

## A Bonus Scene from The Assistant

### Two Friends Meet

*Montana State University*

*5 years prior to the events in The Assistant*

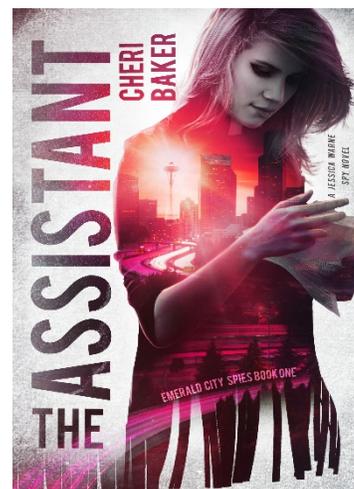
Jessica set her heavy suitcase down and pulled a square of paper out of her back pocket. She'd unfolded and refolded the page so often that the paper had become soft, and the edges were stained muddy blue from the ink of her new jeans. The new outfit was an indulgence. The jeans, and the MSU T-shirt, and the sneakers she kept clean with a washcloth, taken together they formed the correct first impression. One that said she belonged, just like everybody else. The room number on her welcome letter matched the brass numerals on the wooden door in front of her. She reached up to knock, then paused. Were you supposed to knock before entering your own room? There were rules in the dorms. You weren't allowed to have a hot plate, and boys couldn't visit past ten. But those were the official rules. As for the unofficial rules, the letter hadn't explained those.

She was on her own.

*Try to be nice*, Joan had said when dropping her off at the parking lot. Joan meant well, but that just meant that she slid her criticism in sideways. Not that it mattered any longer. Her foster mother had kept her end of the bargain, and she'd allowed her to stay rent-free until the fall term started. She'd been touched when Joan offered to drive her to Missoula, saving her the cost of a bus ticket. Joan was decent. And now she was gone.

Be nice? Jessica knocked softly. A feminine murmur answered. She turned the knob and opened the door. Inside was the girl some spreadsheet had assigned as her roommate. The heavy suitcase banged against the door frame as she walked in, sending a jolt of pain shot up her arm.

The room was small, as the brochure hadn't sought to hide. But it was lopsided. A skinny short girl stood between the twin beds. She had freckled skin and bright blue eyes. Her hair was a curly tangle of strawberry-blonde. Jessica felt a reflexive stab of envy at the dress she was wearing. It mimicked casual wear, but it had a designer vibe. She'd known a girl or two who dressed that way, back in school. Rich girls pretending not to be any different than the rest of them. The kind of girls who had stories



about summer camp and ski vacations and who complained when a gift didn't meet their expectations. They may as well have been aliens, for as much as they'd had in common with her. And now an alien was her roommate. And not just any alien. A perky little blonde thing who was smiling at her for no reason at all.

Jessica's roommate grinned and skipped two steps forward to hold out her hand. "Taylor Ellis. Sociology."

*Be nice, Jessica.*

She set her heavy suitcase on the naked twin bed. It was wrapped in a white plastic cover and there was no bedding. Her heart sank. Was she supposed to provide her own blankets? In retrospect, it seemed obvious, but she'd been too focused on getting to Missoula to even think about it. What was she paying the insane fees for if they didn't even give her a pillow? She swallowed and turned around, hiding her embarrassment. She extended her hand. "Jessica Warne. Accounting."

She looked over Taylor's shoulder, at the explosion of girlishness that weighed down her half of the room like a pink and white mudslide. Jessica's half of the room spartan, with a narrow slab of a bed, a small desk, and a wardrobe with scuffed wooden doors. Plus the suitcase sitting on the plastic mattress cover. Taylor's side looked like it had been visited by a fairy godmother. There were layers of pink and white blankets on the bed, topped with a small mountain of decorative pillows. The plain brown carpet on her side was covered with a cream-colored rug. Even her wall was artfully decorated. There were photos of a smiling blond family above the headboard, and quirky artwork along the side, featuring brightly painted owls. The desk had a brand new laptop on it, a tall stack of unused notepads, and a black mesh cup full of pens and pencils.

*This is fine.*

Taylor sat on the edge of her bed and bounced lightly. "Tell me all about yourself, Jessica. Or should I call you Jess? Where are you from? Why did you choose the University of Montana? What do you like to do for fun? And—"

Jessica murmured her answers while she put her clothes away. How long would this interrogation last? This blonde girl was too perfect, too friendly, and obviously she was used to being the center of attention. Within a week or two Taylor would ask for a better roommate, and until then, what was the point in pretending they were friends?

She mentally reviewed her resources, and her recall was accurate down to the penny. There was three hundred and fifty-seven dollars in her checking account. That had seemed a tidy sum, given that loans covered her room and board and books. But where was she going to find bedding? She glanced at

her suitcase and wondered if there was a place she could buy a blanket until she found a job. Her case worker had said she shouldn't work during her freshman year, to focus on academics instead, but that wasn't practical. She hadn't thought about the bedding. What else hadn't she accounted for?

"Say, I have an idea," Taylor said, breaking into Jessica's thoughts.

"Yeah?" Jessica zipped her suitcase shut and set it next to the small dresser.

"Well, this is kind of embarrassing," she swung her legs as she spoke, "but my Mom was so freaked out about me leaving home that she overdid the decorating thing. I mean, look at my side of the room! It's like Cinderella barfed on it."

Jessica snorted a laugh and glanced over her shoulder.

Taylor smiled in response, and she stopped bouncing. "I know my stuff is tacky, but would it be okay with you if we... I don't know... spread it around? I have three times more blankets than I need and I'm going to suffocate tonight. And that way, everything will coordinate. I'm kind of an organization nut; I like it when things match." She shrugged. "It's a flaw, I'm aware. And perhaps later, after my Mom backs off, we can go shop for something less..."

"Disneysque?"

"Exactly," Taylor said, looking relieved. "I've been itching to organize your side of the room since I got here, but it seemed presumptuous of me. My dad is always saying how presumptuous I am. It's something I'm working on."

Jessica shot a suspicious look at Taylor. Her roommate was spinning a nice story, but she didn't need the rich girl's pity. It was bad enough that she—

"Ugh! You think I'm being bossy! I'm so sorry. We don't have to—"

"No," Jessica said, pushing her pride to one side. It stung, but pride could wait until she could afford it. For now, she'd accept whatever help she could get. "I think it's a great idea. Besides, I didn't know we had to bring all this stuff. I'm unprepared, and it's totally stressing me out. You'd be doing me a favor too." As the words left her mouth, she waited for the blow to fall: some cutting remark or a pitying look. But it never came.

"It's a win-win then!" Taylor said, her face lighting up with pleasure. "After we fix up the room, would you walk with me to the library? I want to check the anthropology section. There's this book about research methods I want to check out. My dad wouldn't let me buy it, but I can check it out after we get our ID cards."

"Sure. But isn't your major sociology?"

“True, but anthropology is fascinating, isn’t it? I’m already thinking about my electives for next quarter. Perhaps I’ll double-major? They say you shouldn’t do too much your freshman year, but there’s so much here to see and do! Why not make the most of it? We won’t be students forever.”

“You’re kind of a nerd, eh?” Jessica said, the words escaping her mouth before she could catch and filter them. Her face felt hot.

Taylor just laughed. “And you say exactly what’s on your mind, don’t you?”

“Something like that.” Jessica looked at her, wondering why she suddenly cared so much about what this tiny person thought of her.

Taylor stood up and pulled a layer of blankets off her bed. She handed the frilly bundle over. “That works for me! Let’s be friends, okay?”

Jessica felt something old and tight loosen up inside her. “Okay.”