

SHEPPARDS IN LOVE BOOK 1

Kissing for Keeps



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*Kissing
for Keeps*

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Other titles by Martha Keyes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

I FLIP OPEN my computer and pull up the spreadsheet titled “Wedding of the Century.” You’d think I’d reserve that title for my own wedding, but it just shows you how much I love my friend Madi—and how determined I am to be the best maid of honor in history.

Or maybe I lack confidence in my own odds of getting married. Both are valid theories.

Coordinating a wedding with someone who lives thousands of miles away has its challenges, the time difference foremost among them. Hence the color-coded spreadsheet where we keep track of different aspects of the wedding and when they’ve been scheduled, paid for, and confirmed.

There are a lot of cells in this sheet, which means I have my work cut out for me. It’s all worth it for Madi and Rémy. From the moment Madi called me from Paris and told me about her disaster of a meet-cute with her French Airbnb host, I was rooting for Rémy. And now I’m planning their wedding.

The two of them are taking bits and pieces from American and French wedding tradition, which is going to be a fun and unique experience for all of us involved. Not least because all the wedding festivities will take place at a chateau—a bona fide, country chateau in France.

I glance at a row midway down the spreadsheet: *Siena’s flight to France*. It’s not for a couple of weeks, but honestly, it couldn’t come soon enough. I could use all the distraction I can get right now.

My eyes flit to the other spreadsheet that's hiding behind this one—one that's been a permanent fixture for months. It's titled "AMY STEWART FOR SENATE!" It can now be closed once and for all. Maybe even deleted for good measure.

I don't have the heart to do it yet, nor do I have the courage to open it and really analyze where I went wrong. Probably because I *know* some places I went wrong, and seeing the evidence of them in those tidy little cells makes me nervous for Madi's wedding and what unwelcome surprises are lurking in *those* cells.

But not all the mistakes I made as Amy's campaign manager could have been solved with a better spreadsheet. Not sure if that's heartening or *disheartening*.

My phone starts ringing, and Madi's picture pops on the screen for a FaceTime call. I glance at the time. It's only 8:30 in the morning here—an hour earlier than when we scheduled.

"My little croissant!" I say as I get a glimpse of her face. It looks like she's in a taxi, and she doesn't hear me because she's speaking in French to the driver. It makes me feel incredibly proud and slightly strange. Her life has really transformed in the last year and a half, and even though I've visited her twice in Paris, and she's been back to California a couple of times, I've missed a lot more of the daily progress than I'm used to. It's been seven years since we made the quick transition from strangers-sharing-a-dorm to best friends.

"Sorry!" she says to me in a harried voice. "We're on our way to do some unexpected paperwork. It's like all the French bureaucracy has combined to make sure Rémy and I don't get married."

"Do I need to fly over there right now? Handle some maid of honor business?"

"I wish you would, just so I could see you! But you've got a ton going on. I heard about the election. I'm so sorry, Siena. You worked *so* hard."

I shrug, like the burden of responsibility I feel for the loss isn't shriveling me from the inside. "You win some, you lose

some. When do you guys head down to the chateau?”

She takes in a big breath. “Good question and part of why I’m calling you...”

My stomach clenches. Her tone is not promising. Did I mess something up? This wedding has been in the works for almost a year now. It’s been hard not to be there to help with everything, but Rémy’s best friend, André, has done a lot since he’s actually, you know, *in* France.

“What’s up?” I try to keep my voice chipper, giving the impression I’m ready to meet any problem head-on. As maid of honor, it’s my job to shield Madi from the most difficult things, to make sure she can look forward to her wedding instead of getting lost in the minutiae of stressful planning.

“It’s André,” she says. “His mom isn’t doing well. He’s booked a flight for Wednesday to go stay with her. Indefinitely.”

My stomach drops. André is my man on-the-ground, but this is the news all of us have been dreading since his mom went into remission eighteen months ago. The cancer is back. “Oh my gosh. That’s awful, Madi. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s really sad. I don’t think he’ll be at the wedding at all.”

There’s silence as I process this news and what it means. I scan my spreadsheet for all the blue cells. Those are the tasks André is supposed to handle. *Was* supposed to handle.

My cortisol levels skyrocket.

“Anyway,” Madi says, “We thought you should know. Rémy and I are going to handle everyt—”

“I’ll change my flight.”

“What? No. Siena, you’ve been campaigning for months. The last thing you need is to take a last-minute flight across the Atlantic. You need to *rest*.”

“Not likely.” I prop my phone against my laptop so I can navigate to my flight booking. It’s not until four days before the wedding—I figured I’d be right in the middle of

implementing the next phase of strategies for the general election. But now my schedule is wide open. Depressingly so. “I need to stay occupied, Madi. You know me. And it’s not like anyone ever had to drag *me* to France kicking and screaming. Besides, this way, I can bring all the things you need before the wedding and make sure everything’s really in order. You’re staying at the chateau for a couple of weeks before the wedding, right?” It’s not a question. I know this because... spreadsheet.

“Yeah. I’m shooting a wedding in England this weekend, so we were planning to head down on Monday. But André was supposed to go to the weekly market by the chateau this Saturday to find favors for the guests, so I’m going to see if I can change Rémy’s flight home—”

“You’ll do no such thing, young lady. I’ll be there in time to go to the market.”

“Siena...”

“Too late! New flight is already booked.” It’s not. But it will be as soon as the options load. “I’ll forward you the details when I get the confirmation email.”

She sighs, looking me in the eye. “Are you absolutely positive?”

“As positive as an unwelcome pregnancy test.”

Her laugh makes me miss her even more. “How are you a perfect best friend *and* maid of honor?”

“More like Friendzilla. But *someone* has to step into the zilla role, and that’s clearly not something you’re capable of.”

“Yeah right! I’m worse than Bridezilla—I’m your garden-variety scatterbrained bride. I love your spreadsheet and your organization. You are single-handedly keeping our world spinning.”

Rémy’s head pops into the frame. “It’s true. We’re relying on that sheet to run our lives, so thank you.”

I smile at those beautiful faces. I would do anything for these two, including taking on the role of both maid of honor

and best man, apparently. Madi and Rémy are meant for each other, and they deserve the best wedding, especially after all the headaches they've had dealing with Madi's visa and citizenship process.

"I will make you two adorable lovers as many spreadsheets as you want." I'm just thrilled to be planning *their* wedding. If things had gone differently, I might have been trying to paste on a smile for Madi and her ex-boyfriend Josh.

Gag.

"If you're sure you're okay coming early," Madi says, "we already have a room booked for André—"

"She knows, love." Rémy holds up his phone. It has my trusty spreadsheet displayed, including the details for the room at the chateau.

I smile benevolently upon him. "Ten points to Gryffindor. Or Beauxbatons, I guess."

"You're such a brown-noser." Madi kisses Rémy on the cheek.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to stay for that long?" I ask. Not that I'm trying to dissuade anybody from letting me stay at a chateau for more than two weeks. But I'm going there to work, not play princess.

"Positive," Madi says. "It's a huge place, and we're paying them good money to host the wedding festivities, so giving us a discount on one of their many rooms isn't a big deal. It'll make it so much easier for us to get everything in order as the date gets closer. I'm more worried about you getting there from Paris."

I wave away her concerns with a hand. "Pssht. I'll be totally fine."

"I know you're a capable woman and a seasoned traveler, Siena, but it's a lot of stuff you'll be bringing. And it's a long drive."

"Rémy," I say, "will you please show the client cell C34?" I clasp my hands together so they can see them. "What color is

the cell, Ms. Allred?”

“Red,” Madi says, reluctantly playing along with me.

“Which means it’s not something for you to worry about. Now please mind your own business.”

“All of it’s my business, Siena. It’s *my* wedding.”

“I’m not going to argue semantics with you right now. Or ever. Mostly because I don’t understand what semantics are. But that’s beside the point. I’ll be completely fine. You know I love a good challenge.”

“Fine. But you better text me if it gets closer, and you realize it’s going to be harder than you thought.”

“Sure thing, jellybean.” Definitely not doing that. I’ll pay a sketchy stranger to help me before asking Madi to rearrange her chaotic schedule.

“Make sure to keep the luggage receipts so we can reimburse you for the extra costs, too,” she says.

I send her a look. “Already on it, as you’ll see in the finances tab of the spreadsheet.”

Rémy’s phone pops into view again, and Madi laughs. “Right. I should have known.”

“I promise not to be this insane once I’m finally there, okay?”

I’ll still be keeping this spreadsheet in perfect order, but I’ll be able to handle a lot more of the details myself once I’m on location. Madi’s call came at a really great time. I need this distraction, and now I can really take the stress off her and Rémy so they can actually enjoy the time before the wedding. Rémy will be interviewing at some schools in the area around the chateau, so they’ll have plenty on their plate.

“Again, Siena,” Madi says, “you’re saving our lives, and we love you for it and for everything you’re doing for us. Which is why I am sorry for what I’m about to tell you.”

“Bring it on.” Like I said, I’m all about making sure she knows I can handle anything she throws at me. Secretly,

though, I'm shaking in my matted, fuzzy slippers.

"I had to ship some stuff to my mom's house, but since I'll need it before she can fly out—"

I nod. "I can go get it, no problem."

"No, that's not what I mean at all. I convinced Jack to drive it down, so he'll be dropping by around three today." She grimaces. "I know. It's Jack. Not ideal. But you can just—"

"I know how to handle Jack by now, Madi."

"I know you do. I just feel bad he always teases you so much. But I know you can handle anything. It's why I love you."

I couldn't handle getting Amy Stewart through the primaries, even though she was the best choice out there.

But Madi's at least partially right. I can handle her brother. I've had years of practice.

Yeah, it took me a while to get over what happened between us, and yeah, I never told Madi about it, but it's been seven years now. Seven. That's a freaking long time. And before anyone tries to convince me that something that happened so long ago shouldn't be hard to tell your best friend, save your breath. The state of California expunges most driving infractions from your record after three years. *Expunges* them. Meaning it's like they never happened.

Maybe in some ways, that night with Jack was a more serious infraction—like a DUI. Insurance companies hold on to those records for ten years, but everyone knows insurance companies are the devil, so my point stands.

As far as I'm concerned, that whole episode has been wiped from my record. Initially, I didn't tell Madi because I felt like an idiot, but as time went on and I realized the history I had stepped into, I kept things to myself for Madi's and Jack's sakes. How could I ruin the decent terms the two of them had finally come to—and for what? Nothing had come of that night between Jack and me. I didn't want to do anything to put extra strain on an already strained relationship. I know how important my siblings are to me, and even though Jack's

behavior secretly gutted me, I understand now why he did what he did.

So, the best thing has just been to leave it all behind and pretend it never happened. That's ancient history, and I never think about it.

Barely ever.

I don't interact with Jack very often, but being as close as Madi and I are, it's inevitable that we see each other from time to time, and since neither Jack nor I are the type to make things awkward, it's been fine. He teases me to get under my skin, just like he teases Madi to get under hers. It's what Jack Allred does.

As for me? I give as good as I get because that's what *I* do.

Both of us have dated plenty—that might be an understatement for Jack, from what Madi says—and that's that. He's just the hot brother of my best friend who I once (expunged from the record).

After going over a few of the to-do list items for the week, I say goodbye to Madi and Rémy just as their taxi drops them off at their destination.

I hang up with a thousand things on my mind and less than a week to accomplish them. I may have worked hard to give *I got this* vibes to Madi and Rémy on the phone, but the truth is more like *I don't got this yet—at all—but I will got this very soon or I will die trying to got this*.

This beautiful, colorful, tidy spreadsheet will help ensure that happens.

I take stock of my spreadsheet, breathing deeply every time I have to change a cell from blue for André to red for me. Of note, I have now become the person responsible for both the bachelorette *and* bachelor parties. Yikes.

But I'm up for the challenge! How hard can it be to plan a bachelor party in France for a bunch of French guys I don't know?

I minimize the spreadsheet. That is a problem for my future self. Right now, my current self needs to finish changing a plane ticket.

My phone lights up again, and a picture of Amy appears with the name Senator Stewart below. Of course, thanks to me, she's *not* Senator Stewart, but I put that name into my phone when I was still a bright-eyed, hopeful campaign manager. I think they call what I did manifesting, and obviously, it's all a hoax.

The sight of the name strikes actual pain inside me, which I swallow away as I pick up the phone to read the text.

SENATOR STEWART

Just wanted to say another thank you for all your incredible and hard work on the campaign, Siena. We fought hard, and I'm proud of us.

I swallow again. Apparently, this pain is like reflux. It just refuses to go down. It burns, too, which explains why my eyes sting.

I would feel better if Amy railed at me and listed all the ways I failed her in those crucial moments, because both of us know I did. It was *my* job to keep track of deadlines, including the financial filing one we missed; it was *my* job to know her well enough to keep her out of situations I knew she couldn't handle, but I ignored my intuition and persuaded her to do a debate she wasn't ready for. That debate tanked our numbers right before voting.

I brush away the tears. It's been four days since Amy conceded, but this is the first time I've let myself cry. Not that I'm letting myself. I just can't stop it this time.

I type out my response: "I'm just so sorry." At least, I hope that's what it says. Given my blurry vision and the ever-threatening specter of autocorrect, it's very possible I just sent her a death threat or something.

"Special delivery!"

I whip around at the voice, then whip right back, blinking quickly and using my fingers like windshield wipers to ensure there is no trace of my leakage. If there's one thing I don't do in front of Jack Allred, it's cry.

I CAN BARELY SEE around the sides of the box in my arms, but Siena's sitting at the table in her small dining room, her closed laptop in front of her and her phone in her hands.

She doesn't immediately respond to my greeting, but after a few seconds, she stands up and turns toward me. "Most delivery people knock or ring the doorbell, you know."

