

mona kasten



begin again

a novel



new town. new start. new life.

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About the Book

He makes the rules. She breaks them all.

A new start. It's the only thing keeping Allie Harper going, when she packs up her life and moves across the country to Woodshill, Oregon. She's about to start college, desperate to leave the ghosts of her past behind her. Even if that means never talking to her parents again.

Now the hard part—finding an apartment before classes start. Just when it seems she'll have to live out of her car, Allie visits one more place. It's beautiful. With one exception: can she stand being roommates with campus bad boy Kaden White? Sure, Kaden is sexy with his tattoos and careless attitude, but he's also an arrogant jerk. With nowhere else to go, Allie moves in.

The first thing Kaden does is make a set of rules. Either Allie obeys, or she's out:

1. Don't talk about your girl problems.
2. Keep your mouth shut if I bring someone home.
3. We will *NEVER* hook up.

Easy enough, thinks Allie. Who would want to get involved with a brute like Kaden? But the more she gets to know him, the more she sees beyond his gruff façade. He, too, is harboring some painful secrets. For Kaden and Allie, it gets harder and harder to ignore the sparks between them. And the lines between the rules start to blur ...

About the Author

Mona Kasten was born in Germany in 1992. Before devoting herself to writing, she studied Library and Information Science. She lives with her husband, cats, and countless books in northern Germany. She loves all forms of caffeine and taking long walks in the woods. Her favorite days are the ones when she can block out the world and just write. Mona loves to interact with her readers on Twitter @MonaKasten. Her website (in German) is www.monakasten.de

MONA KASTEN

begin again

*Translated from the German by
Toby Axelrod*



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For Christian, my biggest supporter

begin again playlist

Brain - Banks
Waiting Game - Banks
Feel Real - Deptford Goth
Meet you There - Busted
Can't break Thru - Busted
Strong - One Direction
Right Now - One Direction
Ocean Avenue - Yellowcard
Breathing - Yellowcard
Irresistible - Fall Out Boy
The Kids Aren't Alright - Fall Out Boy
Fourth of July - Fall Out Boy
I Wish you Would - Taylor Swift
New Romantics - Taylor Swift
Red - Taylor Swift
Fearless - Taylor Swift
A Beautiful Lie - Thirty Seconds to Mars
Attack - Thirty Seconds to Mars
Jealous - Nick Jonas
Where are Ü Now - Jack Ü, Skrillex, Diplo, Justin Bieber

Chapter 1

White.

I stared at the nameplate by the doorbell. Tilting my head, I lifted my finger, then hesitated. I clenched my hand into a fist. The drama of the last few days rushed through my head all over again.

Weeks of fighting with my parents. One thousand seven hundred miles. A twenty-four-hour drive. It was all behind me now. I'd arrived in Woodshill two nights ago, crashing in a run-down hostel. For the first few hours I'd fought the urge to turn back. But now things were clear.

Because I'd made it. *I was here.*

Actually, things hadn't exactly started out as expected. Of course I'd had a glimpse of my new home from a distance; it was like I already knew the mountains of Oregon, the endless forests, and even the university campus, thanks to the Internet. Yesterday was freshman orientation on campus, and then I went to check out some apartments I'd found online. It turned out to be a waste of time, because they were all complete dumps. But I didn't care. I had arrived in Oregon.

Freedom.

It was the only thing that had kept me going these past few months. Now I could start my own life, do things the way I wanted. The past nineteen years had been so damned suffocating.

To my parents, appearances were everything. My hair was colored to fade into the perfect golden ombré, and I wore only the best labels. Chanel. Hermès. Saint Laurent. I could flash a charming smile practically at the touch of a button. I had to be perfect little daughter—or at least look

the part. So that's why my first act as a college student had been to hit up the nearest beauty salon for a drastic cut and color. No more long, blonde tresses: Now my cheeks were framed with unruly brown fringes. For the first time in years, I kept my own natural wave. Mom wouldn't have approved.

Every time my short-cropped hair tickled my cheeks, it reminded me that I was finally allowed to be me. It was my first step toward freedom, and even if it seems silly, I felt like an entirely new person.

