the old pictures? I didn’t want to remember, so why leave them up where anyone can see?

“Wow,” I said, pointing at the line snaking out the door. “We got here just in time.”

“I told you this place had a growing reputation. It’s good, isn’t it? And we haven’t even had the famous milkshake yet.”

“God help us.” I lined up three French fries so that their ends were even before biting into them. The fries were crunchy on the outside and potatoe-y on the inside. Sheer perfection. “I’m going to need a shower, breath mints, and new clothes after eating here.”

Two men with trays full of food cast dirty looks in our direction. True, Sarah and I had been taking a long time, but we were still eating. They needed to calm down and stop eyeing us.

One of them, the taller one, drew his brows tightly together and frowned at me.

“Sugar, pay them no mind. They’ll find a seat. Besides, we’re ladies, and everyone knows a lady gets to sit. And if they don’t, they have no manners.”

Sarah’s no nonsense, black-and-white view of everything was so different than my West Coast perspective. I guess that made us an odd couple, but whatever. We liked each other. Or at least I thought we did. Making friends was like dating. You go out a lot until you feel ready to introduce them to your family – or in this case, your husband.

The men stopped staring and turned their backs to us. Sarah was right.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be single again?” She said out of the blue. “Like if you were back on the market with three kids, would you talk to one of those guys? Do you think anyone would be interested in dating someone like us?”

I pursed my lips. This is something I'd considered frequently over the past year. I sometimes still did. At times, divorce or death seemed like the only two options out of the misery called my life. "Sometimes." I paused. "My boys are older than your girls, so I think it may be easier in my case. But you never know." I sipped my Diet Coke. "Why?"

Sarah rested her chin on her hand. "Well, the blog told the truth. I wouldn't be too terribly sad if Kyle died. Don't get me wrong, I don't want the girls lose their father, but I wish I had a second chance at love."

"Do you love Kyle?" I blurted and immediately regretted it. "I'm sorry, that was insensitive."

Sarah shrugged. "I wish he gave me a reason to leave. I mean, if he ever cheated on me, that would be the end of our marriage."

Her bluntness shouldn't have surprised me, but it did and I sat back heavily in my chair. "Really?"

"Absolutely. I have self-respect." She tilted her head. "Wouldn't you leave if you found out Jason was cheating?"

Panic welled inside me. "I...I don't know."

"Of course, you would," she said. "Because staying means you're okay with it, and you're too strong of a woman to condone such behavior."

Was I strong? It didn't feel like it most days. In fact, I often felt the opposite of strong. My feelings must have been all over my face because Sarah changed the topic. "What are you doing Friday night? I'm having a small cocktail party. Melissa Foster will be there. Have you met her? Cute little blond that lives on Mountain Pass?"

I smiled, relieved to leave the cheating conversation. "You just described a third of Waterford."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "I guess so, but if you come over Friday night and bring a red, you can meet her. She's lovely, but Kyle hates her. He thinks she's into me." Sarah winks. "In *that* way."

If that blog post were true, Kyle should be happy about Melissa's crush given his taste for three-ways. Or maybe he felt threatened by this Melissa Foster. Who knew?

“Are you sure she isn’t?”

“Oh honey, she and her husband used to swing, but that was eons ago. Melissa is straight-edge now.”

“Sounds like fun. What time?”

“After my girls go to bed, so eight?”

“I have a thing at Karen Newbold’s starting at six, but I can swing by after I do my official duties.”

Sarah smiled tightly. “Oh. I didn’t know Karen was having a party.”

“It’s just a small thing.”

“No party of Karen’s is small. She invites everyone.” She stared at me for a second like she was trying to figure something out.

“What?”

“Don’t you have to ask Jason? I mean, doesn’t he get a say in where you two go?”

She was right. Jason hated when I planned things without checking in with him first. Plus, with his work schedule, I never knew when he’d be home. “Can I get back to you tonight?”

“Of course! There’s no hurry.” Sarah played with her straw. “I understand how it is. Kyle is the man of our home, too. Everything, and I mean everything, has to run through him.”

I nodded. Since I had become sick, Jason had become more protective of me, and I no longer ran the household like I once had. In fact, I did very little beyond showing up and breathing.

“So, call me and let me know, okay?”

“Of course!” I answer.

Sarah’s grin stretched wide. “Good! I can’t wait to introduce you to everyone. It’s a whole different group than the Bitch Brigade.”

If Sarah’s friends were anything like her, the night would be fun. And maybe, just maybe, I’d find my tribe. “Hey,” I said as I swiped crumbs into my hand and dumped them in a bag. “Why don’t we head over to the Club before the kids get out of school and detox this grease from our system in the sauna.”

Sarah’s mouth dropped slightly open, and she glanced away

before smiling at me. “Honey, you know, we’ve already discussed that right? About five minutes ago? We’re getting milkshakes to-go.”

Heat flashed across my cheeks. I had no memory of that conversation. None. “Right,” I said. “I’m just eager to go.”

Sarah beamed. “Well in that case, let’s get our Rocky Road and hit the road.”

I kept a smile on my lips but my brain was screaming, not again. Not again. Not again. To lose my memory with Jason was one thing; to lose it with a near stranger was another.

What was wrong with me?