I haven't seen her in months, and she looks... different.

I grin. "Like I said, this is a *special* delivery."

She walks toward me, and the way her eyes shine and her cheeks are more pink than usual gives me pause. I don't see her all that often, but she's my sister's best friend, and I know her well enough to say she's not a crier.

"So special it's hours early," she says, coming up to take a look at the box. "Madi said 3:00."

"Never had someone complain about an early delivery before." I try to get a better look at her face, but she flips up the lids of the box so all I can see is the top of her dark hair. Her hair is triggering—it looks every bit as soft as it felt that night—so I move my gaze elsewhere. "There are more in the back of my truck."

"Thank heaven!" She relaxes slightly. "You can set the box in the spare bedroom—down the hall and on the right. I'll head to the truck for the others." She glances at me, but before I can get a good look, she turns away and heads out the door.

I narrow my eyes. If there's one thing I've learned about Siena Sheppard, it's that she looks me in the eye. She's almost impossible to embarrass, which I appreciate about her. In fact, I take it as a challenge.

I pass by the open front door and note the campaign sign for Amy Stewart in the yard. I know from the news that she lost in the primaries a few days ago. I also know from my mom that Siena was the campaign manager.

I set the box in the room. It's far from the only one, and there are a couple of suitcases in there, too. I hurry out and through the front door. Siena's in the truck bed, bending to lift the other two boxes.

"I got that," I say, hopping up.

"No need." She's got an armful of boxes, making me look like a pansy for carrying just one. She peeks around the side and smiles sunnily at me. The traces of whatever crying I suspect she might have been doing when I arrived are gone.

I hop off the bed, resting my hand on the edge of the trailer. "What's your strategy here?"

"Don't even worry about it." She sets the boxes down.

"It doesn't make you any weaker to accept a little help, you know."

She hops down so she's right in front of my face. "And it doesn't make *you* any less of a man to watch me carry a couple boxes."

I flash a smile at her. "You afraid you'll faint from the sheer sexiness of watching me carry them?"

"Terrified." She scoops the boxes into her arms and starts toward the house.

I chuckle and follow her until she's set the boxes next to the others in the spare room. From the doorway, I pull out my phone and take a picture of her amongst all the boxes.

She shoots me a weird look. "What are you doing?"

"Proof of delivery. It's standard practice."

“If you were a delivery driver, maybe. But you’re not.”

“Today I am.” I shoot off a text to Madi with the picture attached. She’ll be in awe I’ve already finished what she asked me to do.

“So, you *do* know how to use a phone.”

“Har har,” I say sarcastically. I’m not attached to my phone like most people, and I’m fine with that. More than fine with it. I don’t want to be that reliant on anything. Or *anyone*, just like I don’t want anyone that reliant on me.

I take one more glance at the photo I sent. Siena looks small in it, surrounded by so many boxes and suitcases. “How are you getting all of this to France?”

“The Floo Network.” She brushes past me and out of the room. “I’m flying with it, of course.”

I glance at the accumulation of boxes once more before following her out of the room. She *was* going to need a magical fireplace travel network. “Alone?”

She turns around in the hallway, and I stop short to keep from running into her. “Why? Are you offering your help?”

I open my mouth wordlessly.

She grins like she just won something and heads toward the door. “Didn’t think so. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an entire wedding to rescue from the brink of disaster.” She waits for me to pass through the door and out of her hair.

I glance at that hair, and the memory of my hands in it makes my fingertips tingle. Seven years later. It’s a lot shorter than it was that night, and I wonder if she ever wears extensions anymore. She hasn’t whenever I’ve seen her. Her hair just barely brushes her shoulders.

It’s not like I’ve been pining after her. That episode was a lifetime ago. A memorable episode in that lifetime, but so what? When it comes to dating your sister’s best friends, I’m thoroughly convinced the third time is *not* the charm. Unless by charm we mean certain sibling relationship death.

The only reason I can get away with teasing Madi about me going for Siena is because we've had this many years to put the past behind us. It's like a twisted acknowledgement I haven't forgotten my crimes, so she doesn't have to worry about me repeating them.

"Are things really on the brink of disaster?" Apart from buying my plane ticket and paying for my suit, I haven't thought much about Madi's wedding.

Siena tilts her head, faintly amused. "Must be nice to just show up on your sister's wedding day and have everything taken care of."

I scoff, but there's not a lot of power behind it. "My flight gets in the day *before* the wedding, thank you very much, and no one's asked me to do anything *but* show up."

She raises her brows.

"It's true."

"Hmm..." She taps her chin with a finger. "Why do you think that is?"

I shrug. "I'd screw things up."

"You run your own business, Jack. I don't think your capability is the thing in question."

She's not wrong. I run an app development company. It's small, but it does well. Our current focus is a fitness app, but while my software engineers are doing all sorts of testing, I get to kick my heels and wait—or, more realistically, brainstorm the next app.

"You're telling me you think Madi wants me helping with the wedding?" I ask.

"I'm telling you I think Madi would be happy for *any* show of interest from you."

Ouch. That hurt. It's not that I'm not wanting or willing to help. I've just always been reluctant to involve myself too much in Madi's life. (I can hear her now, saying, "You sure weren't reluctant involving yourself with my best friends!"). We were both really young when Dad died, and since I was the

older of the two of us, so many people seemed to think it was my job to take his place or something. No one knew better than me how impossible that would be. Dad was on a whole different level of amazing. I might as well try to climb Everest tomorrow.

So, I've done my best to just... not. And maybe I've gone too far.

"Fine." I clap my hands together. "Put me to work. What's on your list?"

She lets out a breathy, incredulous laugh. "My list?"

"Yeah. Do you have one?"

"*Do I have one?*" She stares at me for a second, then turns and walks away. When she reaches the table, she flips open her laptop. Balancing it on her palm, she puts her hand in front of the screen to showcase it.

All I can see from here is a colorful spreadsheet. I approach, leaning toward it and scanning the contents. It's a massive rainbow of cells with all sorts of headings, dates, names, and notes. Way too much for me to make heads or tails of. A good chunk of the screen is in red, including *suit alterations* and *bachelor party*.

"Does red mean things that are finished?"

"Ha! More like things I have yet to do."

My eyes flick up to her, but she's not looking at me. Her gaze is on the spreadsheet, and there's a hint of a deer-in-the-headlights expression there. She bites at the inside of her lip as her eyes skim.

She shuts the screen and takes in a big breath. "Anyway —"

"Siena, that's way too much work for one person. Does Madi know you're doing all this?"

"Well, it wasn't *supposed* to be for one person. André was helping, but now he's got a family emergency, so—" She shrugs.

I'm the biggest jerk on the planet. I haven't done anything to help with the wedding. I figured the drive to Siena's today was a pretty good effort on my part. To be fair, I had no idea how complicated a wedding would be to plan. Shows how much I know.

My shock must be showing on my face because Siena starts looking at me warily. "Jack, don't you dare say anything to Madi. I want her as relaxed as possible. She has enough on her plate right now."

I shake my head, staring at nothing in particular. How much have Siena and Madi taken on since Madi's engagement last year? What about Mom?

"Is my mom doing anything?" I ask.

She scoffs lightly. "Of course. She's the green cells. She stayed up until two a couple of nights ago to work on seating cards. I think you can agree she has plenty going on without me adding to it."

I nod, feeling a little sick. Mom has been working overtime just so she can make it to France for the few days off her job will approve—and apparently, she's been doing wedding tasks in her spare time.

"I want to help." My pronouncement is met with silence. "Lemme help. Put me to work."

She stares at me like I just applied at Hooters. "Most of the work is already done."

"That spreadsheet hemorrhaging red begs to differ."

"Yeah, but a lot of that stuff has to happen *in* France. They were André's tasks. That's why I moved up my flight, so you don't need to worry about it."

"Moved your flight to when?"

"Friday."

"Friday as in five-days-from-now Friday?"

Siena puts a hand on my shoulder. "Your awareness of the days of the week is commendable, Jack. Yes, *that* Friday."

“Thanks.” That means Siena will be *in France* helping with the wedding for more than two weeks.

My contribution? Driving a couple of boxes half an hour both ways and showing up the day before the wedding.

If my goal was to avoid anyone judging me against the standard set by Dad, I’ve succeeded. He was always going above and beyond the expectation, sacrificing for all of us. Nobody would even consider the comparison at this point.

Given how hard I’ve tried to avoid just that, that knowledge should satisfy me, but instead, it makes me feel terrible.

“How can I help you get ready for Friday?” I ask. “Can I pack the suitcases for you? Drive you to the airport? There’s no way all that will fit in your car.”

“It looks like a lot more than it really is once I get everything out of boxes.” She sets down the laptop and folds her arms across her chest. “Look, Jack, I wasn’t saying any of this as a cry for help. I’m just very busy.”

I put out my hands. “And I’m offering to help you be *less* busy.”

She doesn’t say anything. I can see the cogs turning in her head, and I know just what to do.

I drop my hands. “You know what? I get it.” I shrug and head for the door. “I can’t blame you.”

“What do you get?”

I’m glad I’m turned around because I can’t help but smile a bit at the curiosity in her voice. “You’re afraid you won’t be able to resist me if you have to work with me on wedding stuff.” I reach the door, arrange my face into something somber, then turn to her.

She’s staring at me like she’s trying to decide if I’m serious. Then, she starts laughing, and even though the entire point of my comment was to get a reaction out of her, the laughing lasts so long that it becomes mildly offensive. I’m tempted to remind her of *the night*, but I refrain because, while

I'm very willing to walk the line by referring vaguely to it in order to get a rise out of her, I never outright bring it up. It's a taboo subject, and I'm afraid if I use it against her, she'll use it against *me* and spill the beans to Madi.

That's not a chance I'm willing to take. Madi and I have reached a decent place in our relationship. Finally. We're not close, but we're on civil terms.

The first time I ruined things between Madi and one of her best friends, I was young and dumb. I was high on the feeling of a pretty girl liking me. The second time, I really thought there was something there, but it fizzled faster than a mid-2000s boyband.

I watch Siena as she tries to get a handle on herself, wiping below her eyes.

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks," I say.

"This lady doesn't really care what you think. I laughed at your joke. It's good manners."

"If what I said is a joke, why are you so afraid of letting me help?"

"Because I'm thinking of Madi. Your sister. Remember her? You really think she wants us working together on this?"

I walk toward her. "C'mon, Sheppard. If Madi was *really* worried about that, she wouldn't have sent me today. She has no reason to worry about *me*." I stop right in front of her. "Are you saying she has reason to worry about *you*?"

She puts a finger on my chest and pushes me backward. "No, Casanova. That's not what I'm saying."

I grin and clap my hands together. "Great. So, what can I do?"

3

SIENA

SEVEN YEARS AGO

HOLDING UP MY HANDHELD MIRROR, I turn so I can see the reflection of the back of my head, smoothing my hair to ensure my clip-in extensions are covered. What can I say? Not all of us are blessed with the hair from a L'Oréal commercial like my new dormmate.

I send a quick glance in her direction as she sets a camera lens inside her bag and tucks a massive lock of light brown hair behind her ear.

I snap the compact shut and set it on the bathroom counter. Envy isn't a good look on anyone. "You sure you don't want to come?"

"I do," she says, "but if I'm serious about getting into the photography program, I really shouldn't miss this club meeting."

"Right. Politics and all that. I get it." I grab my lip stain from the drawer. "Sounds like you've got academic responsibility covered for tonight, so I'll volunteer to take on the delicate task of fostering our social lives."

"Super generous of you," she says with an amused smile.

I wave her words away. "Don't mention it."

After hearing horror stories from my two older brothers, I obviously lucked out in the freshman roommate department. It's only been a week since the start of the semester, but I really like Madi. She's good people.

"I don't know what kind of ragers the photography clubs are throwing these days," I say as I apply lip stain on my way to the door, "but if you get home early, text me and I'll tell you the address. It's only a five-minute walk."

"For sure."

The sound of collegiate merrymaking meets my ears when I'm still two doors away from my destination. After five days of classes and homework, the sound acts like a homing device,

and my heart rate kicks up a notch or two. Not every person would show up to a party where they don't know anyone, but *that's* how desperate I was when the girl behind me in World Civ told me about it. And when she mentioned it was being hosted by a junior? *Say no more, girl with Princess Leia buns!* I've had enough of immature boys. I'm leveling up.

My heartbeat is through the roof as I knock on the door, but I've learned how to give off the vibe that I'm cool and confident. Confidence—even the fake-it-til-you-make-it kind—does wonders in life. The knock is just a formality, though; there's no way anyone will hear the sound with how loud it is, so I turn the knob and open the door as if the next thing out of my mouth will be “Honey, I'm home!”

There are people grouped and paired off in the entry and living room, laughing and whispering as a heavy beat rumbles in the background. I suck in a slow breath through my nose, smiling with satisfaction.

Shockingly, no one has noticed me yet, despite these glamorous, off-brand extensions I'm wearing. That's probably because every girl in sight is *also* wearing extensions. I make my way through small groups, my gaze peeled for wherever people are getting their drinks. Why is it so much easier to feel relaxed when my hands are occupied?

I spot a few different types of alcohol as my eyes roam the room, and I land on the thing I'm looking for: someone holding a can of soda.

One of the guys I just bumped excuses himself to the girl he was talking to and steps toward me. His long, wavy hair is bleached blond, but by the sun rather than whoever did Justin Timberlake's hair during his NSYNC days. He may as well have Surfer Dude tattooed across his tan forehead. He's even wearing a shell necklace. “Hey, I'm Brad. I don't think we've met.”

“Hey, Brad.” I can't help giving him a once-over. *So, this is what junior guys are like.* I'm slightly disappointed because I'm getting some distinct smoothtalker vibes from him. “This

is *your* party, then.” I vaguely remember the girl in World Civ mentioning Brad as the one hosting.