Unfortunately even my new style hadn't helped much with the apartment search. Unlike most incoming freshmen, I hadn't applied for a place in the dorms—I wanted to be out on my own.

But the clock was ticking. Only a handful of apartments were still available, and I could write them all off as total disasters.

At the first one, my potential roommate was more interested in my bra size than in my bad habits. Gross. Just the thought of that pervert gives me the creeps. Then there was the young mother who not only wanted a roommate but also a live-in babysitter. Not much better. At apartment number six, I met a couple who were practically going at it during my visit—and asked me to join in. All the other places were either trashed or contaminated with mold. Somehow, I'd thought finding a place would be easier.

Which is probably why I couldn't bring myself to ring the last doorbell of the day. The letters on the nameplate were illuminated from behind, and burned into my retinas.

White.

This was it. There weren't any other available apartments near campus. If I couldn't move in here next week, I'd be out on the street. Everything else seemed to be booked out for the start of the school year.

I needed this place. I didn't even care that I'd be rooming with a guy, because if I didn't get this place, I'd

have to find a park bench for the start of the semester, or make a cozy little home in my car. Whatever happened, no way was I going back to Lincoln, Nebraska. Never. I was starting over here, whatever the cost. And if I had to spend a few nights in the open air, so be it. Anything but Nebraska.

I pressed the doorbell and waited, inhaling the warm evening air. I hardly noticed the pressure rising in my chest.

One, two, three ...

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe. I counted to myself and squeezed my eyes shut.

Finally the buzzer sounded to let me in. I took another breath before pushing the door open.

Mr. White—I didn't know his first name at that point—had mentioned in his email that the apartment was on the second floor, left. As I set foot on the stairs, I heard a door open upstairs and then the sound of muffled voices.

"You've got my number," a female voice purred.

Someone cleared his throat. "You know that I ... "

"Nothing serious, I get it. You made that perfectly clear."

Followed by a slurpy sound. *Were they making out in the hallway?* I listened more closely. Before I knew it, footsteps from above were approaching me on the stairway.

A light breeze wafted over me, and I looked up: She passed me on the stairs, the girl who'd left the apartment that I was about to enter. She didn't seem to see me as she floated down the stairs with a blissful, dreamy smile. Considering her reddened cheeks and tousled hair, I could imagine what she'd just been up to.

Oh man.

Frowning, I climbed the last few steps. Mr. White was nowhere to be seen. I walked down the corridor and looked to either side. On my left, a door stood open a crack. That had to be it.

I pushed the door in and hesitated at the threshold.

The hallway was neat, and I could see a few jackets hanging on the wall. Various sneakers, a few work boots, and hiking boots were lined up in a tidy row. Appreciatively, I raised my eyebrows: The shoe collection revealed eclectic interests. I took the plunge, crossing the threshold, and entered the narrow hallway.

"Sorry, dude!" A muted voice bellowed from the room that opened directly onto the hallway. "I've been trying forever to get her out of here without looking like an ass. But some people can't take a hint."

Wow. He sounded like a winner.

The voice got louder. "I know this apartment showing was planned last-minute, but glad it still worked out."

I heard his footsteps as he approached.

"If you've got a girl, too, that's fine. At least as long as —"

Mr. White appeared in the doorway. And it wasn't only his mouth that dropped open.

I gasped, too.

The first thing I noticed was his torso. His naked, taut belly rippling with muscles. Then his tattoos. I tilted my head and looked at the designs inked onto his tanned skin.

Holy mother of God.

He cleared his throat and shook me out of my trance.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I stared at him open-mouthed. He wasn't much older than I was, maybe a year or two. He had warm, caramel-colored eyes, stubbly cheeks, and brown hair that was longer on the top and shorter on the sides.

Finally my voice came back. "We had an appointment. I'm here to see the apartment. We emailed," my words gushed out too fast.

Mr. White cocked his head and glared at me. "A. Harper ... " he muttered. And then something seemed to

click in his head. "Why the hell didn't you sign your email with your first name? I assumed you were a guy."

I didn't feel like explaining to him that I was still getting used to my new identity, hence just the initial. He let his eyes wander over my entire body for a second time; his features darkened, and he shook his head slowly. "No."

