



1

Sally Wright



As soon as my Fitbit vibrates, letting me know that Tom Flaherty is calling, I mentally kick myself for forgetting to disengage that feature when I turned off my ringer. Ever since the last Bucklin family get-together, he's called me every single day, bugging me to go out with him again.

When I first met Tom at a children's fashion trade show in Jackson, I thought he was handsome, sweet, and overall pretty wonderful. I even liked going out with him a few times after that. But something snapped during the last reunion—maybe when I realized he wanted to be something he wasn't and never would have the nerve to become—and I lost interest. But how would I have known he hated children, fashion, and children's fashion when that's what he does for a living? I still like him, sort of. But I have no desire to have a romantic relationship with him.

I know I need to talk to him and let him know I'm not interested, but that's hard for me. Even though we're not in a relationship, doing this feels an awful lot like breaking up—something I've never had to do before. I've had dates here and there, but they hardly ever turned into a real relationship. And when one did, it always fizzled out on its own without having a formal breakup.

My wrist vibrates again, and I groan. But when I glance at my Fitbit, I see that it's my identical twin sister, Sara, and I grab my phone.

"Hey, have you checked your email?" The teasing lilt in her voice sounds awfully suspicious.

"No, why? What are you and Justin up to now?"

She laughs. "*We're* not up to anything, but the family is. Mama and Aunt Lady are planning the next family get-together."

"We just had one," I remind her.

"That was four months ago."

I snort. "Seems more like four days ago."

"Yeah, I know."

"Are you going?"

"You're kidding, right?" Sara's voice goes up an octave, so I hold the phone away from my ear. "Wild horses couldn't keep me and Justin away." She pauses. "Well? Are you going?"

"I'll have to read the email and see if I'm busy that day."

Sara laughs again. "Okay, you do that. In the meantime, I'm going to call Shay and see if she has time to teach me how to make something yummy. I want people fighting over the last bite in my casserole dish."

"I'll probably bring those meatballs I brought last time."

"So you're going?" She lets out a giggle. "You do realize it's during Thanksgiving weekend."

"I know." I pause and wonder if meatballs will go over on Thanksgiving. Then I remember it's the Bucklin family. "If I go, that's what I'll make."

"Let me know if you don't so I can bring them. Then I won't have to waste my time learning something new in the kitchen."

The hair on the back of my neck rises. "I have dibs on the meatballs. You have to come up with some other signature dish."

"Don't forget, you stole those from Shay," she reminds me. "So if anyone should have dibs on them, it would be her."

I let out a sigh that I know annoys her, but I don't care. Sara and Justin have gotten on my nerves off and on ever since they eloped a few weeks before the last reunion. Don't get me wrong. I love my sister, and I've gotten past the point of merely tolerating my brother-in-law. In fact, I even like him most of the time. But they say and do things that I'm sure are just to annoy me. I remember when Sara and I used to do that to each other to keep things from getting boring, but the whole dynamic has changed with Justin in the picture. To top it off, they only dated a few weeks, even though Sara reminds me we've known him most of our lives. But still...

"Hey, I gotta go," she says. "Justin wants me to go help him pick out a new turkey fryer."

“I thought he already had a turkey fryer.”

“He needs a bigger one for the reunion.”

I have more questions, like why she would need to get a recipe from Shay if they’re frying a turkey and why she has to go with him to pick out a fryer since she knows nothing about anything culinary. But I don’t say another word, since I can’t wait to get off the phone.

The first thing I do after clicking the Off button is open my laptop and pull up my email. Yep. There it is. A note from Mama, giving me what she calls an *early heads-up* about the reunion so I can be prepared. She puts emphasis on the fact that it’s Thanksgiving weekend, so I need to do something extra special.

I close my eyes for a moment to reflect. It seems weird that I’ve found out about the reunion from Sara, who I used to tease about being flakier than Mama’s pie crust. So many things have changed ever since Sara and Justin got married. But now that I think about it, our lives haven’t been the same since she and I left our teller jobs and became full-time bow makers.

After Sara and Justin got married, they decided to stay in the condo with me. Now they get out of the condo every chance they get, and I find myself wandering around aimlessly. I always thought it would be fun to be alone, but Sara and I have been attached at the hip since birth, and I find myself missing her more than I ever thought I would.

Our Etsy hair bow business hasn’t slowed down, even though Sara isn’t as active as she once was. When she first backed off, I increased my workload to accommodate the business, but now I’m starting to burn out. The bloom of success has faded now that I’m alone most of the time. I’ve even mentioned that we might want to find some other way to earn a living, but she reminds me that this and banking are all we know. Neither of us wants to go back to being a teller.