He grins like I gave him a compliment, then spreads his arms. “Welcome to my party...” He raises his brows, waiting for me to fill in the blank.

“Siena.” I feel eyes boring into me, so I glance at the girl he was just talking to. *Yikes*. If looks could kill, she’d be a sharpshooter. “Brad, I’m a little thirsty. Can you tell me where I can get a soda?”

“Just a soda? You sure?” If I hadn’t already been sure, the way his brow lifts provocatively decides things.

“Yup.”

“Okay,” he says like he sees regret in my future, “there should be a few sodas in the fridge. I can sho—”

I put up a hand to stop him, then immediately drop it from his chest. The last thing I need is for Annie Oakley over there to think I’m trying to steal what she sees as rightfully hers. I’m here to make friends, not enemies. “That’s really nice of you, but I think your friend is waiting to talk to you.”

He glances over at the girl, whose expression magically morphs into the intersection between sweet and sexy. Brad’s mouth quirks at the side at the same time as that rogue blond brow, confirming to me I’m just one of many balls he’s juggling tonight. Part of me wants to see them all come crashing down on him, but I resist since, again, I’m here to widen my social circle. Plenty of room there for the Brads of this world, as long as they keep a proper distance.

I can almost see it in his eyes, though: *which ball is more fun?* I’m tempted to unclip my hair extensions right in front of him just to see the look on his face.

“You sure?” he asks again.

“One hundred percent.” To make sure he believes me, I walk toward the kitchen. None of the lights are on except the one over the stove—I’m assuming the dark is to discourage nosy college students from ransacking the fridge for anything

that doesn't directly affect the functioning of their decision-making skills.

The fridge is to my left, and I pull the door open, letting the light from inside flood the dark space behind me. It's slim pickins in here. Brad probably spent his entire food budget for the month on beer. There are a few cans of soda on the nearly empty shelves. Hopefully, he can survive on flirtatious smiles, or it looks like he may starve.

Luckily, I'm not picky, so I reach for a Dr Pepper.

"Can I help you?"

I whip around, exclaiming, "Holy cheese snips!" The can of soda drops to the floor, barely missing my foot. I hold my breath as I wait for it to explode or start spinning like the cheap ground fireworks we did as kids.

When it seems safe, I look up. After the relatively blinding light of the fridge, it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust enough to see the guy sitting at the kitchen table. The fridge light casts his face in a blue light, and he's got a can of Sprite in front of him.

His mouth pulls up, and his eyes narrow slightly. "Did you say *holy Cheese Nips*? Or *holy cheese snips*?"

"Holy cheese *snips*," I clarify, slightly breathless, with a hand to my chest. "Gosh, you look creepy."

His mouth tilts up at the side. It's oddly reassuring, countering the creep-in-the-dark-kitchen vibe with a look of genuine amusement. "Raiding my fridge *and* insulting me... bold move." He reaches behind him and flips the light switch. "Is that better?"

Better is an understatement. He's shed the Jason-from-*Friday the 13th* vibe completely, replacing it with brown hair that's brushed up in the front, a five o'clock shadow the men of my freshmen class would kill for, and a pair of matching brown eyes with a glint of... fun? Mischief? The jury's still out.

I take in a breath, hoping it'll settle my heart, but it's shaken up like the soda. "Um, yeah, much better, thanks."

“What *are* cheese snips?” His voice is all curiosity.

“I don’t know. It’s what I thought Cheese Nips were called when I was little.” I narrow my eyes, registering what he said before. “This is *your* fridge? Are you and Brad roommates?”

He nods once and gets up. “We’re fresh out of cheese snips tonight.”

I shoot him an unamused look, even though I secretly want to laugh. “Are you on graveyard shift for fridge guard duty or something?”

He lifts his can in acknowledgement. “You’re not the first person to get the munchies tonight.”

I let out a laugh that sounds suspiciously like a snort and look at the sparsely populated shelves. “Either those people have all been seriously disappointed by the selection, or you are the worst fridge security guard in history.” I turn to him just in time to see him pick up the soda at my feet.

“My tactics seemed to work just fine on *you*.” He holds the can toward me. “Besides, it’s the beginning of the semester. Stocking the fridge is a work in progress.”

Eyes trained on the can, I back away slowly, hands up. “I don’t want anything to do with that can.”

He laughs as he sets it on the counter, and for a second I wonder if I’ve met him before. His smile is familiar. But that’s probably the same thing all the other girls have thought. That’s why there are so dang many of them here.

“Is the dark an essential part of fridge guarding?” I ask. “Or do you have a secret rendezvous with one of the girls out there to help the time pass during your shift?”

He reaches behind me and shuts the fridge door. “I don’t make a practice of preying on freshman girls.”

I can’t decide whether that’s an insult or something he expects to be applauded for. I look through the doorway to where groups of mostly girls are hanging out, talking. “Are these *all* freshmen?”

“Every last one.”

“Okay, but being social requires no preying, you know. What exactly do you have against freshman girls, anyway?”

An overly girlish giggle comes from the other room, and he cocks a brow.

“You think we all laugh like that?” I ask incredulously.

“No, but you’ve got to admit the timing was pretty perfect. To answer your question, though, freshman girls tend to be overeager.”

“Overeager?” I repeat. That’s definitely an insult. Do *I* look overeager? I resist the urge to touch a hand to the clips of my extensions. I’m guessing he’d classify those under the *overeager* category.

“It’s like you can’t decide whether you’re at college to go *Girls Gone Wild* or *Say Yes to the Dress*. A lot of times it ends up starting as the first, then turning into the second.”

“Sounds like you’re a man speaking from experience.”

“More experience than I want, that’s for sure.”

That same giggle erupts, a cascade of soprano laughter that’s probably too high for the elderly to hear.

“Which one do you think she’s going for?” I ask.

His responsive smile is perfect evidence of why he’s found it so easy to gain so much experience. It’s unfairly attractive.

He folds his arms, taking my bait. “That laugh is distinctly *Girls Gone Wild*.”

“You’re very confident in your assessment,” I say, though secretly, I agree with him. “What if you’re wrong?”

“Then both she and Brad are going to be *very* disappointed in a few days.”

I scrunch my nose. “You don’t seem to think much of him. Why do you live with him, then?”

“My friend had to cancel his contract last-minute, so I didn’t really have a choice in roommates. But hey, Brad’s not

all bad news. I met you tonight, and you seem like a semi-normal person.”

“Oh, stop.” I slap his shoulder playfully and do my best imitation of the girly giggle, fluttering my lashes, which I doubt is as effective when they’re not six inches long and as thick as a push-broom.

“You’re really terrible at that,” he says, grinning widely.

I shrug. “Thanks.”

Brad pops into the doorway on the other side of the kitchen.

“It’s like you summoned him,” my kitchen buddy says with a little shoulder bump.

Brad’s eyes light up when he sees me. “Siena! Thought you got lost in the fridge or something.”

“Plenty of space for it.” My comment is soft, not even meant for Brad, and it draws a smile from... I still don’t know his name.

“Huh?” Brad says as he walks toward us.

I clear my throat and speak louder. “Thanks for checking on me.”

He nudges me with an elbow. “Of course! You’re my guest. What kind of a host would I be if I didn’t see to your needs?”

Barf.

He shakes his hair out of his face in a gesture I imagine is a signature move. “Some of us are gonna play spin the bottle. What do you say? You in?”

“Spin the bottle?” If my tone wasn’t making clear how surprised and, frankly, appalled I am, I’m guessing my face is. I don’t have the strongest brain-to-face filter.

I can’t help but shoot a glance at my nameless friend, who meets my eye with a *what’ll it be?* expression with a bold subheading of *this is what I have to deal with.*

“Yeah!” Brad says, missing my horror. “For old times’ sake.”

“Right...” I try for a smile. I’m confident this is less for old times’ sake and more for Brad’s good times’ sake. I haven’t played spin the bottle since freshman year of high school, and I definitely don’t intend to break my streak tonight.

Brad shrugs when I take too long to respond. “We’ll be in the living room if you want to join.”

Next to me, his roommate gives a sort of grimace.

“Wait,” I say. “What about your roommate?” Brad never even checked whether he wanted to join.

Brad turns around, confused. “Who, Jack?”

Jack. His name is Jack. I look at him to see whether it fits. It does. It fits him as well as the blue Henley he’s wearing.

Unable to resist a little teasing, I put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “He was *just* saying he wished there was a different way to get to know all the amazing young ladies here tonight than just standing around and talking.”

Jack narrows his eyes at me, and the promise of revenge there sends a thrilling chill across my skin.

Brad laughs, his eyes darting to my hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I don’t think so. He told me not to expect to see him the entire night.”

I squeeze Jack’s shoulder, amazed by the sheer bravery I’m exhibiting right now given the retribution his gaze is already promising. “He takes his fridge guarding duties seriously, doesn’t he?”

Brad’s brow furrows, but I don’t even care. None of these comments are for him.

“Actually”—Jack smiles in a way that’s slightly frightening, then looks at Brad—“I’m game.”

My mouth might be hanging open. I didn’t expect Jack to actually agree to play. In fact, I was counting on him digging

in his heels so I could hang out with him in the kitchen.

Jack pats my hand on his shoulder. “Like Siena here, I’m always up for anything.”

“Sweet,” Brad says. Then he’s gone like the wind.

Jack puts out a hand, smiling way too politely. “After you.”

I WAS WRONG.

Well, I was right *and* wrong. It's the night before my flight to France, and Jack and I have unpacked and sorted everything in the boxes—everything from clothes for Madi to ribbon to bridesmaid dresses. It *is* less than it had looked like before, but the three suitcases I had are clearly not sufficient.

After the two of us wrestle the zipper of the third suitcase closed, I sit back on my heels and blow out a puff of air. I've got a flight tomorrow morning, and I still haven't packed my own stuff. I have no time to go on suitcase quests.

Reluctant as I am to admit it, if it hadn't been for Jack's help over the past few days, I shudder to think what state I would be in.

To be clear, my current state isn't particularly flattering. My hair is up in a ponytail, but half of it has fallen out of the tie. It's distinctly different from an intentional half-up style. I'm also in sweats and—out of pure desperation—an oversized *Amy Stewart for Senate* campaign shirt since most of my clothes are in the wash so I can pack them.

I glance at Jack, who's smiling at me. Always smiling at me like he knows something I don't.

I shoot him a look that says, *Don't you dare say a word*. "It probably would have fit if *I* had packed the second suitcase. You clearly didn't play as much Tetris as I did."

"By all means, let's unpack it, then." He makes a move for the zipper on the second suitcase, but I snatch his hand to stop

him. I don't actually think it would make a difference if I'd packed it, and he knows it.

"If only we had more suitcases," he says with too much languishing in his tone.

I can't help the hope in my eyes and voice. "You have some?" Jack's apartment is half an hour away, so it's a big ask to have him go all the way there, come back with them, then drive home again. But it's an ask I'm willing to ask.

"I might. Depends on what's in it for me." He wags his brows.

"How's keeping that pretty face for an incentive?"

"Change *pretty* to *sexy*, and you've got yourself a deal."

If there's one power I wish I had right now, it'd be the ability to keep a straight face and not stroke Jack's large ego by showing any amusement. But I'm no superhero. I'm just a mangy maid of honor with a dire need for suitcases.

My reluctant smile is enough for Jack, though, because he stands up and leaves without so much as a goodbye.

"See you in an hour," I mumble. I'm glad he's putting in this work for Madi. It's about time he showed up for her, even if it's packing suitcases.

It's only been two minutes when I hear the front door open again, followed by suitcase wheels on the floor. Before I know it, Jack's in the doorway with two suitcases behind him.

"You had them in your truck?"

"Based on how much stuff you had in here, I figured we'd need them. Oh, and it gets better."

In a show Vanna White would approve of, he comes into the room with a little prance, pulls one of the suitcases in front of him, showcases it with his hands, then unzips it. Inside is another, slightly smaller suitcase.

"Bless you, Jack Allred," I whisper.

"What now?" He cups his ear, grinning.

I get up on my feet. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Uh-huh.”

We pack two of the suitcases like the pros we’ve become, then stand, admiring the beautiful results of our work: empty boxes stacked together and a row of lovely suitcases.

Jack puts up his hand, and I high-five him.

“One more spreadsheet cell you can gray out,” he says.

“One down, fifty to go.” I take another look at all the stuff I’ll be carting around tomorrow. It’s going to be interesting. Once the bags are all checked, it’ll be okay, but then there’s the issue of how I’m going to get all this stuff from the baggage claim at the Paris airport to the van I’ve rented to drive to the chateau. My stomach ties itself in knots just thinking about it. But I’m an enterprising human. I’ll figure it out. I’m not the first person to travel with an inordinate amount of luggage.

“So, what time should I be here tomorrow morning?” Jack asks.

“Huh?”

“To take you to the airport.”

“I’m taking an Uber.”

“Cancel it. *I’m* taking you. End of story. What time should I be here? When’s your flight?”

“It leaves at 10:20, so I was planning to leave by 6:45.” That ought to nip his idea in the bud. I don’t take him for an early riser.

“See you at 6:30, then, Sheppard.”

I hesitate, considering whether I should fight him on this. But it would be really nice not to have to put my safety in the hands of some random driver while it’s still dark out. So, I humble myself and say, “Thank you.”

IT'S 7:00, and I'm late. That's what happens when I make last-minute decisions. But after talking to Mom, it seemed like the only choice for anyone wanting to call himself a half-decent human and brother.

When I pull up to Siena's house, all the suitcases are sitting on the porch. She's got the curtain in her living room pulled back with a finger. It shuts as soon as she spots my truck, and I take in a deep breath, preparing for what I know I've got coming.