No? I was about to retort when he repeated: "No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?" I folded my arms in front of my chest. "I can pull up the email on my phone if you need proof."

"It must have been a misunderstanding. You're definitely not moving in here," he said and turned away. Then he disappeared into who knows where. All I knew was that I hadn't even seen the damned apartment. "Let yourself out," he called back over his shoulder.

My mouth dropped open again.

The guy had actually left me standing alone in the hallway without even giving me a chance. Not even one word of my prepared speech. The last forty-eight hours had been filled with so much crap, but this ... this pushed me over the edge.

I blew a fuse and stomped after Mr. White.

"Hey!" I yelled, marching into what looked like a well-lit, cozy living room. The jerk stopped mid-stride and turned to face me, his eyebrows knit in anger as I shouted, "You can't just throw me out without even showing me the place!"

Something like shock flashed through his warm, brown eyes; it didn't fit with his cold aura. "See if I can't." Now he crossed his arms.

"Well, you can't. We emailed, dammit! You invited me to check out the apartment, so I should at least be able to see the room and have the chance to convince you that I'd be a good roommate." I tried not to snarl.

"Like I said, there's been a misunderstanding. I thought you were a dude. But you're definitely not." He gave me

another dismissive once-over. "I'm looking for a male roommate. Not a *female*." He practically spat out the word.

By now, my rage was about to boil over. The other apartment viewings had been bad, but this one took the cake.

"Do you have any idea what I've been through the last two days?" I spat, and my pulse skyrocketed. "In one place, a guy was sitting in his kitchen in his underwear—his UNDERWEAR—and asked me my bra size. In three apartments, I was told that sexual favors were part of the rent; in another I was told I'd have to be the nanny; and twice I could barely keep my potential roommates from going at it right in front of me!" By now I was almost yelling, but it didn't occur to me to lower my voice. The avalanche was flowing full-force at this point. "I saw rooms with walls covered in black mold. I was in apartments so crammed with trash that you couldn't even see the floor. Sometimes I couldn't even tell if I was standing on a carpet or a pile of flattened pizza boxes. I was in apartments that smelled so much like pot that I could have gotten high just from breathing the air." I took another step toward him and drew back my shoulders. "Things have gotten off to a shitty start for me in Woodshill, *dude*. So don't tell me to just disappear. I want to see the damned room!"

The mistrust on his face had faded into general indifference, as if I were using up his precious time.

"And this is exactly why I don't want a woman in here," he said calmly. "I don't need the endless whining and girly emotional stuff."

Now adrenaline propelled me with such force that my shoulders shook. Maybe it hadn't been a good idea to dump my problems on this guy. But sometimes I just couldn't stop until I got it all out.

"Are you done, or do I have to take any more of this? If the answer is yes, then I'd like to dress for the occasion,"

he continued in a flat voice. His indifference only spurred me on.

"Fine," I hissed, turning my back. Walking out, I could hear a phone ringing: the ringtone was a song by the group Fall Out Boy. Wow, the jerk actually had good taste in music.

Tears burned in my eyes as I faced the door. I didn't want to go back to Lincoln, back to a life that was so fake and scripted.

My entire personality had been a façade that my mother had manipulated according to her wishes. I'd only realized it about three years ago—when I learned just how far she was willing to go. That day my trust in her was shattered into a thousand pieces. I'd thought my mom would always protect me. But instead she'd just heaped more and more lies on me, until I could barely stand under their weight. After that, nothing was ever the same.

I swallowed hard and tried to banish the negative thoughts.

By now my hands were shaking with frustration. I overheard the jerk's muffled voice as he chatted with someone on the phone. A few second later he cursed loudly.

Again I heard his naked feet flapping on the floor, as he came to the hallway.

"Hey," his voice rang out behind me. I turned to face him.

"What?" I barked, glaring at him.

He had put on a tight navy blue shirt that stretched over his torso. Folding his arms over his chest, he frowned at me. "My other potential roommate just jumped ship," he said, showing me the smartphone in his hand.

"And?" I said, unconcerned, digging into my bag for my car key.

He sighed and tapped his foot so long on the floor that I had no choice but to lift my eyes.