My frustration comes and goes, and at the moment it’s pretty bad. So I start pacing—the same thing I always do when I can’t come up with solutions to business problems. My wrist vibrates again, and this time it’s an unknown number. Although tempted to ignore it, I pick up my phone and answer it.

“Hey, Sally.”

I should have gone with my first instinct. “Hi, Tom.”

“Are you going to your family reunion?”

I can hear the hope in his voice. I swallow hard. “How do you know about my family reunion?”

“I have ways.” He lets out a low chuckle that I suspect his mama said was cute when he was younger, but it’s not the least bit cute now . . . at least it isn’t to me. “Actually, your mother emailed me a couple of hours ago and told me about it.”

I need to have a talk with Mama.

“So, tell me. Are you planning to attend?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Now that he’s aware of it, I’ll need to come up with an excuse not to invite him. “Why?”

“After your last one, I started working on some new recipes, and I have a couple new dishes that I think will knock the socks off your family.”

“Um . . .” I know I need to tell him—to break it to him that I’m just not feelin’ it, but it’s hard. “You might want to hold off on that.”

“Hold off on what, Sally? What are you talking about?”

“You’re not going to my family reunion.” The words tumble out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop them, and I cringe. “What I meant to say was—”

“Did I say something to upset you? I thought everything was good between us.”

The hurt in his voice is palpable, and I want to crawl under the table. As much as I don’t have the least bit of romantic feeling for him, I still think he’s sweet, and I would never want to hurt him. I’ve had coffee with him a couple of times since the last reunion, but I’ve thrown out some hints that we can never be more than friends. The problem with Tom is he’s so desperate to be in a relationship he can’t grasp subtle hints and needs to be told. So I suck in a deep breath and as quietly as possible let it out.

“I’m sorry, Tom, but there really isn’t anything between us.”

“I thought we were friends.” He clears his throat. “I guess I read that wrong.”

“We are friends, but that’s all.”

He sighs. “That’s all I thought we were. If I led you to believe . . .” His voice trails off, and he sighs again. “You obviously don’t want me around.”

Oh man, now he's playing the guilt card. He's done this before, which is why it's been a while since I've tried to explain. But I have no choice now. He needs to be clear.

"No, Tom, that's not true. I do want ... I mean, I like you ... as a friend."

"But you don't want me around your family."

That's sort of true, but it sounds so harsh. "I think it might be awkward for us to go together, since I'm ..." I suck in a breath and blurt, "I have a date."

The instant those words come out, I want to kick myself because I know I can't take them back. What's so crazy about this is that I've never so blatantly lied before.

"Oh, then it makes sense." He sighs again, making me worry that he might hyperventilate. "I don't want to make your new boyfriend *jealous*."

The way he says that lets me know he's the one who's jealous, but I can't take responsibility for something I can't control. "I'm sorry, Tom."

"Oh, Sally, honey, that's okay. No need to apologize. I understand completely. In fact, I've been worried about letting you down easy. It's nice to know we're on the same page."

"Thanks for understanding." I glance over at my computer, where I see new orders popping into my Etsy queue by the second. "I really need to run now."

"Bye, Sally. Have a nice life."

My heart sinks as I hang up. He makes the end of our conversation seem so final, yet I'm sure I'll see him again next time I go to a children's fashion event. That's where I met him, and that's where we had our first date. Well, not a date exactly, but we had lunch—just the two of us. And that's when I thought we might have been at the beginning of something special. Occasionally, I wish I hadn't taken him up on his lunch offer or gone out with him after the last reunion, but I know the only way of seeing how a relationship can go is by spending time with each other. Unfortunately, he is totally incapable of taking a hint ... or two or three.

I glance over at the computer as the orders continue rolling in. As frustrated as I am, I can't ignore the business that puts food on the table and keeps the lights on.

So now I scan the orders and come up with a plan of action to make

the wisest use of my time. In spite of my argument against orange a few months ago, I realize that Sara was right when she insisted on going heavy on orange ribbon. That is *the* fashion color of the season this year, and our orders reflect it.

I pull out all the orange ribbon we have on hand and realize we're short by several spools. So I use this as an excuse to call my sister again.

"What do you want, Sally?" she asks without a greeting.

"Sorry to bother you, but while you're out, would you mind stopping off at the craft store and picking up more orange ribbon?"

"Yeah, but it might be a while. Justin is still talking to the guy about the turkey fryer."

"That's fine." Out of the corner of my eye, I see more orders coming through—and at least half of them are for orange bows. "You'd better get all the orange ribbon they have."