"You know," Siena says as she emerges from the door, "I would have gladly taken a late delivery the other day if it meant you would have been on time today."

I grab two suitcases and haul them down the stairs. "Good morning to you, too."

"There's also this new thing called *texting*. It's where you send a message to let someone know you're entirely unreliable, and she can sleep an extra thirty minutes."

"From the looks of it, you got plenty of beauty sleep." I refrain from telling her I'm an *extra* couple of minutes late because I forgot my phone and had to go back for it.

"It's 7:04, Jackson. We said 6:30. No, scratch that—you said 6:30."

"The flight's not until 10:20. And my name isn't Jackson. It's just Jack."

She stops in front of the bed of my truck, and I hurry to pull the handle to open it.

“I don’t care, Just Jack,” she says. “I need an effective way to communicate how angry I am with you.”

I chuckle and start throwing the suitcases into the truck bed, glancing at her to see if she notices anything, but she’s too busy watching me lift the suitcases.

“Like what you see?” I ask.

“I really, genuinely don’t. Handle with a little more care, would ya?”

I raise my brows. “Clearly, you’ve never seen how they treat these things at the airport. Or are you trying to find reasons to be mad at me?”

She turns and heads to the porch to get the last bags and her carry-on. Why is it so fun to push her buttons?

Pretty soon, everything is squared away, and we’re on our way to the airport.

“So,” I say from the driver’s seat, handing her a blueberry muffin, “you ready for this?”

“Maybe don’t talk to me,” she says. “I’d rather not say rude things to you when you’re doing something nice for me.”

I laugh and turn on the radio. “Suit yourself.” I haven’t even told her the news yet, but it’ll keep.

An Ed Sheeran song plays on the radio, and Siena taps her finger to the beat on her knee. Except not—not unless she has a terrible sense of rhythm, and given that her brother is an emerging star on the music scene, I rule out that option very quickly.

These aren’t jamming-out-to-music finger taps. They’re fidgety, stressed ones.

I cover her hand with mine. “It’s gonna be okay. Promise.”

Her hand stills under mine, and she frowns.

“We’re not gonna miss the flight, okay?”

She takes a deep breath and nods, pulling her hand away.

When I finally press the brakes in front of the valet service, she looks around like she's just realized we're not in the usual place. Before she can ask what's going on, the valet driver comes to my door and opens it for me.

"Thanks, man," I say, stepping out. "Keys are in the ignition."

"What?" Siena's fingers are on the handle, but she's not moving.

I walk around the front of the truck and open her door as one of the other workers starts unloading the suitcases.

"What are you doing?" Siena asks me as she steps from the truck. "It won't take that long to get through the bag check line, and I can get one of those luggage carts."

I raise my brows as the guy in my truck bed hands me yet another suitcase to add to the collection.

"Fine, *two* luggage carts," she says.

The suitcases keep coming, and she looks around at them. Things begin to compute. "Wait, what's that blue one?"

"Thanks again," I say to the worker as I take it from him and set it on the ground. I face Siena because *it's time*. "It's mine. I'm coming."

Blank stare. The blankest of the blank.

"I changed my flight," I expound.

The valet steps next to us while Siena's gaze stays fixed on me. "You should have gotten an email with your valet ticket number," the guy says. "It has the link to our app. You can download it to notify us when your flight is landing, so we can have your car here waiting."

"Thanks." I nod to let him know he can leave. Siena has yet to say a word. I grab one of the luggage carts nearby and start stacking the suitcases.

"Is this a joke?" she finally asks as the truck pulls from the curb.

“I sure hope not. I want my truck back when I get home.”

“You seriously changed your flight?”

I grab a second luggage cart to load up. We’ll be a circus on the way inside, but at least everything will be in one place. “*You* were seriously about to fly to France with six suitcases? By yourself?”

“I would have been fine. I *will* be fine. You don’t need to change your flight, Jack.”

“Too late. It’s a done deal.”

There’s a pause. “What about your job?”

I shrug. “I have a lull at work right now. I’ll have to do some stuff while I’m there, but it’s nothing urgent.” I stack the last suitcase, then turn to face her. “Weren’t you the one who said Madi wants me to take an interest in the wedding? *Voilà*. I want to help her and Rémy. Now, come on.” I thread my arms through my backpack straps and elbow her. “You’re making us late.”

JACK IS COMING TO FRANCE. As in, he's taking the same flight as me, and, as far as I can tell, he'll be joining me on the drive to Chateau Vidal. Or maybe not. Maybe he plans to hang out in Paris for a few days and trot out the ladies. A French fling would totally be his style.

As far as I know, Jack treats dating like a hobby—he never lets it get serious. I have no doubt he'd find plenty of takers in Paris. He's a good-looking, charming guy, dang him.

When it's finally our turn at the check-in counter, we hand our passports to the agent, and she looks up at me and then Jack.

“Together?” she asks.

Taken off guard, I open my mouth to set her straight.

Jack wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Yeah.” He shows her that dazzling smile. “Any way you could get us seats together?”

Offering a toothy smile to the agent, I stomp on Jack's foot.

“I meant whether your reservation is together,” the agent says with an expression that says *nice try*. “As far as seating goes, you'll have to take that up with the gate agent at this point.”

“Of course. Whatever it takes to get a seat next to this fine young lady.” The teasing glint in his eye has me ready to stomp on his other foot.

The grand total I owe once all the suitcases are weighed and checked is a number I don't care to repeat. Jack insists on charging it to his credit card, and I put up a little fuss, but it's only half-hearted. I have no job prospects at the moment, and even though Madi's going to pay me back, having a bit of a cushion on my card limit until then might come in handy.

"Triple points," Jack says with an eyebrow wag at me as he gives the lady his loyalty card.

Free of our mountain of luggage, we make our way through the long security line, then to our gate. There's no opportunity for Jack to schmooze the gate agent for a seat next to me because some other passenger is arguing with her for a solid half-hour. Since he was just doing it to tease me, he doesn't seem too broken up about it. We'll be sitting apart, and because this is a direct, red-eye flight, the teasing should be at a minimum.

The agent announcing each group's boarding time finally calls ours, and we head there together, our carry-ons rumbling with dozens of others down the jetway and onto the plane.

"Looks like you'll have to bug some other innocent passenger," I say with feigned disappointment when I reach my row.

"What can I say? Sometimes the luck just doesn't run my way." He smiles and looks past me in a way that makes me wary.

I glance at my seatmate. It's a middle-aged lady with a leopard-print bodysuit and hair so teased it's invading my seat space. And don't forget the strappy stilettos she's already shed. Her toes are enjoying their freedom, wiggling in a way that highlights the pedicure that matches her hot pink lipstick. Her phone starts ringing, full-volume, and the sound of The Pussycat Dolls' *Don't Cha* fills the airplane.

Heaven help us all.

It takes her a minute to answer because her nails are nearly as long as her fingers. I'm tempted to swipe the screen for her just to make the song stop.

“*Bon voyage.*” Jack squeezes my elbow and continues to his place, two rows behind, where there’s an open seat between two very ordinary-looking people.

I look at it longingly for a second, then take in a deep breath of cheap hairspray—I’ll take it over foot smell—and sit to listen, along with the rest of the passengers, to Leopard Lady’s conversation about all the *juicy goss*, as she puts it, that’s fomented during her absence. At least she won’t be able to do this once we take off.

You know what she *will* be able to do, though? Rest her bare foot on her knee so it might as well be in my face. Serenity now! Why couldn’t Jack be just a bit more charming? Maybe then we’d be sitting together.

We’re just a few minutes from take-off, and I’m pretty involved in Leopard Lady’s story when someone taps my shoulder.

I find Jack standing at my side. Leopard Lady stops mid-sentence, her eyes traveling up Jack, then back down. Do I detect the hint of a blush in his cheeks?

“Hello, there,” Leopard Lady says, putting out the hand that, until moments ago, was massaging her bare foot. “I *did* order a tall glass of water.”

Jack’s eyes widen. He’s a gazelle in the leopard’s kill-zone. It’s tempting to watch this play out, but I also owe him, so I grab both of his hands. “Hey, honey.”

His gaze drops to me, and he blinks. “Hey. Um, I was just gonna tell you that the guy on the aisle seat next to me moved, so there’s an open spot.”

“Oh!” Leopard Lady says, completely abandoning her friend as she drops her phone into her purse. “That’s wonderful news! I definitely prefer an aisle seat.” She gets up, and I’m barely holding it together. Jack Allred, the guy who has a cheeky response to everything, is completely still, utterly silent as the next few hours of his life flash before his eyes. They’re full of shiny toenails and, more than likely, a lipstick stain on his shirt. On the cheek, if Leopard Lady is quick.

It's a delightful vision. Temptation hath never struck thusly, but I get up reluctantly. "Perfect! You can have *this* aisle seat, and I can go sit with my boyfriend." I scrunch my nose and wrap my arm around Jack's as I look at the lady. "He's really needy."

He covers my hand with his, squeezing it in a way that says *please don't leave me*. "How could I *not* be with a beautiful woman like this on my arm?"

I try to pull my hand out from under his, but he keeps a tight hold, grinning at the lady like *aren't we just the cutest?*

"This way, everyone wins," I say.

Leopard Lady does not look like she's won. "*You're with him?*"

Um, okay. She was just overkill before, but now she's offensive. Those claws aren't purely for show, apparently.

"Aren't I the luckiest?" Jack says. "Safe flight, now." He guides me toward our seats, still holding my hand. "*Honey*, is it? I took you for a *babe* girl."

"And *I* took *you* for a guy who wouldn't need to be saved from a woman with animal print and acrylic nails."

"Nah. I just figured if I looked helpless, you'd rescue me."

I pull my hand away, making sure the lady's not watching.

"You've got soft hands, you know," Jack says.

"Shut up." I pull the arm rest between us, and he frowns.

"That'll make it a lot less comfortable for you to rest your head on my shoulder and catch up on those z's you missed this morning." He rubs his shoulder invitingly. To be fair, it *does* look like a decent spot for a girl's head to rest.

"I bet that Leopard Lady would gladly take you up on that." I unclip my seatbelt and stand up. "Lemme just see if she wants to swit—"

Jack's strong hands pull me down by the arms. "Whoa there. I'm just having fun with you. No need to jump straight for the big guns."

I scrunch my nose and look at his arms, which are, to be honest, a perfect, muscular size. “I don’t see any big guns nearby.”

He throws his head back, laughing. “You fight dirty, Sheppard.”

The safety announcements start, ending our conversation, and I pull out my phone to text my younger sister, Tori.

SIENA

Just about to take off

TORI

Did Jack ever come? Or did you have to call an Uber after all?

SIENA

He came. Thirty-four minutes late.

And he stayed.

TORI

?

SIENA

He’s sitting next to me right now

He changed his flight

TORI

Um, wow. Should I be worried?

SIENA

About...?

TORI

You.

I scoff softly and glance at Jack. He's got his head resting against the back of his seat, his eyes closed.

Why does everyone seem to think I can't handle Jack Allred? He's just your average annoying, over-confident, attractive, funny, surprisingly thoughtful—okay, I'm getting off track here. The point is, I've known plenty of guys like Jack. They're the peacocks of men, with fancy feathers to draw in females and a pair of fast legs to carry them far away when the fun ends. I recently learned that peacocks can run ten miles per hour. Ten!

SIENA

Your belief in me is inspiring, Tor.

TORI

Hey, you know what happened the last time you two were alone.

SIENA

Yeah, we packed a half-dozen suitcases full of wedding paraphernalia.

TORI

You know what I mean. Just be careful.

I never should have told her about that night, but Madi was still at her photography club meeting when I got home, and I had to tell *someone*. I wonder what things would be like if Madi *had* been home when I'd come through the door, Dr Pepper covering my feet, stars in my eyes, and hair extensions hanging over the sides of my purse.

SIENA

Just pray the captain keeps the seatbelt sign on because otherwise, I won't be able to stop myself from jumping on top of him.

eyeroll emoji

TORI

You're a dork. But don't say I didn't warn you.

I laugh softly through my nose and turn my phone to airplane mode.

“Something funny?” Jack's eyes are open now.

I shake my head and put my phone away, hoping he didn't see anything. His ego doesn't need any help. “So, what's your plan once we get there?” Tori at least got me thinking about what happens after this twelve-hour plane ride. Exactly how much time will I be spending with Jack?

“You tell *me*, spreadsheet master,” he says. “Consider me your newly minted assistant.” He straightens an imaginary tie at his throat.

“You're my Dwight?”

“Sure, if you're cool being Michael Scott. I took you for more of an Angela, though.”

I punch his arm as he laughs. “And I took *you* for more of a Ryan.”

His smile fades, and he shakes his head, even though there's still a teasing glint in his eye. “Too far, Sheppard. Too. Far.”

“So, what did Madi say about you changing your flight?”

He shrugs as he plays with the tray table latch. “Nothing.”

I simply refuse to believe that. “You mean you didn't tell her.”

“I’ve been kind of busy changing my flight and getting things ready to run without me while I’m gone. I got like an hour of sleep last night.”

I cock an eyebrow. “How long does it take you to compose a simple text, Jack?”

He shifts in his seat, messing with the safety info card in the seat pocket. “It’s *not* a simple text.”

Someone in the row in front of us turns, gives us the evil eye through the space between the seats, then clears his throat meaningfully. Apparently, one person on the entire plane is listening to the safety demonstration, and he happens to be seated in front of us.

Jack waves in acknowledgement. “Sorry ‘bout that, sir.”

I lean toward Jack and, with my eyes on the row in front of us, I whisper. “It’s as simple as you make it. *Hey, I changed my flight to help with the wedding. See?*” I get a whiff of his aftershave, and suddenly I’m on a lamp-lit street with Dr Pepper spraying my feet and his lips on mine.