"There will be rules," he started after a moment's hesitation, narrowing his eyes.

"Rules? For what, if I may ask?" I couldn't take any more of this. I was ready to go back to the hostel and immerse myself in self-pity until I had recovered enough to look for new ads. I could really do without the drivel of unfriendly shitsheads.

"For you. If you want the room, there will be rules you have to stick to." He moved his arm in a way that looked like an invitation, and turned back toward the living room. As if I would follow, just like that.

"I don't want your fucking room!" I shouted after him.

He poked his head out the door again and drew his hand through his hair. "Listen, I need the money, and I'm sick of showing the place. People keep bailing on me."

"I wonder why." I retorted.

He ignored me. "And you need somewhere to stay. So stop complaining and check out the room."

I opened my mouth to reply but the jerk was already in the living room, not bothering to wait for my response.

What I really wanted was to storm out and slam the door in his face. But instead I paused.

To be honest, this hallway alone was nicer than all the apartments I'd seen—and I'd prefer to begin the semester here than on a park bench. It couldn't hurt to take a look.

"All right." I stepped into the living room. Now that I'd calmed down, I could see how nicely things were arranged.

"You already know the living room; back there is the kitchen. Here's the bathroom," continued the jerk, leading me through the living room. He gestured toward a half-opened door, and I caught a glimpse of pale blue tiles and a large bathtub before we came to one last door.

"This is it. Not too big, but still better than a dorm room."

He turned the doorknob.

I held my breath and walked in.

The room was tiny. Just big enough for the essentials. But the cream-colored walls and the window that let in the last rays of daylight made up for it. Clearly no one lived here anymore—it was empty except for a desk, a white swivel chair, a small bookshelf, and a bed.

“Don’t worry, Ethan will pick up his bed,” said the jerk with a nod toward the item in question. “You can keep the desk and shelves, if you want.”

I nodded, tearing my eyes away from the bed. The floor of this room, too, was a rich hardwood. My eyes darted to examine every corner to see if there was even the slightest hint of dampness or mold. Everything seemed okay.

I’d be able to study over there. And after the bed was gone, I would get a sofa bed, to save space. I could already imagine the beautiful spread that I would cover it with. And string lights! This room had to have string lights!

Mom had always hated them; she thought they looked cheap.

Oh yes, here I would have string lights! And I would fill the entire room with things that I’d never been allowed to have, because they didn’t meet Mom’s high standards.

Just like this guy would hardly meet her standards—the thought bolted through my mind. She’d probably have a heart attack at first sight. Or throw up. The thought almost made me laugh.

“I’ll take it,” I said. I turned to him and hesitated for a moment, noting his pensive expression.

“You don’t know the rules yet,” he warned me, an amused sparkle in his eyes.

“Shoot,” I said and turned around again. I hadn’t felt this way in any of the other rooms I’d viewed.

Instinctively, I knew I belonged here. Whatever the rules.

Mr. No-way-will-I-live-with-a-female walked slowly toward the desk. He leaned back against it, his arms still

crossed in front of him. His pose didn't seem offensive anymore—actually the opposite.

"First of all," he raised a finger, "don't bother me with your girl stuff. I don't give a shit about your private life. So don't impose your company on me. We won't have any 'girl's nights' in my living room. I pick the TV channel, and you don't come crying to me about your problems."

"I can live with that," I replied coolly.

"Second," he continued unmoved, "keep your mouth shut if I hook up with someone. I don't need anyone telling me what to do in my own home."

"I don't give a shit who you're with," I shot back, but looked toward the door a bit concerned. True, his room was on the opposite end of the apartment, but who knew how loud he could get? I frowned. Hopefully I wouldn't notice if he was getting it on with someone.

"And finally ... " He pushed away from the desk and leaned in toward me. He was a few inches taller, and I had to narrow my own eyes to return the scowling look in his caramel-colored eyes. "I don't care how good your legs look in those shorts."

My cheeks suddenly were burning, but I didn't blink. Two could play at this game.

"There's no way you and I will end up in the sack," His dark voice swept over me, and his breath tickled my temples. "So don't get your hopes up."

I felt a tingling sensation in my stomach, and it had nothing to do with hunger. He smelled good—a mixture of spice and mint.

