

AUTHOR OF *IF TOMORROW NEVER COMES*

# Falling into Place



ALLISON  
ASHLEY



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 Montlake



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*For the healthcare workers of the COVID-19 pandemic*

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Carly*

I went to a new Thai restaurant yesterday and it made me think of you. It was so good I thought about having it again tonight, but then I remembered it was Thursday and Thursday is Barrio's night. I can't seem to stop going there every week like we used to, but now I sit at the bar instead of at our regular table. Have you found a place over there you go every Thursday? Anyway. Miss you.

*—Email from Carly Porter to Benjamin Wheeler*

"I would rather walk barefoot across broken glass than have sex with that man."

Extreme? Perhaps.

Overdramatic? Maybe.

Something one shouldn't say to their boss at 8:00 a.m. on a Monday morning before everyone had at least two cups of coffee? Probably.

But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Five minutes ago, Carly had walked into her longtime friend and part-time boss's office feeling fresh, hopeful, and a little nervous. But like, the *good* kind of nervous. The kind you get when you're about to cross the stage at graduation to receive that hard-earned degree or walk down the aisle toward the partner of your dreams. Maybe you didn't love that people would be staring at you, and you were slightly terrified you'd trip and fall and make a fool of yourself, but still, this was something you *wanted* to do. It was something good and exciting.

Today, Carly was the good kind of nervous because she'd been called into Mai's office for a one-on-one. The last two people who'd had a private meeting with either Mai or her business partner, Kyle, had been offered rare full-time, salaried positions at Mode Style, Oklahoma City's premier personal-styling business. Ever since moving back to her hometown two years ago, Carly had worked for Mode on a client-by-client basis as a contract employee. Which meant she'd had to keep her *other* job as an accountant that, while it paid the bills, bored her to tears.

She'd give anything to work in fashion full-time and had been killing herself to take on and go above and beyond for every client possible to prove herself. Her positive client-feedback rating was the highest in the company.

There was no way Mai hadn't noticed how hard she'd been working.

The excitement swirling through her veins meant she didn't notice Mai's solemn expression when Carly sat down on the other side of the desk. But when her boss-slash-friend spoke, her grim tone was unmistakable.

"Carly, we need to talk."

Carly's stomach dropped to her toes. "Oh." Her spine went straight and she gripped her hands together in her lap. "Um, okay?"

Was Mode going under? Was Mai leaving? Was Kyle?

Mai's cheeks puffed out as she slowly blew out a long breath. "Mrs. Princeton reached out to me over the weekend."

Carly frowned. "Kitty Princeton?"

"Yes. Your client's wife."

Though the term "client" was technically correct, it was also generous. Carly had felt more like a mix between a kindergarten teacher and an etiquette instructor during the hours she'd spent with the sixty-four-year-old oil tycoon. She'd spent more time than not politely (but firmly) declining his advances and attempting to redirect his focus from her breasts to appropriate subjects, such as current tie-width trends and popular street styles for more . . . seasoned men. She didn't have kids but wondered if maybe this was what it was like trying to dress a six-year-old who kept running off to play with his toys.

Unfortunately, the only toy Chet Princeton wanted to play with was . . . well, Carly.

“She called you on a weekend?”

Mai nodded. “Sent an email, too. And when I say what I’m about to say, I don’t want you to panic, all right?”

Oh God.

“She contacted me to express concerns about your behavior toward her husband. She alleges that you’ve been . . . overly flirtatious with Mr. Princeton during your appointments.”

“She *what*?”

The only reason Carly stopped there was Mai’s flat expression that said, *I know this is complete bullshit, but let me finish*. “She said he’s uncomfortable working with you, and she requested I assign a different stylist. She also suggested I consider . . . corrective action to address your unprofessional behavior. Now, don’t look at me like that; I know it’s not true.”

“Thank God,” Carly said. She felt sick. “Because I would rather walk barefoot across broken glass than have sex with that man.”

Mai snorted, then put her hand up while she composed herself. “I’ll accept that as your formal rebuttal to her allegations. I’ve known you a long time and know you wouldn’t behave that way with a client, and on top of that I’m a member of the same country club as the Princetons. Everyone knows that guy has had more affairs than dollars in his bank account.”

That was a lot of affairs.

Mai slid her red-framed cat-eye glasses from her nose and set them on the desk between them. “But . . .”

“But?”

“We can’t afford to lose the Princetons—or their influential friends—as clients. And even though it’s a baseless accusation, she did make a formal written complaint. So to cover Mode’s ass, I have to document that I discussed the situation with you, and the entire team will be required to retake the sexual harassment and workplace professionalism training. No

one will know what sparked the training update, so don't worry about bad press for you. I just have to make sure it doesn't turn into a PR nightmare for the company as a whole, okay?"