I pull back to a safer distance, not sure if I’m intrigued or annoyed that he still wears the same aftershave seven years later.

My safe distance is compromised when he leans toward me. “Yeah, and how do you propose I let her know I’ll be showing up with *you?*”

“I thought you said Madi had no reason to worry.”

“Not about *me...*” His eyes are teasing me again, and from such a close distance that I notice for the first time how dark brown they are.

Poop. I’ll call them poop. And I’ll stay away from them in case they smell, too.

“You’re somethin’ else, Jack. If Madi trusts one of us, it’s *me*. For good reason.”

“She trusts *both* of us more than we deserve.” The teasing look is gone, and I know exactly why. We share a secret, and even though it was just one dumb night seven years ago and its

power should be entirely gone, in moments like this, it almost feels like every year we've kept it has *increased* its power.

"You know," Jack says in a low voice, "she didn't talk to me for almost a year after things with Carly went down the drain."

Ah, Carly. I've never met the girl, but I know plenty about her. She was Madi's best friend in high school. She and Jack dated just after her senior year. Then he broke up with her, and she ditched Madi as a friend.

"So," Jack says, "even if *we* know she has no reason to worry—"

"Anything to even remind her of what happened might be enough to bother her."

He nods, sits up, and rests his head against the headrest just as the engines gear up for takeoff. "I want to be a good brother to her."

I'm not sure if he even meant to say that aloud, given how soft it was.

"Well," I say, "I've got a spreadsheet full of ways for you to do just that. Besides, Madi's a rational woman, Jack. She might tease you for the past, but I don't think she's worried about it. She'll be glad to have your help."

"Maybe so," he says. "But I have a tendency to ruin things for her."

The engines gear up, drowning everything out, and I take out my Kindle.

We haven't even reached cruising altitude when Jack's shoulder bumps into mine. I glance at him just as his head tips over, and he slumps onto me.

Oh, joy.

And just like that, I'm in a predicament. Do I wake him up like a jerk? Or do I accept the role of Jack Allred's pillow for the time being?

Thankfully, my bony shoulder rouses him, and he sits up, blinking. “Sorry.” The man only slept an hour last night, and he looks exhausted, and yet somehow still very beautiful.

He reclines his seat the full inch our coach tickets allow, then closes his eyes again, and I go back to reading my book. Narrow escape.

I’ve read almost a chapter when, from the corner of my eye, I note Jack’s body tipping again. Except this time, it’s tipping away from me and onto the unsuspecting passenger next to him.

The young woman’s anxious gaze moves from Jack’s ever-nearing body to me, pure terror there. I could shake him awake, but he’ll just fall asleep again, and since he’s clearly incapable of sitting up while he sleeps, I only have one option.

Pulling up the seat divider between us, I grab his arm and pull him toward me. He doesn’t wake, nor does he resist.

And that is how I find myself with Jack Allred sleeping on my shoulder and, eventually, on my lap. It looks terribly uncomfortable, his legs in a sitting position and the rest of his body in a lying position. But he sleeps like that for almost three hours while I read and try to eat my dinner from *his* tray since I can’t use my own.

Once I’ve eaten and the flight attendants clear things away, the sleepiness sets in. I’m still catching up on sleep from the campaign, not to mention the precious half-hour that was stolen from me this morning.

I eye Jack’s comatose form with envy. He looks so peaceful there, so... sweet? I’ve never had the opportunity to study him without him winking at me or doing something similarly annoying. Which is exactly what makes seeing him like this so strange. No teasing comments, no boyish grins, no provocative remarks. It’s Jack Allred stripped down.

I shut my eyes. *Not stripped like that, dumb brain. That’s not a road for us to follow.*

What I meant was that Jack asleep is Jack without the peacock tail, and it’s kind of nice.

I'm just having fun with you. His words from earlier pop into my head. They're annoyingly similar to the words Mitch said to me when we broke up a few weeks ago. If you can even call it a breakup. Apparently, we weren't ever really together. He thought we were *just having fun*, because what's more "fun" than saying *I love you*? It's a hoot!

But Mitch is not the first guy to say something like that to me. I don't know what it is about me that screams *I'm not interested in anything serious! Play with my heart!* But that's the message men are getting, loud and clear. 10-4, good buddy. Six months before Mitch, it was Adam, and before that, it was Dallin.

Jack shifts slightly in my lap.

It's for the best—how things happened with Jack and me. Okay, not the *best*. The best would have been nothing happening in the first place. But I can definitely see how, if it hadn't turned out that Madi was his sister, I would've fallen for Jack Allred. Maybe even fallen hard. It wouldn't have ended well. My relationships never *have* ended well. They've just ended quickly. And things with Jack? Well, they ended before they ever began.

As for now, Jack's here to help with the wedding, and even though it would be a lot easier if he was a little more Shrek and a little less Flynn Ryder, it's nothing I can't manage.

If there's anything I've learned in politics, it's that strategy is key. Jack and I aren't running against each other for office—in fact, we're going to be working together—but any campaign manager worth her salt is aware of her candidate's weaknesses. And, much as I hate to admit it, I have a history of getting tangled up with guys who are *just having a good time*.

My strategies, I decide, will be two-fold: first, keep busy with the spreadsheet tasks. That's why I'm here—for Madi—and that's why Jack's here, too.

Second, don't let Jack get away with anything. A good candidate doesn't let her opponent get away with cheap shots.

I'll give as good as I get, so if Jack teases me, well... two can play that game.

My eyes are slipping closed, and my body is begging for me to move into a sleeping position by the time Jack rouses. He tips his neck from side to side and sits up straight, cringing.

“My turn,” I murmur as I set my pillow on his lap.

His laugh is swallowed by a yawn. “Fair enough.”

“YOU ARE INSANE,” Siena says.

My hands grip the wheel. “I would be insane *not* to. I can’t come to France and *not* see Paris.”

“Eyes on the road, mister. You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

Up ahead, above the lines of cars in front of us, the top of the Arc de Triomphe comes into view. “We’re about to spend two weeks working like dogs. Don’t you think that earns us a quick, romantic drive around Paris?” I wag my eyebrows. I’m not really in the loop on Siena’s love life, but I managed to subtly pry the information from Mom that she’s not dating anyone as of a few weeks ago. I’m not sure if Siena kicked the guy to the curb or the other way around, but I’m glad I don’t have to feel guilty for provoking her a little.

“Yeah,” she says, “because what’s more romantic than getting into a car crash in a foreign country?”

“Oh, ye of little faith! Watch and learn.”

She shakes her head. “If we get into an accident and Madi’s stuff is ruined, I will throw you under the bus faster than Regina George.”

I frown. “Didn’t she get hit? Wasn’t really thrown under.”

“What are you, the *Mean Girls* plot police? I will drive the bus into you myself, then. Happy now?”

I shrug. “It’s just not the best metaphor.” Siena’s sitting forward in her seat, looking ahead like she doesn’t trust my

driving for a second. “I thought you were the adventurous one between you and Madi.”

“I am,” she snaps. “But *someone* has to be the responsible adult in this situation.”

“Being responsible and enjoying life aren’t mutually exclusive, you know. Live a little. I promise I won’t let us get hurt.” The Arc de Triomphe looms large while the lanes of cars pour into the biggest traffic circle I’ve seen in my life. “Here we go!” There are no real lanes, just utter chaos, filling me with adrenaline as I merge into the roundabout amidst honking and the instructions of Siena’s phone GPS.

We find ourselves in the middle of it all, and there’s no way for me to exit when the GPS tells me to—not if I want to keep my promise to Siena and keep us safe. Instead, I take us around again, hoping for better luck and more merciful drivers this time.

No such luck. Not on the third go, either. This is the wild, wild west of Europe, and it’s every car for itself.

“So,” Siena says conversationally, “I actually have a wedding I have to attend in a couple of weeks. Any chance we can get out of this roundabout by then?”

I chuckle, check my blind spot and rearview mirror, then stomp on the gas pedal.

“Jack!” Siena shouts as she lurches back. She’s being dramatic. This van we’re driving does *not* pack the punch I had been hoping for. It was the only option if we wanted to fit these suitcases, though.

Despite the van’s subpar acceleration abilities, I pull ahead of the car next to me and make my way toward the outer rim of the circle. All of this is accomplished amidst Siena’s sound effects, more honking, and, eventually, laughter from both of us as I realize that, despite my more aggressive driving, I’m going to have to do a *fourth* round.

I finally exit the circle as a man driving much more aggressively than I am rolls down his window and shouts what I’m assuming are French expletives.

“See?” I say to Siena as I send him a friendly wave. “Safe and sound.”

“And with more chances to see the Arc de Triomphe than anybody could ever ask for,” she replies in a voice that’s breathy from reluctant laughter.

I glance at her, feeling a sense of satisfaction at the smile on her face. “I aim to please.”

“It seemed like you were aiming to kill us both.”

“It may have *appeared* that way to the inexperienced eye, but I was very much in control the whole time.”

“It *was* a long time to be in control.”

“Hey, none of your sass, Sheppard. I was trying not to scare you.”

“I was mostly afraid we would spend the rest of our lives in that roundabout.”

We make our way along the Seine, and amidst her backseat driving, Siena points out some of the landmarks she recognizes—the Obelisk, the Tuileries Gardens, the Louvre, Orsay Museum, and so on. We discuss and decide against stopping for food in the city. We can find a place with less intimidating parking en route to the chateau.

Siena chooses a playlist, and I’m pleasantly surprised at the number of songs I know and like. We cruise south, and even though I’m tired, the music, the scenery, and joining in with Siena’s unabashed singing whenever I know the song, give me enough energy to stay awake.

When our stomachs start rumbling, Siena does some research and chooses a place just off the freeway for us to stop for gas and lunch. It’s a quaint little cafe in a small village where minimal English is spoken. We stumble our way through the interaction with the waiter and order two decent meals, then head out for the second half of the five-hour drive.

As we near the chateau, the landscape changes, transforming from wide, flat fields to hills, forests, vast fields of bright yellow flowers, and finally, hilltop castles

overlooking the valleys below. One of them even has a sign on the side of the road offering medieval tournaments for birthday parties and events.

“I thought you’d been here before?” I say as Siena lowers her head to look through the window at yet another chateau perched above the road.

“To Paris, yeah. Not to this region. No wonder Madi and Rémy want to move here.”

The GPS takes us onto smaller roads that pass through picturesque villages with rivers winding through and purple wisteria hanging from warm-stone houses.

The roads become narrower as we delve deeper into the countryside until we finally reach the drive leading up to Chateau Vidal. It’s gravel and lined on either side by trees as we wind up a hill.

When the chateau comes into view, my eyebrows shoot up. I don’t know what I was picturing when I found out Madi and Rémy had plans to have their wedding at a chateau, but this was definitely not it.

It’s got towers and turrets and enough windows to give a salaried employee work. For a split second before the hedges block them, I get a glimpse of meticulously manicured gardens and a fountain. It looks like something out of a fantasy novel.

“Holy cheese snips,” I say as I press the brakes and stop the car in front of the entrance.

Siena’s head whips around.

It came out by accident, but I don’t let her see that. I act like I did it on purpose because part of me thinks it would be weird if she knew the ridiculous phrase she said *once* seven years ago has stuck in my head ever since.

“Don’t let Madi hear you say that,” she says. “She knows that phrase of mine all too well.” She turns to admire the view outside the van. “But holy cheese snips is right.”

As I put the van in park, a couple in their late fifties comes out of the chateau and start walking toward us. I open my door

and step out of the van, which is so completely out of place among the Mercedes and Aston Martins that it would be laughable if it wasn't so embarrassing. I don't belong either in my gray joggers and black hoodie.

Behind the couple comes a young man dressed like a bellhop. It occurs to me that he should probably be tipped, but in my urgency to change my ticket and take a spur-of-the-moment trip to France, I overlooked getting any euros.

There's no time to stress about that because the couple—the chateau owners, I can only assume, based on how they hold themselves—are here, smiling at us.

“*Bonjour*,” the man says. He's graying near the temples, and his glasses have solid, dark rims. I'm guessing he was a heartthrob in his younger years, especially if he owned a chateau. Or maybe owning a chateau in France is like owning a second car in the States.

I let my gaze run over the clothing he and his wife are wearing. It's the type of understated attire that screams *I'm made of so much money, I don't have to worry about looking flashy*.

“*Bonjour*,” Siena says.

“You are here for the Allred/Scott wedding?” the woman asks in such a heavy accent, I think she's speaking French at first.

Siena and I nod simultaneously, and the couple smiles again.

“We are the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Vidal,” the man says. “We welcome you warmly to our home.” He gestures behind him. “We are very pleased you have chosen Chateau Vidal for your wedding.”

Siena and I glance at each other, both of us trying to understand if they're under the impression *we're* the couple getting married. I smile mischievously.

“Oh, we aren't getting married,” Siena clarifies, shooting down my idea like she's in a standoff in the Old West. “I'm

Siena Sheppard, the maid of honor—or one of the witnesses, I guess?”

Comprehension dawns in their eyes, then their gazes move to me.

“I’m Jack Allred, brother of the bride.” *Whoa*. Madi’s been engaged for a while now, but referring to her as the bride makes it feel so much more real. My little sister is getting married.

The hosts look at us, then at each other, then back to us. “You are... together?”

I’ve barely opened my mouth when Siena says, “No.” It’s a very firm use of the word. Offensively so. “Is there a problem?”

“No, no, no,” says the vicomtesse. “It is only that we did not know two of you would be coming. We have only the one place reserved.”

Even in my peripheral vision, I can see Siena’s eyes widening. She’s really doing her best to keep me humble right now, isn’t she? And here I thought we were having a good time.

“Do you have any other vacant rooms?” I ask.

