

Chapter 3

Having already picked out an outfit the night before, Lena was ready to get her day started. Alonzo had gotten up, showered, and left her in bed around six thirty a.m. He had a fifty-something-minute drive to Concord, depending on the traffic. She rested well. She always slept soundly when Alonzo was there. She snoozed her alarm only once, which was good compared to her normal three snoozes, and checked her phone before hopping in the shower.

Alonzo: *Have a great day, baby. I'm glad that we talked last night. I'm talking with Mike today. TTYL.* She smiled as she read the text from Alonzo and then sent him an emoji blowing kisses.

There was another text from Tammy: *I'm stopping by our coffee shop. Do you want anything?*

Lena replied: *Cream-cheese cinnamon roll, please!*

She hopped in the shower, applied her makeup, and then put on a dark-gray, tweed skirt suit with a navy-blue blouse. She looked over her shoes for a few minutes, then

decided on her dark-gray—so dark that they were almost black—pumps. Lena hurried to the kitchen and poured her hot tea in her mug. Then, she was off with her travel mug in hand.

Beep, beep. Lena unlocked her car. She loved her Acura. It was a champagne color, drove so smoothly, and was classy just like her. She laughed at the conversations from her local radio hosts playing through her speakers. Twenty minutes later, she was pulling up in the parking lot at Powers. She gathered her tea, purse, and workbag, shuffling them in her hands and arms until they were comfortable to tote. Finally, she was heading to the employees' entrance, where she swiped her key card and entered the building. Two big, burly security guards sat at the front desk. She would often bring them pastries in the morning. They greeted her with a smile and nodded as they normally did. She smiled back. "Good morning, Larry, Pete!"

"It's always a good morning when we see you," Larry responded. Larry was always more talkative than Pete. Larry had to be over six feet and weighed at least 270 pounds. He had a shaved head and a long biker beard. Tattoos covered his right arm. He looked big and mean, but she could tell he was a big teddy bear by his big smile.

Pete laughed. "Ditto."

She laughed with them, then headed to the elevator. She waited for a few seconds and rode it up to floor three. Once she was in her office, she unloaded her things, sat down at her desk, looked out of her small window, and took a breath.

Knock, knock.

“Come in.”

“One cream cheese–frosted cinnamon roll!” Tammy grinned as she sashayed in. She had a natural glow to her ivory skin, and you could barely catch her without a smile. Tammy was a brunette with hair hanging to the middle of her back, but she normally wore it in a low bun.

Lena’s mouth was watering. “Girl, thanks! I owe you big time.”

“As many times as you’ve bought me drinks? C’mon, Lena. I’m still trying to catch up.”

“Well, you know I like my after-work beverages.” Lena chuckled.

“I like them, too!”

Tammy sat down in one of Lena’s chairs. “Oh yeah, I can’t find my Powers flash drive. It’s one of those blue ones. Have you seen it?”

Lena thought *flash drive* to herself and suddenly found herself triggered and in a room with Danen. She thought deeply, then remembered. *Oh my gosh! I dreamed about Danen last night!*

Tammy got up. “Let me know if you see it. I need to pick up my copies from the copy room before someone takes them. Want to do lunch today?”

“Sure, will do, and thanks again for breakfast.” Lena was flustered at the thought of Danen. *What’s going on with me?*

She stared at her computer screen. If someone was in the room, they’d think that she was reading intently, but

she was in her zone. She was triggered by something as simple as a flash drive.

She remembered being in class with Danen when he showed her the small memory device during second period. They were saving their papers and she had forgotten her floppy disk. He had offered to let her save her paper on his flash drive. She was skeptical but gave in.

High school. Things were so different back then. She had no idea what a “gig” was back in the day. He probably had more along the lines of twenty-five megabytes on that thing, but there he was with his deep-brown eyes, saving the day as usual. Nice smile, broad shoulders, low haircut, sandy tan skin, a football player—someone who all the girls wanted, but he was hers. Always and forever, they thought. They dated for two years in high school, junior and senior year, and even lasted two years through college with a few minor breakups. They were in a long-distance relationship, but not by much. She attended the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, while he attended North Carolina State University in Raleigh. They were about forty minutes away from each other. He played football and crossed in a fraternity. She couldn’t handle all of the groupies and missed time. He also admitted to not being able to handle them and their long distance himself. They ended and didn’t talk for about a year. They saw each other back at home a few times and decided to keep in touch. Besides, they had been friends first before they were anything else. *His lips*, she thought.