Carly nodded, thankful Mai trusted her but feeling sort of gross about the whole thing all the same. "I . . . feel like I should say I'm sorry, even though I didn't do anything wrong. Mr. Princeton is such a creep."

"Believe me, I know. And you're right, you have nothing to apologize for. It's more likely he does." Mai paused, leaned forward, and, with an elbow on the desk, pressed one palm to her forehead. "God, I should have asked you that first: Have there been any issues working with him? Has he done something to make you uncomfortable that I need to address? Important client or not, if he's crossed a line, he's gone."

Carly shook her head. She wasn't about to make this a bigger deal than it already was. "Nothing I can't handle. I appreciate it, though."

"Of course. I hope you always know you can come to me if something like that ever came up."

"I do," Carly said.

Mai smiled. "Well, thanks for coming in so early today. I know it's not the best way to start your week off."

Carly snorted. "You can say that again. And here I thought you were gonna offer me one of your coveted full-time positions." The second she said the words out loud, she regretted them. It sounded like she just expected Mai to hand it to her, rather than strategically outline everything she'd done to earn the role. She was Mai's best stylist, and they both knew it.

"You're a model employee," Mai said, echoing Carly's thoughts. "And you have the highest request rate from return clients of anyone on staff right now."

Why did she feel a *but* coming here, too?

"But hiring decisions aren't just up to me. I'm the style part of Mode, and Kyle's the business half. We're looking for someone with people skills and fashion intuition, yes—and you have those in spades. But we're also looking for people who bring fresh ideas. Innovation. Unique perspectives to

keep us not only on the cutting edge of the fashion industry but also in the narrative of how our company fits into the broader picture of Midwest community and culture.”

It wasn’t the first time Carly had heard that. Mode’s business model primarily revolved around stylists working via contract and by commission, and they only pulled people on full-time if they would have a more expansive role within the company.

“I believe in you, Carly,” Mai said, likely reading Carly’s silence as defeat. “Bring us something inspired that could take Mode to the next level, and you’d be very hard to say no to.”



“That motherfucker.”

Carly clinked her drink against the glass her best friend Sasha held up, then drank. “You can say that again.”

“Do you think he’s the one who put his wife up to it? To get you in trouble because he’s pissed you said no? Or did she do it on her own?”

“I have no idea.” Carly shrugged. “But it doesn’t really matter. I know Mai believes me, but I don’t know Kyle that well. Part of me wonders if this ruined my chances of ever getting a salaried position.”

Most of the contract stylists had enough work that they didn’t need to hold second jobs if they didn’t want to. But Carly was unwilling to sacrifice having a consistent paycheck, and no matter how good she was, working on commission terrified her. Financial stability was nonnegotiable, and anyone who knew what her childhood was like wouldn’t blame her for that.

“No way,” Sasha argued. “They know how incredible you are. In a week they’ll have forgotten all about it, and you can march back in there and demand a promotion. Be the badass I know that you are and go for what you want!”

Carly glared at her friend. “You mean to tell me that a week after being accused of sexual harassment at work, you’d walk straight up to your boss and demand a promotion?”

“Well. My sister’s my boss, so. Probably.”

“It’s not that simple for me. Harassment allegations aside, Mode doesn’t just want people who know fashion. They want people who bring ‘fresh and innovative ideas’ to the company.” She air-quoted around Mai’s key descriptors.

“You don’t have those?”

“Not the kind they’re looking for. The last person they hired is the one who pitched an athletics division and landed the Thunder contract. You think I can compete with the guy who gets to dress super-tall, super-sexy, super-famous NBA players?”

“Well, when you say it like that . . . no.”

Carly took another long drink and spun around on her barstool. She gestured at their surroundings. “Take Variety. Never in a million years would I have come up with something as cool as this.”

Ava, the owner who often doubled behind the bar, passed by at that moment and gave Carly a huge smile. “Bitch, you just made my whole day.”

Carly laughed and gave a thumbs-up, then turned back to Sasha. “Remember when we first came here? You immediately wanted to cover it and did a whole piece in the magazine about it. I mean, a bar where people can gather and watch their favorite reality TV shows? Collectively gasp with housewives or literally cast their vote on who they think’s about to get kicked off the island?” Tonight was *Bachelor* night, and she and Sasha rarely missed it. Witnessing the lavish dates, relationship drama, and rose ceremonies on a huge screen surrounded by other die-hard fans was a thousand times better than viewing from home. Plus, they awarded prizes to customers who correctly predicted the outcome of that evening’s episode. “*This* is innovation.”

“You’re right. And that piece did do well,” Sasha agreed. “Unlike anything else we’ve covered in the last nine months.”



Carly had been scanning the room with appreciation when Sasha muttered that last part, so it took her a minute to pick up on it. She glanced over at her friend, assessing her more closely.

“What’s going on?” Carly asked. “Is the magazine not doing well?”