Distracted by his sudden closeness, it took me a few seconds to process what he'd just said.

"I'm sorry if it hurts your ego," I gathered myself and retorted, "but I got over my need for 'bad boys' years ago." Which was the truth. I had no plans to get into a relationship any time soon, especially with a jerk like him.

He hadn't been counting on that. Surprise flickered in his eyes; he rubbed his face and stepped back.

"In that case, welcome to Casa de White." He held out his hand. "I'm Kaden."

For a second it didn't register. Then I opened my eyes wide and hopped in excitement. "Does that mean I can move in?"

Kaden winced. "You're already breaking rule number one."

I stopped my bouncing and turned down the volume. "Sorry. I'm Allie." My new name was getting easier and easier to say. *Allie*. Probably because that's how I'd been introducing myself at all the apartment viewings.

I went for it: Kaden's hand was warm and rough. I wasn't prepared for the bolt of lightning that the handshake triggered. It struck me right in the chest.

And I certainly wasn't ready for the tingling sensation that sparked when Kaden started drawing soft circles with his thumb on my back of my hand. I tore my hand from his grip and shot him an angry look. "What the hell was that?"

"I just wanted to see if you understood rule number three." Grinning smugly, he dug both hands into the pockets of his pants.

The guy was hot, but not all that. His so-called rules were a joke.

"So, when can I move in?"

Kaden shrugged and turned toward the door. "As soon as you pay the rent and the deposit, the room's yours."

I didn't do my dance of joy until he'd left the room.

Chapter 2

“They. Look. So. Good!” Dawn’s round eyes opened even wider when she saw the star-shaped string of lights in our shopping cart. By now we’d reached the aisle with bedspreads and throws, but I turned up my nose at all the bright flower patterns attacking me from all sides. I brushed my hand over the colorful fabric and turned toward my new friend.

I’d met Dawn at the intro lectures. We’d both gotten there way too early and started chatting while we waited—a stroke of luck, as far as I was concerned. There was no other explanation. Dawn was new here, like me. But she hadn’t moved to get away from her family. In her case, it was an ex-boyfriend. They’d been together six years when he cheated on her. She’d needed to get away, too. Now here we were together at Target to snag stuff for our rooms. The hour-long drive to Portland did us both some good. Besides, it was a way to get to know the area around Woodshill a bit better.

“Take one with flowers,” she said as she disappeared into the next aisle. “Or the pink one!”

At the end of the row I found a crocheted, cream-colored throw with fringes—a perfect match with the pale blue curtains already in my cart.

“How do you like this one?” I called out, holding up the throw for her to see. Dawn came back around the corner, carrying a reading lamp with a rose-colored lampshade.

“Bingo!”

Kaden would lose his shit if I came home with something like that. But then it wasn’t any of his business how I set up my room.

I'd had to spend the entire past week in the hostel before Kaden could finally give me a key. Turned out the previous tenant had needed more time than he thought to pick up his bed. But today was the day: I was moving into my new room. Kaden still seemed a bit wary when he handed me the key this morning. As if he already regretted his decision. But that was his problem, not mine.

Right after that, Dawn and I set out to shop for my first-ever furniture. I'd saved up some money in high school; I always socked away any cash I'd gotten from tutoring or as birthday gifts from relatives. My little stash would easily cover the cost of everything in my shopping cart. I also had a savings account that Mom had set up, but I only dipped into that in emergencies ... or to pay for essentials—like tuition. After all, it wasn't for nothing that she'd paid into the account for the last few years. It made me sick to think about why she'd given me the money at all. She honestly believed I could be bribed, and that money would make me forget what had happened. She had another thing coming. But even if I couldn't be bought, I could still exact a kind of revenge by using some of Mom's money.

I took a deep breath and pushed the dark thoughts to the back of my mind. Back to shopping.

"Do you need another table?" asked Dawn as we wheeled our shopping cart down the next aisle.

"No, the guy who had the room before me left his desk and shelves there. Kaden said if I don't like the stuff I can get rid of it myself." I rolled my eyes. "Thank goodness he picked up the bed. It looked disgusting."

Dawn raised an eyebrow. "That guy sounds lovely."