She inclines her head like she’s got a heavy crown she has to keep on top of it. “We do, and, given that you are holding the wedding here, you would receive a special rate.”

“That’s really generous.” I pause, realizing I have no idea what a room in a chateau costs. “So... what would a regular room cost with that special rate?”

“With the discount, it would be 150 euros per night.”

“Oh,” I squeak. Like a mouse. A mouse who’s doing the math of what 150 euros multiplied by fourteen is. This is a very intelligent mouse. But unfortunately, this is also a mouse who did not plan on spending thousands of dollars to stay at a chateau. I probably should have thought things through a bit more before changing my flight, which, by the by, was *also* expensive.

Apparently, my rodent response didn't go unnoticed, since the vicomte smiles at me kindly. "Of course, the suite Miss Sheppard has contains two separate rooms." He and his wife glance at her, and so do I.

I really don't want Siena to feel obligated to let me stay in the same place as her, so I search for signs she's uncomfortable.

"It's a suite of some sort?" she asks.

"A chalet. Two bedrooms, a small kitchen, and a bathroom."

Siena looks at me, and I can't quite tell what's passing between us, but it's something.

"You can discuss it together and let us know what you prefer," the vicomtesse says. "For now, we will show you to your suite, Miss Sheppard."

I grab a couple of the suitcases to help the bellhop, who, unfortunately for him in this scenario, only has two arms. That'll really affect my tip.

Or maybe not. He clearly has the dragging-suitcases-over-gravel gig down pat, whilst I do not. Siena glances at me a couple of times, barely able to hide her amusement as I wrestle with the two suitcases I'm dragging along like tantruming two-year-olds.

We reach the suite, which is, to put it in lingo I hate, totes adorbs. Flowering vines climb the gray exterior walls and latticed windows. Over the door, wisteria hangs like icicle lights.

After a quick tour of the inside, which is cozy but not as small as I thought, the vicomte and vicomtesse head for the door. "We will leave you to settle in and discuss what you would like to do. Would you like to have a tour of the chateau and grounds? In, say, half an hour or so?"

"That would be wonderful," Siena says.

My eyes are fixed on the bed I can see through the nearest door. I'd much rather take a nap than go on a tour—*if* Siena

will grant me permission to stay in this little cottage. Based on how she's acted since our arrival here, I'm not particularly hopeful. Maybe I can convince her to let me stay for a night while I look for a vacation rental in the area. There's gotta be a room that's less than 150 euros a night.

Siena shuts the door behind the Vidals, then turns and grabs her suitcase. "I call the bedroom next to the bathroom."

I'm not speechless very often, but this is one of those times.

She looks at me blankly. "What? You came to help, right?"

"Y-y-yeah," I say, sounding like a thirteen-year-old whose crush just talked to him. I'm surprised my voice didn't crack.

"Then having you here makes more sense."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It'll be nearly impossible for you to escape helping me. If you're in some random room in another part of the castle, I'll probably never see you again."

I laugh. "Your opinion of me gets more and more inspiring by the minute."

She wheels my suitcase toward me. "Just giving you plenty of opportunity to exceed expectations. Better get unpacked before the tour." She pulls her suitcase toward the room next to the bathroom.

"You mean before my nap?"

She turns toward me. "You're kidding, right? If you take a nap now, you'll be jet lagged for a week. If you can stay up until tonight, you'll basically be back to normal by tomorrow."

"It's just a little cat nap."

She grimaces. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you." She opens the bedroom door and disappears, her voice trailing behind her as she adds, "Not exceeding any expectations so far, Just Jack."

I chuckle and pull my suitcase through the door on my right. The bed has less of a collapse-here-with-your-shoes-on

vibe and more of a this-shimmery-bedspread-was-handstitched-by-castle-servants vibe, but a bed is a bed.

It's a little balmy, so I go to the window and turn the lever, opening it enough to let in a breeze. I kick off my shoes out of respect for the pretty bedcovers and fall on the multitude of pillows.

It's only been ten seconds before I realize what I have to do before I take a nap. Reluctantly, I haul my body up and go in search of my phone, which I haven't looked at in hours. It's made its way to the bottom of my backpack, so I pull it out and hurl myself onto the bed.

Texting has never been a forte of mine, but I don't remember it ever being *this* hard. How exactly do I tell my sister I'm here? And not just here, but here with Siena? Sleeping in the same suite as her? It's not like it's *actually* a problem, but given the rocky history between Madi and me, she'll probably jump to all the wrong conclusions.

I write a few texts only to delete them immediately. Blowing out a breath through my lips, I run a hand through my hair, which needs to be washed. But not right now.

Maybe I *should* have Siena help me write this text. Or maybe *she* should break the news to Madi. Madi's much less likely to be upset with her than with me. But that's the coward's way out.

I sit up, trying to focus my mind just as there's a knock on the front door. It's probably the owners back to give Siena a tour.

Siena's footsteps reach my ears, then the front door opens.

"Hi." Her muffled voice is full of surprise and uncertainty.

"*Bonjour, Madame,*" comes the response. It's definitely not the voice of a middle-aged man. Maybe the bellhop is back for his tip. "My name is Philippe." His French accent is weaker than the vicomte's and the vicomtesse's. "I have come to take you on the tour."

I frown and sit up again, leaving my phone on the bed and walking to the window for a glimpse of the guy. It's not the

bellhop, that's for sure. This guy has dark hair that's long enough in the front to brush back. He's wearing a slim-fit gray suit with a skinny tie. He might as well have a rose in his mouth for the way he's looking at Siena right now.

"Oh," she says in surprise.

"My parents had to leave for an event, but I assured them I would take care of you."

Oh, this guy is good. I can imagine just what kind of *tour* he plans to take Siena on. Maybe it's the fact that she slept on my lap for four straight hours, but I'm feeling protective. I can't let her get drawn in by some sleek French guy with light eyes and dark hair. She's here on business, not for romance.

I hurry to pull on my shoes, glance in the gilt mirror hanging on the wall by the window to adjust my hair, then open my bedroom door.

SIENA'S BROWS go up slightly.

"Here for the tour," I say brightly. Philippe sizes me up in a split second, a hint of a question in his eyes. I'm pretty sure I can verbalize the precise question: *Are you her boyfriend?*

I'm tempted to act like it, but if I know Siena, she'll make a fool of me the second I try anything. My foot still hurts from when I put my arm around her at the airport check-in counter.

All I really need is for Philippe to know Siena has someone watching out for her. My coming along on this tour should accomplish that well enough.

"I thought you were taking a nap," Siena says.

"I'm not tired anymore. Plus, like you said, it'll be better if I can hold off until tonight to sleep."

She narrows her eyes.

"*Bonjour*," Philippe says, putting out a hand. I reach to shake it, ensuring I have that grip that says *I can do damage* while also maintaining civility. Delicate balance.

"Right," Siena says. "Philippe, this is Jack. He's Madison's brother."

"Ah," Philippe says. "Not your boyfriend, then."

She laughs. "No."

His smile widens as they share a glance that reinforces my choice to come on this "tour." I put on a smile of my own and

wrap my arm around Siena's shoulders. "We've known each other for a long time. She's like a sister to me."

I stare at Philippe, willing him to take my meaning, but his expression stays pleasant. Maybe the sister thing was a bad choice. Is sisters-are-off-limits not a French rule?

"My parents said you might want a different room, Jack," he says. "We have a very nice one in the *donjon*—what you Americans call the dungeon, I think."

You would want to keep me locked up in the dungeon, Philippe. I glance at Siena to see if she's getting the same aggressive vibes I am, but apparently, she sees nothing wrong with the prospect of me sleeping on a grungy floor with my wrists and ankles in rusty chains.

"I'm good here," I say. "Thanks, though."

Philippe dips his head politely.

Siena turns to me. "You really don't have to come."

"But how am I supposed to be an effective assistant if I don't know the venue?" I jerk my head toward the door. "Come on. Let's not keep Philippe waiting."

Philippe mainly addresses himself to Siena as we start, heading for the main part of the chateau first. I try to listen as he gives us a rundown of some of the 900-year history of the place, but I'm also trying to keep tabs on this guy. He's not aggressive in his approach, but he's also not shy about the fact that he admires Siena. Basically, he's riding that line that keeps me on my toes but never gives me enough reason to intervene.

As for Siena, I know from personal experience how quick she is to put me in my place at the first sign of flirtation, so I'm kind of surprised to see how much she lets Philippe get away with. She doesn't even bat an eye when he helps slip her cardigan onto her shoulder or when he offers his hand to help her step into one of the rooms.

If I tried anything like that, I'd come away with a bruised arm, at the very least. I've always assumed the way Siena reacts toward me is the way she'd react toward any guy who

flirts with her, but this tour is giving me some stuff to chew on—like the possibility that I really *do* just bug her.

“How do you remember all this stuff?” Siena asks after Philippe explains the stories behind the swords hanging at the top of the staircase.

“I have been hearing it since I was a boy. Anyone who is going to take over a chateau like this needs to understand the history, of course.”

Siena looks at the tall ceilings. “Crazy that this will all be yours someday.” There’s distinct wonder and awe in her voice. She’s probably thinking what it would be like to own a chateau.

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s a crushing responsibility. I can’t imagine the repairs to a place like this are cheap.”

“No, it is very expensive,” Philippe admits. “And it *is* a large responsibility, as you say.”

Pop. There goes Siena’s dream.

“But it is also a great honor,” he continues, “to take charge of something like Chateau Vidal that carries so much history and heritage within its walls.”

Siena glances at me with a little smile that tells me she thinks Philippe just pulled one over on me. “You said the chateau is 900 years old?” she asks as we come back down the grand stone staircase.

“Not this part of the chateau,” Philippe says. “The ruins are the oldest section. The *donjon*—this building we have just toured—is only 600 years old.”

“Basically brand new.” Her cardigan shifts precariously close to the edge of her shoulder again, and I’m determined that *I* will fix it this time.

But Philippe is too quick for me. He laughs as he readjusts it and smooths it over her shoulder. “You have a wonderful sense of humor, *madame*.”

I barely suppress an eye roll. I mean, she *does* have a good sense of humor, but Philippe has known her for all of twenty

minutes.

“Oh, thanks.” Siena’s expression turns pensive. “Hey, I thought unmarried women were *mademoiselle*?”

Seriously, Siena. She’s basically throwing herself at him. The way Philippe responds to her comment by sending her a sidelong glance tells me he’s interpreting her question the same way. My eyes will get stuck permanently rolled back in my head if this continues. That’d be a shame, because this tour is actually kind of cool, and I want to see everything.

Philippe clasps his hands behind his back. “That is true, and some of the older generation still uses it, but the term *mademoiselle* is frowned upon nowadays, and I did not wish to give offense.”

Siena’s head tips to the side. “Huh. I always thought it was kind of charming.”

He opens the door that leads outside. “Yes, perhaps so, but many believe it is sexist to refer to women differently solely based on whether or not they are married.”

“Hmm,” Siena says as she steps outside. “I can see that, I guess. Where are we heading now?”

“To Vidal’s grounds and gardens, which I think you will like very much.”

In his defense, the grounds are impossible not to like, especially with the sun dropping lower and lower in the sky. It casts halos and soft shadows everywhere. It’s not just the immaculate and tidy hedged statue garden, though. There’s an entirely separate garden with all sorts of flowers planted in the middle of low-lying hedges. There’s a vineyard and fruit trees. A church. Cloisters. A lake with a fountain in the middle. A labyrinth. And, last but not least, ruins.

“*This* is the oldest part of the castle,” Philippe says as we start walking along the outer wall of the chateau. “It was ruined during a battle a long, long time ago.”

Its edges are draped with ivy, softening the roughness of the uneven stone. There’s a gap in the middle of the wall and

beyond it, a swimming pool. When the wall starts up again, it leads to a tower missing a roof.

Siena looks all around with wide eyes and parted lips, and I can't blame her. No one could look at this place and wonder why Madi and Rémy chose it for their wedding.

"From there"—Philippe points to the ruined tower—"you can see the valley below."

"Really?" Siena asks.

"Yes, but it is dangerous now, which is why we have closed it off to the guests." Philippe grimaces apologetically.

"Yeah, of course. Safety first and all that. Well, it's not like you're hurting for beautiful views here."

"No," he says, glancing at her in a way that would make a Hallmark movie director slow-clap.

But I'm not a Hallmark movie director, and I'm feeling pretty done with this tour.

"Well," I say, if only to remind them I'm here, "it's getting close to dinnertime..."

"Oh, right," Siena says, as though she had forgotten about such trivial things as the need to eat. She turns to Philippe. "Thank you for the tour. This will really help with the planning. Your chateau is incredible."

"I am very happy to show it to you, and, of course, I am here if you have any need of me." He takes a little card from the inner pocket of his suit coat and hands it to her. "There is my information."

Real smooth, Phil.

Siena glances at both sides of the card. "Thanks. Or *merci*, I guess."

"*Je vous en prie, madame.* I will leave you to your dinner plans." Philippe gives a little bow and walks toward the dungeon, the modern equivalent of a king walking to his throne.

“Why are you looking at him like that?” There’s a frown on Siena’s brow and an amused smile on her face.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re considering tackling him.”

“I’m not.” Well, now I am.

She cocks a brow. “Then what?”

“Just hadn’t figured that was your type. That’s all.”

“What type?”

I jerk my thumb over my shoulder toward Philippe.

“You mean the handsome, nice, chateau-owning type?”

I chuckle and start walking, and she follows my lead.

“I just think he’s taking the whole French schtick a little far. Don’t you?”

“No, Jack. I *don’t*. You know why? Because it’s not a schtick. He *is* French.”