Sasha was editor in chief of *LiveOKC*, an online and print magazine that focused on everything local in Oklahoma City and the surrounding suburbs. Part of a larger media company started by her parents more than thirty years ago and currently run by Sasha’s sister, Macy, *LiveOKC* was a staple for keeping up with anything and everything happening in town, from boutiques to restaurants and all that fell in between.

From the age of nine, Sasha had planned on working at the magazine with her mom. But when her mom died unexpectedly in high school, *LiveOKC* became more than just a potential career that seemed interesting and fun. It became Sasha’s entire life.

Sasha rubbed her temples. “No, it’s not. We had our quarterly review this morning, and we’ve been behind on every metric for the last nine months. New subscriptions are consistently down, and local partners are starting to pull advertisements.”

“Shit. Do you know why?”

Sasha shrugged. “Macy thinks there’s too much competing for people’s attention. You get, like, three seconds to hook someone, and if you fail, they’re on to the next thing.”

“You know how to do that, though,” Carly said. “You’re on top of all the social media stuff.”

“It’s not enough anymore. I try to keep up with the changing algorithms, but it feels impossible. Even if a random post does well, doing the same thing doesn’t work a second time. It’s exhausting, trying to keep up with the hot new thing, you know?” Sasha toyed with the straw in her glass. “*LiveOKC* won’t survive if people just stop in and then forget about us; they need to keep coming back. I get what Mai’s saying about valuing innovation for a business model, but whatever happened to good old loyalty and

consistency? As a consumer, I don't always want to be surprised. Sometimes I want exactly what I want because I've had it before and know I liked it."

"Literally all I want in my life is consistency," Carly agreed. Growing up she'd had way too little of it. That was probably why she was chronically in long relationships—several years with a guy during college and one and a half with Benjamin, who she'd still be with if they hadn't agreed on taking a break while he was out of the country for an internship.

"Why does everything always have to be new and shiny?"

Carly gave her friend the side-eye. "Says the girl sitting at Oklahoma City's hottest new bar."

Sasha's glare would have turned a lesser woman into a statue, but they'd been friends long enough that Carly wasn't fazed. "Rude. I love the Hideout just as much as this place."

As much as Carly loved the Hideout, a hole-in-the-wall staple that had been around well before they could legally drink, the unique draw of this place couldn't be replicated anywhere else in town.

"You know what's weird, though?" Carly said, tipping her head. "Watching reality TV at a bar might be fresh, but reality TV itself isn't. I mean, God, what season is *The Bachelor* on now? Twenty? What about *Survivor*? *Big Brother*?"

"I don't know, like five million?" Sasha kept her eyes on the screen above the bar for a long moment. "How on earth is that possible when two of my favorite sitcoms over the last few years were canceled after one season? What is it about these shows people love so much?"

Carly definitely didn't have all the answers. "Maybe because humans are weird. We love watching other people live their lives, especially if we don't feel like we're living our own. Even if it's fake as hell. Can't find love? Watch someone else fall into it. Even if they're pretending, I eat it up every single time. Not enough adventure in your life? Watch castaways try to stay alive and win a competition from some remote island without electricity. Are they secretly sleeping in hotels and eating regular food when the cameras are off? Don't know, don't care. I'll pretend it's real all day long."

Sasha didn't reply right away, her attention locked on the lavish date between two strangers happening before their eyes. Carly tuned in, too, and neither said anything for a long moment.

Then Sasha said quietly, "You know, you're right."

Just as Carly noticed that look in her friend's eye—the same one she'd had when they were seventeen and stole and smoked several of her dad's cigars (bad idea) and then snuck into a rap concert at the Zoo Amphitheatre (100 percent worth it)—Sasha swiveled on her stool and grinned.

"I have an idea."

# CHAPTER TWO

*Brooks*

*“Who’s that?”*

*“Oh, that’s Dr. Martin. Don’t worry about him; he doesn’t yell and never gets mad if you page him in the middle of the night. But don’t expect him to crack any jokes or go out with the crew after work. I don’t know what skeletons are in his closet, but dude’s private as fuck.”*

*—Overheard at the 4W ICU Nursing Station*

Ever thought something you were about to do was a terrible idea—possibly the worst idea of your entire life—then went ahead and did it anyway?

Yeah. Brooks knew the feeling.

He dropped his head into his hands, still a little shocked at what he’d just agreed to.

Stupidest man on the planet, probably. And the funny thing was, he’d known right away his sisters were up to something.

He first became mildly suspicious when he arrived at Macy’s house for dinner last night and found his nephews and brother-in-law Mark gone. Sent to the arcade for the evening, or something. Usually, an invitation to come over was nothing but a ploy to get him to wrestle his nephews to the point of exhaustion before bed, and he was always happy to oblige.

Quiet in this house was never a good sign.

The nagging sensation intensified when he found Sasha at the kitchen table.