"That's not necessarily the first word I'd choose," I replied.

Oh man. Hopefully things would work out okay. I didn't want to give up my room any time soon. The endless search for a place to stay had left me mildly traumatized.

I'd be the perfect tenant. At least, that was my plan.

Kaden wouldn't find any excuse to throw me out.

"I wish I hadn't gotten a place in the dorm," Dawn sighed. "Then we could have rented something together."

"Yeah, that's too bad," I agreed and pushed the cart onward. By now it was nearly full.

"My roommate is a bitch," Dawn continued. "I've only been there two weeks, and she's already brought three different guys over. With each one she brings back, she kicks me out! I've thought about just not leaving, out of protest. But that's also gross—would you want to have to watch your roommate having sex?"

For a second I winced and shook the image of Kaden's naked skin, glistening with sweat, from my mind. "No. I wouldn't want that. Though with us it's a bit different," I added.

Maybe my hesitation was too obvious. Dawn glanced at me searchingly, then a grin spread across her face, deepening the dimples in her cheeks.

"Oh yeah? A bit different?" She egged me on, wiggling her eyebrows.

I responded in kind, raising an eyebrow. "Yup. Because I don't live in the same room with him and don't have to get up close and personal."

In a flash Dawn grabbed one of the pillows from the cart and started beating me with it. I dodged the blows, laughing.

"It's not funny!" She dropped the pillow back into the cart and buried her face in her hands, groaning. "Really not. She doesn't seem to have any problems finding new guys to hook up with. I mean, we're in Woodshill! Who would've thought that there were so many hotties running around in a small town?"

I had to agree with her. Right now, at the beginning of the semester, there was a cute guy our age on every street corner—one of the advantages of a university town. Hotties as far as the eye could see.

“How about this,” I suggested, hanging my arm over Dawn’s shoulders.

She peeked through her fingers; her hazelnut-brown eyes twinkled. “I’m listening.”

“Just come over to my place if you have problems with your roommate. It’s probably not the optimal solution—you know the rules my roommate set,” I said, making a face, and Dawn snorted with contempt. I’d told her all about my visit, and of course I didn’t spare any details. She found Kaden’s rules just as stupid as I did. “But we can hole up in my room. At least until the storm has passed.”

By now we’d arrived in the department for candles and picture frames. Without thinking I reached for two huge candles that wafted vanilla and coconut. Another thing we’d never had back home. My Mom thought they smelled cheap. But I found the scent heavenly and was already looking forward to the cozy haven that I would create in my room.

“You’re too good, Allie Harper,” Dawn said. She slapped my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. “Thanks.”

I flushed and looked away. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I’ve always been just the super-bitch. The nasty rich girl from next door. The slut. So I didn’t know how to deal with kind words.

Dawn frowned. She seemed to sense my discomfort and changed the subject. “Wanna check out the things up there? They look nice,” she said, pointing to a high shelf with white, ornately designed picture frames. Standing on tiptoes, I managed reach the top shelf.

“Those are cute,” I said, my mind still elsewhere. “But I don’t have any pictures to put in it.”

It had slipped out. Even I could hear how pathetic it sounded. God, hopefully Dawn wouldn’t write me off now as a total loser. After all, it’d been my decision to leave everything behind. The pain I carried inside was heavy

enough; I certainly didn't need photos to remind me of my old life.

"What a bunch of crap. Then we'll make one ourselves," Dawn said, grabbing her phone. She stood in front of me so I had to look over her shoulder, and aimed the camera at us.

"Here? Now?" My voice was an octave higher than usual. People walked past, and I felt their eyes on us.

"Yeah, why not?" Dawn replied unconcerned, and smiled broadly at the camera. "And now: Say sexyyy!"

I grinned uncomfortably. My green-gray eyes looked gloomy on the phone screen.

"Screw them!" Dawn jabbed her elbow into my ribs, as other customers stared our way. "Now, say it out loud so everyone in the store can hear it: sexyyy! Come on, Allie!"

It seemed I had no choice. Shaking my head, I grinned and shouted: "SEXYYY!"

And this time the smile was real.