We pass under a stone arch with enough ivy draping down that I have to push some of it out of the way and hold it there for Siena to pass under. “Yeeeah, but he’s really milking it.” I straighten my shoulders and run a hand through my hair to make it slant to the side. “*Oh, zis old zing?*” I throw my hand carelessly toward the chateau. “*Oui oui oui, I own it all one day. But of course.*”

Siena slugs me with her elbow. “You’re so dumb.” But she’s laughing, which means I have no choice but to keep going.

“*But you, madame*”—I turn toward her and take her cardigan by both shoulders, pulling the sides together—“*you are unlike anyzing I have ever seen.*” I exaggerate the z’s and r’s as much as possible, looking into her eyes. “*You are funny. Ravishingly beautiful. And verrry single.*”

She grabs my hands, reluctantly laughing. “You’re a dork, and he doesn’t sound like that.”

“That’s definitely what *I* heard.” My eyes flit to her smile. She’s got a killer one, and I can’t blame Philippe too much for being instantly attracted to her. *I* was when we first met.

Her smile wavers slightly, and I realize her hands are still on mine, and I’m still holding her cardigan. We haven’t been this close since—

I drop my hands, and she lets go of mine.

“You know who he reminds me of?” I say, brushing off the moment and walking toward our little cottage again. “Brad.”

“Who’s Brad?”

I raise my brows. “You must’ve kissed a lot of people in your life if you can’t even remember their names.”

It takes a second, but the frown on her brow clears. “Spin-the-bottle Brad?” She scoffs. “I don’t even count that as a kiss.”

Suddenly I’m left to wonder whether she counts *our* kiss as a kiss. And why the thought that she might not kind of bugs me.

We reach our door, and she pulls out the key.

“It’s a good thing I’m staying in here, you know,” I say. “I wouldn’t put it past Philippe to come sneaking to your window at night with champagne or something.”

Siena scoffs and opens the door. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“Am I? He was basically pushing me out of this place so I’d stay in the dungeon.”

“He literally only mentioned it *once*, and it’s not really a dungeon. That’s just what they call the tower part of a chateau, which is technically the keep. Why are you being so weird about him? We want to be on good terms with the family, Jack. For Rémy and Madi’s sakes.”

“Riiiiight,” I say with a knowing look. “For *their* sakes.”

She rolls her eyes as we head inside.

9

SIENA

SEVEN YEARS AGO

FRANKLY, it's ridiculous.

I'm sitting in a circle of college students with an empty bottle in the middle. The ratio of women to men is a solid 4 to 1. The odds were way better than this the last time I played spin the bottle, and even then, the girls weren't looking at the men as hungrily as they are right now. The giggly girl Jack and I heard earlier, however, is not pleased. She probably thought she had things in the bag with Brad, and now she's got competition.

Brad is in his element, tossing his wavy hair out of his face so often I worry he's going to tweak that tan, beefy neck of his.

If I'm twelve o'clock, Jack is my six o'clock. He knows I don't want to be here, which is exactly why he's got the hint of a smile on those ridiculous lips. I have a feeling he's going to be staring me down this entire time, relishing the way he flipped things around.

I'm hoping I get to spin the bottle and it lands on him, so I can kiss that stupid smile off his lips. Clearly, this desire is motivated entirely by malice, not by how attractive I find him.

And yet, I can't keep from staring right back at him because, though I'd never admit it, this is the teensiest bit fun, and it feels almost like he and I are the only ones in the circle.

Brad quickly explains the rules, which state that, if a girl spins and the bottle lands on another girl, the *actual* person she kisses will be the nearest guy.

Jack and I share a look. He makes a face that says *makes perfect sense*, and I roll my eyes. Brad is one of three guys in this circle, so his odds are pretty dang good.

Brad spins the bottle first, and it lands on a girl with long, red hair in barrel curls. She's contoured the heck out of her face, but beneath it, I peep the shadow of a few freckles. Both

she and Brad crawl on their knees to the middle of the circle and kiss over the bottle altar.

It lasts a lot longer than is strictly necessary, and Giggly Girl looks away. Seems like Jack was wrong about her falling into the Girls Gone Wild category. She's *already* possessive of Brad.

Brad's rules dictate that the person to the redhead's left spins the bottle next, so a brunette steps up to the plate and gives it a whirl, her eyes pinned on Jack.

Whoa. What was that? The zing I just felt?

But I know what it is. Giggly Girl's vibes must be contagious.

My extensions are starting to pull uncomfortably on my scalp, but I resist the urge to mess with them. Instead, I'll just fantasize about how amazing it will feel to take them out later.

The brunette must have had some practice with spinning bottles because it lands on the girl just left of Jack.

Bullseye Brunette's thick lashes point to Jack. "Guess that means you," she says like she's not a physics expert who calculated the precise amount of force needed to rotate the bottle 540 degrees and make it land shy of him.

Jack's eyes flit to me for a fraction of a second, then back to her. "Guess so."

The two of them crawl toward the center, and it strikes me how stupid they look. What are they, gorillas? Why not just stand up like normal humans?

They meet in the middle, and good gracious! She uses those lashes like a weapon of war. Fluttering Jack into submission is the goal. They go in for the kiss, and the recently spawned jealousy monster claws at me from the inside. Their obligatory kiss is shorter than Brad's, which this chick clearly regrets, since she lingers for a second after Jack pulls away.

A few more bottle spins happen, and Brad gets lucky twice while the guy to my right is called up once. That means it's my

turn next.

I try not to look at Jack, but it's useless. I can't resist a quick glance. The subtle smile is gone, and his eyes are telling me, *Spin it here*.

Can you faint while sitting down? It feels like you can.

I pull my gaze away because, unlike Bullseye Brunette, I am not a spinning pro. Also because I'm just here to have fun and make friends. I'm not trying to become one of the *Say Yes to the Dress* girls, regardless of what my internal monster demands.

I give the bottle a casual, definitely-not-calculated-to-land-on-Jack whirl, and it rotates a few times, then slows down—unlike my heart rate—until it finally lands squarely on—

“Perfect spin!” Brad's gaze tells me he thinks I'm a sly fox who planned this. His mouth stretches into a grin, and he puts out his hands. “Bring it in, girl.”

I suppress my gag reflex and embrace my inner primate, propelling myself forward with my knuckles and knees. Gorillas have fun, right? That's all I'm here for. Good, old-fashioned freshman fun.

Just before Brad comes in for his reward, my eyes snag on Jack, curious whether I'm the only one with an overactive jealousy beast.

But he's looking at his phone. That's a hard “no” if I've ever seen one.

I refocus myself on the gorilla in front of me. Brad's and my lips meet, and I try to walk the line between forming mine into something politely soft and this-is-only-for-the-game firm. I must have erred on the side of the latter since Brad looks mildly disappointed when I pull apart right away.

I get to watch two more girls kiss Jack before the game finally breaks up.

Yay.

I still haven't gotten a text from Madi, but I'm feeling more interested in hearing about her photography club meetup

than I am in playing the next game Brad suggests: truth or dare.

Bullseye Brunette has hunted Jack down for a conversation—in hopes of it leading to more, based on the fluttering of her lashes—so I cut my losses and leave. I don't bother saying bye to anyone because, let's be honest, none of them really care that I'm leaving, which I can't blame them for. I'm one less woman to compete with.

I haven't even reached the end of the sidewalk when I start unclipping my hair extensions, which are itching my scalp like red ants. I know they say beauty is pain, but I say beauty can stuff it.

Overall, the night was...fine? I met a few people and kissed a guy I never wanted to kiss. You win some, you lose some.

“Hey!”

I keep walking because the chances that call is meant for me are slim to none. Besides, I'm pulling out chunks of synthetic hair, which I realize now must look disturbing. I'd rather not show my face.

“Siena!”

I stop dead in my tracks, a clip of hair in hand. The only guys in the vicinity who know my name are Brad and Jack, and I can't decide which option is less appealing in this situation.

It's dark outside except for a streetlamp a dozen yards away, and I'm wondering if I can hide behind the trunk of the tree in the mow strip next to me. But there's just no way.

I look at the lock of hair in my hand. Can I shove it in my purse quickly enough? Does it really matter? I've taken out most of the clips on the left side of my head, which means I have the asymmetrical bob nobody in their right mind would ever ask for. One side of my hair—the real side—sits on my shoulder, while the other falls past my chest.

The jogging footsteps behind me slow, and Jack appears. He's got a Dr Pepper in hand.

His eyes go to my hair, then to my hand, and his brows go up. “That’s certainly *one* way to let your hair down.”

I laugh in spite of myself—in spite of how I have no one else to blame this brand of humiliation on. But it’s too late now, so I hold it up; embracing nutso is better than hiding it. “The clips pull on my scalp. They’ve been itching me like crazy.”

He looks at the hair clump with interest. “How does it stay in?”

I demonstrate the metal clasp mechanism, and it makes a snap with each clip and unclip.

“Looks like a torture device.”

“Welcome to being a woman.” The soda in his hand has a slight bulge to it, and I pull away slightly. “I told you I don’t want anything to do with that can.”

He turns it in his hand. “I think it’s had time to settle by now.”

“I’ll let *you* test that theory.”

“Actually, I had a different idea for what to do with it.”

I raise a brow. “That idea being...?”

He takes a breath and steps toward me. “The only reason I agreed to play that dumb game was with the hope I’d get to kiss you.”

My lungs are gone. Instantly disintegrated. Yet somehow, I eke out the words, “I thought you didn’t fraternize with freshman girls.” Surprisingly, they sound pretty slick. Adrenaline is an amazing thing.

“I don’t.”

Darn him and his catchy responses. “So, what does this have to do with the soda?”

He crouches, setting the can on the ground. Keeping his hand on it the whole time, he spins it until it points directly at my shoes.

There's a red light going off somewhere in my brain saying, "*Warning. Warning. You are being sweet-talked.*" But the strain the extension clips put on my head must have done some permanent damage to its contents, because I don't even care.

I came out tonight to have fun, and Jack is exactly that. Any man who pulls the move he just did without taking himself too seriously *has* to be. Plus, call me crazy, but I kind of don't think he's just sweet-talking me.

I put out my hand. "Do you use this move whenever Brad hosts a spin the bottle party?"

He takes it, and I pull him to a stand. "Not yet. But I will if *you* plan to come every time."

Oh, he's good.

Our gazes meet for a few seconds as we scope each other out, and then our eyes close and our lips meet.

It's soft, slow, making my lips tingle with every anticipated bit of contact until there's no more tingle, only warmth and the smell of his aftershave.

His fingers touch my neck, and chills trickle across my skin. He covers the chills with his palm, firmly but gently inviting me toward him and into the kiss.

I take a step forward, and my foot hits the Dr Pepper can. A hissing sounds, followed by spray hitting the ankles of my jeans.

I move to pull away, but a hand on my waist stops me.

Fine. I was only pulling back on his behalf. It was a polite gesture, but since he clearly doesn't care about being sprayed by a little soda, I give up and kiss him more.

The hand at my neck trails up into my hair and immediately hits one of my remaining metal extension clips. Torn between annoyance and embarrassment, I start to pull back again, but Jack doesn't want me to. Instead, lips locked on mine, he undoes the clips himself.

He takes one out, gently pulling it from my hair as his lips explore mine, and I have to suppress a groan. The combined bliss of relief from discomfort and Jack's lips on mine has me feeling things I didn't come to this party expecting to feel.

This near-stranger is undoing my extensions and me at the same time.

I TURN over in my bed, determined not to let jet lag get the best of me. If I just keep my eyes closed, my body will eventually understand I mean business.

That's what I'm telling myself.

I grab my phone from under my pillow and open one eye just a sliver. I'm a vampire, and any amount of light could do irreparable damage to the sleep I'm set on getting. I glance at the time through my eye-slit, then drop the phone next to me in utter disbelief. It's just after midnight, but I've been at this since 8:30, and even though my body is sleep-deprived, it's telling me it needs to be fed. Yelling, really. I forgot how miserable jet lag can be.

A sudden sound nearby makes me freeze.

Holy cheese snips. I can't tell if it was outside or inside. Was Jack right? If I pull back the curtain, am I going to see Philippe staring at me, a bottle of champagne in hand and a rose between his teeth? I didn't get creep vibes from him, but maybe I misjudged him.

I toss off the covers, not sure if I should fix my messy sleep braid and straighten my pajamas or run to shake Jack awake for protection. He's probably a deep sleeper. Does he sleep with his shirt on or off?

Not important right now, Siena. Or ever.

There's a knock on my door, making my heart rate skyrocket.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“Eet eez I, my petit escargot! King Philippe!”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I roll my eyes. I walk over to the other side of the room, flipping on the light and opening the door.

Off. Apparently, Jack sleeps with his shirt off. He’s got a jacket on, but it’s only half-zipped, giving me the teaser I never knew I wanted of his pectorals and the top of his abs. He looks far too chipper for the time of night and amount of sleep we’ve both had in the last two days. “Disappointed?”

“Immensely,” I lie, turning away from the temptation to explore the geometry of the body visible under his jacket. “Why are you knocking on my door at midnight?”

“Because we have a situation.”

I turn around just shy of my bed. What sort of situation could we possibly have when we’ve only been here a matter of hours? “Did you clog the toilet?”

He scrunches his nose. “You think I’d come to you for help unclogging the toilet?”

“I’m *very* helpful in a crisis.”

“Good. Because I’d say we’re at DEFCON 5.”

“You know that’s the lowest DEFCON level, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” he says in a totally unconvincing tone. “Okay, no, I didn’t know that. It sounded cool, though.”

“So, what’s the emergency?” I nod at the phone in his hand. “Forgot how to text?”

“Very funny,” he says dryly. “Just because I don’t use my phone as much as you doesn’t mean I don’t know *how* to use it. In fact, I just sent a text.”

I put up my hands and sit on the bed. “I *really* don’t need to know about your booty calls, Jack.”