A window popped up on her computer screen to notify her of a new message. It slightly pulled her back to reality, but wasn't enough to pull her away from her thoughts of Danen. Her phone ringing definitely was enough to pull her back. She shook herself out of her daze while reaching for her ringing phone. It was from office number twelve, her boss. "Good morning, Mr. Edwards," she said, wiping crumbs from her mouth.

"Good morning, Selena, hope your morning is off to a good start. I ran into Greg from tech support. Two of his technicians are having problems with their new-hire packets. Normally, I'd tell him to help out, but he'll be out of the office for a couple of days working on-site. Find someone to help them for me."

She jotted down notes on her sticky pad. "No problem. I'll help them myself."

She could've gotten Tammy to talk to them, but she didn't really cover benefits. They were still looking for someone to help them on that end. She hoped they would find someone soon. Mr. Edwards planned on hiring at least twenty or thirty people within the next six months.

"One more thing, Selena," Mr. Edwards added. "My sister has been bothering me about my nephew. He's in school and needs some work experience. I told him to apply. Flag his app when it comes in and give him a call." He went on to explain that he wanted Lena to go through the whole interview and hiring process, but he did not want her to hire him immediately. He advised her to let his nephew wait for a week or two, and then she could set him up to shadow an accountant.

Lena listened to all of his requests and answered, "Will do." She hung up and thought, *Must be nice.*

She grabbed her cell phone and started to compose a text: *You will never guess . . .* She stared at the cursor for a couple of seconds, then erased it. She started again: *Danen.* She hesitated, then hit send.

Chapter 4

Lena and Tammy's lunch hour seemed like it took forever to come around, but when it did, they were out the door and on the way to a bistro. Lena was all about warm foods. No cold salads or sandwiches, just stomach-sticking stews, soups, and home-cooked platters. They were seated in a booth near the front windows. The restaurant was chilly, but the warmth from the sun glaring through the windows warmed Lena up. Tammy casually flirted with their server, Wayne. Wayne had a creamy, latte complexion and pretty, gray eyes. Tammy batted her eyes, patted her hair, and placed the loose strands behind her ear while she ordered her french-dip hoagie. Lena decided on a bowl of chicken-and-dumpling soup and damn near avoided eye contact. She thought Tammy was flirty enough for the both of them. *With eyes like that, he must rack up tips.*

"Did you find your flash drive?" Lena asked.

"I sure did. It was in the copy room. To be honest, I'm not quite sure how it got there. I never take it from my

desk, unless it's on my lanyard. Anyway, did Lonnie come over yesterday?"

"Yeah, he did. We didn't do anything. Just ate and watched TV."

"Well, that's all you need sometimes."

Lena smiled. "I missed his face. He's been keeping late nights at work and hasn't felt like coming over. I volunteer to go to his place, but I think he's too exhausted on those nights and just tells me, 'Next time.' It bothered me at first, but he needs his rest. He works hard." She smiled hard, thinking about how his hard work was paying off.

"Late nights, huh?" Tammy teased.

"Yeah. Are you concerned?"

"No." Tammy chuckled. "Not at all. You two are the cutest lovebirds, and you are a keeper, honey. I honestly doubt he'd do anything to mess this up!"

"Yeah, but what if?"

"Well, don't let your mind wander. If he does mess up, then you'd have a decision to make." She sipped her sweet tea. "Jason messed up. He has messed up big, but I thought it was something that I could forgive him for and that we could work through. It took some time, but we worked through it."

"I don't know."

"Well, you never know until you're put in a situation."

Lena nodded in agreement and, in an attempt to change the subject from her and Alonzo, asked, "How did your little Lisa do at her recital?" She then realized that it was a bad attempt. She wanted to have a family. She wished she had her own little ballerina to talk about. She wondered

when she would be able to have her own proud-parent moments.