"Why don't you order some and have it overnighted? Hold on a sec." She covers the receiver, and I can hear muffled voices before she comes back. "Tell you what. Justin said he'll be a while, so I'll take the truck, pick up some ribbon, and bring it to you. But I have to come right back and pick him up."

"That'll be wonderful." The mere thought of spending a little time alone with my sister brings a smile to my lips.

"Oh, by the way, Justin has a few days off, so we thought we'd go down to New Orleans for a second honeymoon."

"When?"

"I'll let you know for sure as soon as he gets a definite answer from his boss. But it'll be soon."

My heart sinks. I'll be alone. Again.

As soon as we hang up, I punch in Mama's number. "Why did you email Tom about the reunion?"



2

Sheila Wright



I can't blame my daughter for being upset with me, but I honestly don't understand why she doesn't like Tom. He's handsome, smart, and very successful. His mama was a Chi Omega, and his aunt was a Kappa Delta at a southern college, so if they have a daughter who goes to college, she'll be a shoo-in as a legacy in either of two great sororities. In other words, he's everything a mama would want for her daughter.

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, sweetie."

"Maybe not, but you put me in a bad predicament. I had to tell him I have another date."

My heart picks up a beat. Maybe there's hope yet. "You do?"

"Um..." She coughs. "Not exactly, but I had to tell him that because I couldn't think of anything else to say when he started talking about what he was planning to bring."

"Oh, Sally, why can't you give this sweet boy a chance? He's everything I've always wanted for you and your sister, and since Sara... well, it's too late for her, but you—"

"That's just it, Mama. He's what *you* want." Her voice softens. "Justin isn't so bad. In fact, he's actually a pretty sweet guy."

"Oh, I know. I like him just fine. It's just that—" This conversation is getting beyond uncomfortable. "I just had something different in mind for the two of you."

"But I have something else in mind."

"I didn't mean—" Actually, I did mean exactly what she thought I meant. "I just want you to find someone to love so you can settle down and be happy."

She laughs out loud. "I don't know how much more settled I can get."

"Sally." I clear my throat. "You know what I mean."

"Just do me a favor, okay? Don't try to force things for me in the romance department. If I meet someone nice, it needs to happen naturally."

"Whatever you say, Sally. But remember, don't choose just any guy. He has to—"

"Please don't do that, Mama."

I close my mouth. Sometimes it's so hard to keep from meddling when it comes to my precious daughters. At first, when Sara married Justin, I was fit to be tied. Fortunately, he turned out to be a good guy, and now I'm worried about Sally. They both tell me I shouldn't worry so much, but I'm a southern mama, and that's what we do.

"Are you okay?" I hear the sympathy in her voice.

"Yes, I'm fine." I decide it's time to change the subject. "Hey, do me a favor and tell Sara we're excited about Justin doing the turkey. I have to admit I'm rather surprised by his cooking abilities."

"I'll tell her." Sally pauses. "Hey, Mama, it's been nice talking to you, but I gotta run."

After we hang up, I sink back in my chair. I can't believe how fast my girls have grown up. It's almost like one day I walk them into their kindergarten class with them clinging to my legs, turn around for five minutes, and when I come back, they're off on their own, running their little bow-making business. I can't help laughing though, because they used to fight me tooth and nail when I stuck those big bows in their hair. Now I realize they were just pullin' my leg. They must have really loved them to start a business making them. What gets my goat is that the bows they're making are big ol' honkin' things that would cover most kids' heads.

I turn around and take a long look at the house I've called home for a few decades. It's a beautiful place that I loved from first glance. It's a three-bedroom house, but we've only used two of them as bedrooms and converted the smallest one into whatever we needed at the time. It's been a playroom, a storage space, and a sewing room. We tried separating the girls when they were little, but they always wound up wanting to be in the same room. At least until they were teenagers.

It's one of those places that, when you walk in, you just know it's



right. What I've always liked about it is the flow from the living room, through the dining room, and into the kitchen that is light and bright with rays of sunshine streaming in through the window over the sink. We have a front porch with rocking chairs that we keep saying we'll start using every evening after supper. But so far, we've been way too busy. One of these days we will.

Ever since the girls moved out a few years ago, George and I have been rattling around our house, not knowing what to do with ourselves. He wants to convert the girls' room into an office, but I keep telling him we need to keep it like it is for a while, just in case. I mean, you never know.

Now I'm starting to think he's right, only I'd rather have a sewing room. Maybe one of these days I'll get back to making things—hopefully for some grandchildren.