The picture frame was the first decoration that I placed in the room. On the way back, we'd stopped at CVS to print out the photo, and now Dawn and I were smiling down from the windowsill in my room.

Dawn had done the same: Our Target selfie would hang in her room, too. It felt like today we'd laid the foundation for a wonderful friendship.

Dawn made me feel like there really was such a thing. Friendship for its own sake, and not for the sake of getting something from the other person. Without pressure to always do better than the other.

I was proud of us. We'd bought shelves and a big dresser, which fit perfectly behind the door. Since I'd forgotten to measure the room, it was pure luck. We'd already finished assembling the dresser and the second set of white shelves. Now all I needed was to assemble the sofa bed, which looked more complicated. There seemed to be

some holes missing underneath, and some of the components didn't fit in the pullout bedframe. One was longer than the other, which must've been a defect. I should have returned it right away, but I didn't feel like dragging the thing down two stories and driving all the way back to Portland. On top of that, neither Dawn nor I had tools, and without a drill we'd never be able to finish it.

Frustrated, I sank to the floor.

"I'm probably going to have to sleep on this," I moped, pulling the rolled-up rug to my lap and stroking its soft, bright fake-fur as if it were a pet. Preferably a cat.

"Stop it! We'll figure this one out," she growled, kind of reminding me of a Chihuahua. I had to giggle.

Just then I heard the apartment door slam and muffled voices drifting toward us from the hallway. *Oh great*, the jerk was home.

Dawn's eyes opened wide. "Should we ask him if he has a drill?" She'd sat up so quickly that she now looked like a meerkat. I giggled again.

"You just want to check him out."

"And what if I do?" she admitted and practically floated to her feet. She brushed off her shirt, which was covered with wood shavings, and reached back to check her hair, which was twisted into a messy bun. "How do I look?" she asked, giving a little spin.

"I think we both look like we need a shower," I replied, standing up, as well.

We moved to the door and listened for a second. The other voice was also a man's. So Kaden wasn't about to get things on with some woman.

"Do you think it's a violation of the rules to ask him for a drill?" I whispered, as if they could have heard us.

"Jeez! Don't let that douche intimidate you like that," Dawn retorted, stepping back from the door.

I tugged at the hem of my shirt and mulled it over: Of course I didn't want to be intimidated, but this room was

important to me. I didn't want to get on Kaden's nerves—especially not on my first day as his roommate.

But before I could give it another moment's thought, Dawn opened the door and burst into the living room.

"Dawn!" I hissed and hurried after her.

Kaden was in the kitchen grabbing a beer from the fridge. Even from the back—or maybe particularly from the back—he was a knockout. He wore midnight-blue jeans that hugged his butt and a close-fitting dark green shirt that stretched over his shoulders and drew my gaze toward his muscular back. Next to Kaden, leaning against the kitchen counter, stood a black-haired guy. He was tall and kind of lanky. His plaid shirt was loose, its sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

"Hey, you must be that weird roommate!" Dawn stopped in front of the dark-haired guy, who turned toward her in surprise. His inquiring look was remarkably friendly, unlike Kaden's. "First of all I wanted to tell you that I think your rules are a bunch of crap. I mean, look at you and then look at her." Dawn gestured toward me—and at that moment I wanted to sink into the floor. Or just disappear altogether. Definitely one of the two. "And I don't think she has any desire to get it on with you. Besides, it's awful that you have such a clichéd image of women, painting us all with one brush! How would you even know how we spend our free time? I mean, we could be into wrestling and pro football for all you know."

Kaden closed the refrigerator door and turned around slowly. He eyed Dawn with a raised eyebrow and watched, bemused, as she berated his friend. It almost looked as if he was smiling.

But not quite.

I slipped behind Dawn and put my hands on her shoulders. Leaning forward, I whispered: "That's not him."

She stiffened. "What do you mean, that's not him?"

I nodded in Kaden's direction. "This is Kaden, my roommate. Kaden, this is my friend Dawn."

By now, the other guy was grinning broadly. Deep dimples appeared on his cheeks. He turned to Kaden. "Dude, is it possible that you could have been mean to these ladies?"