Tammy jumped to answer the question. "Oh! She was excellent! The best six-year-old there. I cannot believe that I didn't send you the picture of her in her tutu!" Lena smiled while Tammy dug through her huge designer purse looking for her cell phone. "I wish I'd brought my tablet." She kept searching. "Found it." She started swiping through her photos then held her phone toward Lena's face.

Lena backed up a bit. "Oh, she looks so sweet! If I had a daughter, I would definitely put her in ballet."

Amused by Lena's comment, Tammy chuckled. "Making plans, are we?"

Lena laughed and sarcastically stated, "Of course—not!" But deep down, she wanted to. Lena was a year from thirty and felt like she had no idea what the next few years, or even the next year, would bring. She used to be so sure of Alonzo, but for certain reasons, she wasn't anymore. She remembered how anxious she was to start at Powers, but the zeal had subsided. She felt like she was just . . . there.

The waiter was approaching the table with their orders when Lena felt her phone vibrate in her purse. Wayne sat Tammy's dish on the table. Lena eyed Tammy's sandwich. It looked so good. She thought, *I should've ordered that*. He set her salad, soup, and roll on the empty table before her. She had so much food. She might as well have asked for a to-go box to come out with her food.

"Does everything look okay, ladies?" Wayne directed most of his attention toward Lena.

"Yes," Tammy said while smiling at him. "How about yours, Selena?"

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. It's kind of hard to mess up chicken and dumplings."

Wayne smiled at her this time, but Lena was looking down at her phone and unlocking it. He then told them, "Let me know if you need anything else," then returned to the server's station.

"He sure had eyes for you." Tammy started pouring ketchup over her piping-hot french fries while Lena looked back at her phone.

Lena looked up for a second. "Huh? I didn't see that." She was sure that Mr. Edwards was sending her more e-mails concerned with his family—something that was well below her pay grade.

"My apologies. I forget you only have eyes for Alonzo." Tammy tossed a fry into her mouth.

"Oh my gosh. Whatever. Do I seem that head over heels?" Lena placed her phone in her lap and was in her purse again, looking for her hand sanitizer.

"Yes, you do." Tammy started munching away at her french-dip sandwich.

Without interruption, Lena finally had a chance to view her text messages. Danen responded to her text from earlier.

Danen: *Yes, Lena Harris? Wait, did you mean to text me?*

She laughed to herself.

Lena: *Yes, I meant to text you.*

His response came in moments later.

Danen: *Oh. Did your boyfriend tell you that you could talk to me?*

Lena: *I don't need permission.*

Danen: *Better not get caught.*

Lena: *Enough with your jokes!*

He sent a smiley emoji.

Danen: *Lighten up Lena, lol. What's up?*

Lena: *Not your whack-ass jokes.*

Danen: *lol! Still feisty, I see.*

Tammy looked up and saw that Lena was still texting. "Your soup is getting cold, Miss Chicken and Dumplings. That must be that man. Tell Lonnie that I said hey!"

"You're right, it is getting cold." She placed her phone back in her purse, started eating her food—beginning with her soup—and chatted with Tammy. She never responded to Danen's last text.

The rest of the day went by pretty fast. She scheduled a few interviews for the following week. She was especially excited about one prospect. He had mostly all of the experience that she was looking for, and the other skills he lacked could be taught easily. Mr. Edwards had left early and would be out until the next Wednesday. She was very happy about that, and she had two Internet workshops on federal and state compliance that would block off some of her time. She was looking forward to her next work week but knew that she'd be putting other duties off. She needed to update some applications and job descriptions for the company's career website as well as make a new presentation for the new hires' orientation. She'd chosen to work in human resources because she knew it was a

safe field to be in. Jobs would always be available. Plus, she'd figured it would be easy, but her work was proving to be tedious and, overall, uninteresting.

Lena started packing up as she wrapped up the last of the work that she was completing. Tammy came in and proposed that they have an after-work date at the bookstore next week. Lena thought it was a good idea because it had been a while since she had last purchased a book for pleasure reading. Lena told her she agreed.

Tammy said, "Great! We can sit, drink coffee, and watch all of the hot, metro guys walk around."

Lena almost burst out laughing. "You're a mess. I don't want to look at any 'metro' guys."

I just want to take my mind off things.