I hear the sound of a truck coming up the road, so I walk over to the window to see if it's George. It is. My pulse quickens, and that makes me smile. We've been married a while, but just the sight of him makes me happy. However, his truck . . . well, not so much.

Shortly after his cousin went out and bought a tricked-out pickup truck, he decided he needed one too. Fortunately, his company bonus covered it, because I wasn't about to let him get into our emergency fund—not with every appliance in our house living on borrowed time.

“Hey, hon.”

I turn around and see my husband's smiling face, looking all proud as punch and pumped up. And suspicious. I narrow my eyes. “What have you gotten yourself into now?”

He mocks hurt feelings as he walks toward me. “I bought you some-thin' pretty.”

I frown back at the man whose idea of something pretty is a new skillet or something he spotted on the way back to the tool section at the hardware store. “You don't need to be buying me stuff.”

He reaches down deep into his pocket and pulls out a box that wouldn't hold any pot, pan, or kitchen appliance. As he opens it, I lean over to see what it is.

“One of my buddies down at the tire store said his wife is sellin' this stuff, so I agreed to take a look at it. I thought this looked like you.”

For the first time in years, I'm shocked by his insight. He's right. Lying against the black velvet inside the box is a coral pendant necklace that will go perfectly with half my wardrobe. I open my mouth, but my voice catches in my throat, and nothing comes out.

"Well?" He widens his eyes with a look of concern. "Do you like it?"

"I love it." The truth is, it's so stinkin' pretty that I can't take my eyes off it.

He looks at me from beneath eyebrows that are so bushy I can't see his eyelashes. "Do you really, or are you just tellin' me that so you won't hurt my feelings?"

"Can you put it on me?" Before he has a chance to say anything, I lift my hair off my neck and turn my back to him. Then I stand there and wait ... and wait ... until I realize he's not going to do what I asked.

When I turn back around, I see that he's not even in the room anymore, but he's left the box on the edge of the dresser. So I carefully lift the necklace off the velvet and put it on myself. And then I turn and look at my reflection in the mirror. This is about the prettiest thing George has ever given me since he got down on one knee and presented me with the engagement ring I'd shown him in the jewelry store window a week before he proposed.

The sound of cupboard doors opening and slamming shut makes me cringe. George had always been a noisy man, which used to annoy me to no end until I found out he couldn't hear himself. After he got his hearing aids, he asked me if the world had always been this loud.

I decide it's time he sees his gift on me, so I walk toward the kitchen. On the way, I make a mental note that it's time for changing out some of the décor—something I used to do like clockwork when the girls still lived at home. Now I'm embarrassed by the fact that I still have my summer centerpiece collecting dust on the dining room table that hasn't been used in months.

George glances over his shoulder when I enter the kitchen, turns back to whatever he's doing, and then does a double take. A wide grin covers his face. "That thing looks pretty on you." He pauses as his smile fades a bit. "Do you like it?"

I nod and move toward him. "I love it. Thank you."

He shrugs and gives me a shy look. “You deserve it for putting up with me all these years.”

My heart does a little flutter, just like it’s done ever since I first met him. I close the gap between us as I open my arms and try to give him a hug. But his body stiffens, and he turns his back toward me. Something is definitely wrong with him.

“What’s going on, Georgie?”

“I don’t know. I have a hard time talkin’ about stuff like this.”

“Like what?”

“You’re awful wrapped up in everything, but . . .” His voice trails off as he looks away.

I let go of George and walk over to the oven, open the door, and see how the casserole is doing. It’s starting to bubble, so I turn down the heat. The aroma of Italian seasonings wafts through the air. I’ve been working mighty hard on making sure this reunion goes well. Thank goodness Georgie isn’t a needy man and he understands why I haven’t been around as much.

“Smells good, hon.”

I turn around and face my husband, who is now shoving half a peanut butter sandwich into his mouth. “You’re gonna spoil your supper if you keep eating like that.”

“Do you want me to starve to death?” He manages to get the rest of the sandwich into his mouth as he reaches for the glass of milk on the counter.

“What’s going on with you, George? You haven’t been yourself lately.”

He nods toward the necklace. “Are you talkin’ about my gift?”

“No, I’m talking about how you’ve been acting for a few weeks.” The family gathering pops into my head. “I want whatever it is to stop before the reunion. They’ll know something’s up, and they’ll assume the worst.”

He narrows his gaze. “That’s the problem, Sheila.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Your family. That’s all you’ve been talking about lately—where we’re gonna have it, who’s gonna show up, who they’re gonna bring, what they’re cookin’—” He lifts his arms out to his sides and shrugs. “It’s like I don’t matter anymore.”