Kaden shrugged his shoulders and popped the cap off a beer. He shoved it across the kitchen counter to his friend and opened another, which he lifted to his lips. Then he wiped his hand across his mouth and looked me up and down. He frowned and turned, heading for the couch. He didn't even look at Dawn. *Oh, great.*

Otherwise inclined, his friend reached out to shake hands with Dawn and then with me. "I'm Spencer," he said. "Nice to meet you."

"Hi," I replied. "I'm Allie."

"Heard about you," he said, glancing briefly in Kaden's direction. He gave his head a little shake, and his grin widened even more. "And you're Dawn, the wrestling fan and pro football player."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make a bad impression." Her voice had gone almost meek, and I couldn't help laughing.

"Oh, you didn't. Trust me." Spencer winked, and for the first time I noticed his brilliant blue eyes. Black hair, blue eyes. What a mix.

While those two were talking, I remembered the real reason why we'd ventured out of my room. If I wanted to have a good night's sleep, I needed to set up my sofa bed.

"Hey," I said, lightly kicking the couch behind my roomie. Kaden looked over his shoulder at me, frowning. "Do you happen to have a drill?"

"What do you want a drill for?" he asked, curious but still scowling.

I wanted to say "none of your business," but changed my mind at the last second. After all, I needed a favor from him. "Somehow, there aren't enough holes in the wooden

frame of my sofa bed," I said, putting on the friendliest tone I could muster. "I have to drill some new holes."

Kaden nodded briefly and turned away. "I don't have a drill."

It took a second before I understood what he'd said. "So why were you asking why I needed one?"

"I just wanted to know if you really need one, or if you're just too dumb to read the instructions," he said, shrugging. Then he picked up the remote from the coffee table and switched on the TV.

I felt a flood of insults rising but dammed them up. "So you mean, you have a drill but don't want to lend it to me?"

He didn't even bother looking up from the TV. "You got it."

Dawn and Spencer had stopped talking and were staring at me.

"Don't be an ass, bro," Spencer said finally.

"Yeah. Don't be an ass, *bro*," agreed Dawn. Normally, I would have laughed. But I was practically boiling over with anger. One look at Kaden's clenched lips told me that he, too, found the situation anything but funny.

He gave me another one of those unbearably mistrustful looks. "You're on thin ice," he muttered and rose so suddenly that I drew back and banged my calves on the coffee table. My eyes opened wide as I began to stumble; I flailed my arms wildly to keep my balance. But Kaden had already grabbed me under the arms.

I felt his chest against mine, felt his heart beating.

He blinked and the moment was gone.

Just as suddenly, he let go of me and stormed out of the living room.

I managed to catch my breath, hoping Dawn and Spencer hadn't noticed. When I turned toward them, they were both looking in the direction of a loud clatter in the hallway.

Kaden appeared at the door. "Here," he barked, holding up a dark green tool case. "Give it back the way you got it, or else."

"You could just give us a hand for a second, instead of being such an asshole," suggested Dawn with a sweet smile. She could be a little devil if she wanted to.

I liked this side of her, but damn, if she didn't start being nicer to Kaden, I'd have to strangle her. I hated his rude attitude as much as she did, and wished I could've tossed one nasty retort at him after the next. He'd have to be given a reality check one of these days. But however unbearable I found him, I still had to spend the coming months in close proximity with him. So I preferred not to get him riled up if I didn't have to.

"I can do it myself," I insisted and moved to take the tool case off Kaden's hands.

"I'll help," Spencer said, leaping to his feet. "Where's the offending item?"

I ignored Kaden's angry glare and followed Spencer to my room. At least *someone* was willing to help. The door was open, but before he entered, he cast a questioning glance over his shoulder. I nodded.

"Oh wow! Things have changed since Ethan moved out."

Spencer took in the perfumed candles and strand of lights, glanced behind the door and noticed the chest of drawers and shelves, on which I'd already placed some of my things.

"It smells like someone ate tons of vanilla ice cream and then threw up in the middle of the room." Kaden was right behind me.

I turned.

His nose wrinkled in disgust, Kaden surveyed the room, then pushed past me and squatted in front of the sofa bed sections.

"Some holes are missing," I explained. "We already tried turning the pieces around but that didn't work either. So I