“First, it wasn’t a booty call. Second”—he grimaces—“you’re gonna wanna know about this text.”

I narrow my eyes, and he drops his gaze, avoiding mine.

My suspicions are sufficiently roused. “Jackson ... why do you look so guilty right now?”

“It’s just Jack, remember?” He taps his thumb on the back of his phone. “Anyway, I was trying to text Madi, and there was a little... mishap.”

“What sort of mishap?” I say as calmly as possible.

“Well,” he says slowly, “I couldn’t decide what to say exactly, so I was just trying out a few different options.”

I stand slowly. “Jack...”

He taps his thumb on his phone. “I accidentally pressed send before I was ready.”

Ever so slowly, I walk toward him. “What did you say?”

He looks at me like I might pounce on him at any minute. He’s not wrong. “It was a total accident.” He backs up, the wall stopping his escape. “I promise.”

I put out my hand as I get nearer, keeping my eyes trained on him. “Let me see it.”

“Nevermind,” he says, taking a slow step the only direction he can—to the side. “I value my life too much. Goodnight!”

He whirls around, and I make a grab for the phone, but he’s too quick, dodging out of my grasp. I go after him, chasing him as he sidesteps my suitcase and moves the desk chair into my path.

But I’ve got my eyes on the prize, and I use the chair like a parkour master, propelling myself off the seat with my hand. Jack has no choice but to make a dive onto the bed, and, like any good strategist, I’m half a second ahead of him. We fall onto the mattress at the same time, and I grab for the phone as he tries to keep it out of my grasp.

We wrestle, a tangle of limbs, grunts, and, from Jack, something that sounds suspiciously like laughter. It only makes me try harder, and, by some miracle—because I refuse

to think Jack is letting me win—I whip one leg over his stomach and pin his forearms to the bed.

“Dang, Sheppard.” His chest rises and falls against the open zipper, which must have unzipped even more during our struggle because now I can see... a lot. My eyes are insisting on mapping out the new territory.

I let go of one of his arms and grab the edge of the zipper, zipping it all the way to his neck. Removing distractions is a solid strategy.

His arm stays in place while one of his eyebrows goes up like he knows exactly why I just did what I did. I curse silently.

He will *never* let me live that down.

Smiling wickedly, he puts his free hand on the zipper and stares me straight in the eye. The clicking of the zipper fills the air as he pulls it downward at a leisurely pace that is equal parts sexy and teasing.

For a split second, I consider letting him continue. Zipping something all the way to the neck is the equivalent of pulling a turtleneck up over your face. It looks all wrong. That’s all this is. It’s about restoring harmony to the fashion universe. The zipper should be unzipped a third of the way. At least.

Get it together, Siena!

My eyes flick to his, and I snatch his arm and pin it.

He laughs more. “What are you, the modesty police?”

“I’ll take *that*.” I grab the phone from his other hand and roll off and away from him.

“You don’t have my passcode,” he says, staying in place.

I consider holding the phone to his face to unlock it that way, but I’m not confident I could keep it from him. I turn toward him, resting on my elbow. It’s not a very threatening stance, unfortunately. “Show me the text or so help me, Jack, I will—”

“Zip up my zipper?” He’s still lying back, his hands clasped under his head like he hasn’t a care in the world.

The bed beneath us starts to vibrate. Frowning, Jack reaches beneath his back and pulls out my phone.

Madi’s name and picture fill the screen. I look at Jack. He looks at me.

I drop his phone and grab mine from him. “You have three seconds to tell me what your text said or, so help me, I will tell Madi you tried to seduce me.”

His eyes widen, a panicked look in them. “You wouldn’t.”

“Three, two—”

“I told her you begged me to come with you to take over for André.” The words spill out of his mouth.

“*What?*” I sit up, and Jack follows suit, putting up his hands defensively.

“She won’t get mad at you. She loves you. You’re her best friend.”

“And you’re her *brother*.”

“We both know she’d choose you over me any day.”

I stare at him, not sure whether he’s serious or kidding. But there’s no time to delve into that murky mystery. I take a deep breath, and still holding his gaze, I swipe to answer.

“You’re awake!” Madi says with surprise. “I thought I’d be leaving a voicemail.”

“Jet lag,” I explain, tilting away from Jack as he leans to try to listen. “How’s the wedding going?”

“Exhausting,” she says. “But also *really* well! It’s been so fun to see Laura and John again. We head to London tomorrow. We’ll have some time to see more of the city before we fly out to Paris Sunday.”

“Sounds like a blast,” I say, feeling weirder by the minute that I’m with her brother and she doesn’t know it.

“I can’t believe you’re in France, and I’m in England! I owe you so big for all you’re doing. Which brings me to the reason for my call.”

I glance at Jack, whose eyes plead with me.

“Soooo, *super* weird question,” Madi says, “but... Jack isn’t there with you, is he?”

My heart goes wild, wondering if she somehow can sense that he’s right beside me, or that he paid me a midnight visit without a shirt on, or that, if she had called a minute sooner, we both would have been breathless from wrestling on the bed. My cheeks are heating up, and Jack’s giving me a quizzical look.

But I’m rational enough to know that’s not what Madi means. She’s just asking if he’s here in France with me, so I take a breath. With Jack’s intent eyes on me, though, I’m feeling as nervous as I did watching the primary votes roll in.

He leans in so his ear rests against my hand holding the phone.

“Yeah, he is.” I try to keep my tone on that balance beam of neutrality—not overly enthusiastic about Jack’s presence, but also not growling with annoyance.

There’s silence for a few seconds. “You’re *kidding*. Oh my gosh, Siena! I was convinced he was messing with me when I got his text. I feel terrible! If you were overwhelmed with things, you could have told me. Rémy showed me the spreadsheet today, and I could hardly believe how much stuff you’re doing.”

I pull away and shoot Jack a look to let him know he will pay for this. The last thing I want is for Madi to be stressed about *my* stress levels. “No no no. I’m not overwhelmed. It’s just that, when he came over to bring those boxes that day, he seemed like he could use a bit more purpose in life.”

Jack’s eyebrows draw together like I just hit below the belt.

I don’t feel like my argument is quite strong enough yet. “I also figured he’d be better at planning a bachelor party than

me.”

Jack smirks, nodding like he approves and agrees.

Why can't I just throw this fool under the bus? I should've done it seven years ago when he hung me out to dry.

Jack leans in to listen again, and no matter how much I pull away to avoid him, he follows, putting his ear against my hand.

I pull the phone from my ear and tap the speaker button, letting Jack know by my facial expression how I feel about his tactics.

Madi laughs. “Don't be too certain. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm glad he's there to help you. Surprised, but glad. But... double check his work, you know? And if he's bothering you, for the love of all that is holy, let me know.”

My brow raises threateningly, and his eyes plead with me.

“I will. But he's actually been really helpful so far.” Before he can smile, I add, “Annoying, but helpful.”

Madi sighs. “Okay, well, I'm sorry I'm not there to be a buffer for you. I know from personal experience how relentless his teasing can be.”

“I can handle him. You do *not* need to be worrying about Jack and me.”

“Oh, I know that. Duh. You're planning my wedding, Siena. I trust you.”

Why does that stop my heart? And why is it suddenly so tense in this room?

“How has it been at the chateau so far?” she asks. “Have you been able to see much of it?”

“Yeah, the owners have been great. They welcomed us personally and then sent their son, Philippe, to show us around the chateau and gardens.” Did I need to mention Philippe? Probably not. But for some reason, after Madi's comment about trusting me, it seemed like a good idea.

Jack gives a soft scoff, tosses a hand through his hair in a gesture I assume is supposed to make him look like Philippe.

I shoot him a look. “The wedding is going to be *amazing*, Madi. This place is unreal.”

“It really is, isn’t it? I’m excited to see it again. To see *you*. I feel terrible about how the election went, but is it wrong that I’m also happy because I get to see you sooner?”

“It’s definitely the silver lining,” I say, trying to keep the heaviness from my tone.

“Okay, so, tell me about this Philippe. Is he... of marriageable age?”

I snort, avoiding Jack’s eye. “What is this, *Bridgerton*?”

“*Pride and Prejudice*. We watched it a couple nights ago. But is he?”

“Um, yeah, he’s of *marriageable age*.”

“And is he a hottie boombalottie?”

“Okay, you’ve veered far from *Bridgerton* and yet you’re still eons from current lingo.”

She laughs. “Stop changing the subject! *Is he or is he not hot?*”

Jack makes a disgusted face and a thumbs down, shaking his head.

“Yes, he is.”

“Siena met somebody!” Madi whisper-yells to Rémy. “This is too perfect! How amazing would it be if you guys got married and both of us lived in France? We could buy houses on the same street.”

Jack’s expression is comical, and I’m with him on this. Madi’s getting a tad ahead of herself. But I won’t admit that. It’s too much fun to mess with Jack. “You’d have to move to *this* street because Philippe’s inheriting Chateau Vidal, so we’d be living here, of course. Maybe you guys could just move in here. I can’t make any promises, but there’s *probably* enough space?”

There Jack goes, rolling his eyes and shutting the door behind him while I smile victoriously.

11

JACK

SEVEN YEARS AGO

HOLY CHEESE SNIPS.

That dumb phrase has been stuck in my mind since last night. In fact, they're the words that played in my head the moment Siena and I stopped kissing.

I really hesitated about going after her when I saw her leave the house, but I didn't have anything but her first name, and though it's admittedly not a common one, I knew I'd regret not getting her number. I'm not looking for anything serious, but she's fun, and I'm curious enough to explore it more.

I run my fingers along the clump of hair I'm holding. Yes. That's right. It was only after she left last night that I realized I had missed her purse with one of the extracted extensions. It was on the ground. Covered in Dr Pepper.

Super smooth, Jacky boy.

Is my current trek to the dorms an overeager wish to see her again?

No way. This is me being decent and honest. Fessing up to ruining her modern torture device. Mom brought me up to tell the truth, and that's the only reason I texted Siena this morning and asked which dorm she lives in. The *only* reason.

I usually go up the stairs two by two, but since I'm very casual today, I settle for one by one, which feels a lot like a funeral dirge. Maybe that's appropriate since, based on how crispy this hair feels, it might need one.

I check my phone for the apartment number and pass two doors before reaching the right one.

Taking in a breath, I rap on the door with the hand holding the hair.

That was a mistake. It made it look weirdly alive. Also, it has me second guessing myself. Who shows up at a girl's door

with a clump of soda-saturated hair in their hand? I move to put it in my pocket, but the door opens.

Caught red-handed—or hair-handed—I freeze.

“Jack?” My sister Madi has confusion written all over her face. Suffice it to say, we are not the sort of siblings who randomly show up at one another’s doors. At least, I might be that sort of brother, but she would hate it because, well, she kind of hates *me*. Her anger with me hasn’t totally fizzled since I broke up with her best friend a few months ago. Her *late* best friend, I should say.

From the kitchen behind Madi, a head pops out. It’s Siena, her hair in a high ponytail and an oversized sweatshirt hanging unevenly on her shoulder. The gears turn in my mind, and it hits me.

Holy cheese snips.

My head fills with every variation of swear word I’m aware of. This is bad. So so bad.

Madi looks at the hair in my hand, and her nose wrinkles. “Ew. What is that?”

Mama-raised-me-right Jack is immediately knocked out by save-all-of-us-from-a-nightmare Jack. “Oh, this?” I hold it out. “I dunno. It was outside your door.” I hand it to her because the extension is a hot potato, and I’m about to get burned.

She takes it and cringes at the feel.

“I know. Gross, huh?” More distance from the extensions is for the best. I stick my hands in my pockets. “Anyway, I came to say hey and see how your first week went.” *Don’t look at Siena. Don’t look at Siena.*

A hint of suspicion rests on Madi’s face. “I didn’t know you even knew where I lived.”

“I asked Mom.” Truth-telling is out the door, but I honestly don’t know what else to do. I *did* text Mom about Madi a bit yesterday, and now I remember her mentioning how much Madi loves her new roommate.

What sort of sick sense of humor does fate have?

“Oh,” she replies. “Well, that’s nice of you.” She turns. “Siena, is this one of your extensions? It looks the right color.”

Siena walks toward us, her eyes on me like she’s trying to figure out what to do with me. “That’s your brother?”

“Yeah. And yes, he’s cute,” she says like she’s giving her usual spiel, “but he’s a player. He chews up my friends and spits them out like gum.”

I open my mouth to take issue with her characterization of me, but Madi doesn’t let me get a word in. She’s still very salty about the last *incident*. I had really thought something was there with Carly. Until it fizzled as fast as it sizzled.

“Jack, this is Siena. Siena, Jack.” She stares at me pointedly. “I really like Siena, and I plan on keeping her as a friend, thank you very much. So stop looking at her like that.”

I give the old chin toss greeting. “Sup.”

I might as well have served Siena a platter of rotten seafood. That’s what her expression morphs into at my greeting.

“Does this look like yours?” Madi asks again, letting Siena take a closer glance at the extension.

“Yeah, it is.”

I stiffen, worried she’s going to out me. Given the way she’s looking at me, I wouldn’t be surprised. The only thing worse than Madi finding out I kissed her new friend last night would be her finding out I lied to her about it.

I send Siena a pleading look while Madi inspects the sugar-crisped hair.

“What happened to it?” Madi cringes again.

“Some idiot spilled soda on it at the party last night.” Siena’s eyes are on me, and there’s something in them. It’s not a we’re-sharing-this-funny-situation face. It’s a... I don’t know, but it’s not good. “It must have dropped out of my bag when I got home.”

“That’s awful! How *was* that party, by the way? Aside from the soda thing.”

“Incredibly lame,” she says. “I would have rather gone to your photography club.”

Ouch. Granted, I deserve it. But it can’t help but make me wonder whether she really *does* think that. I guess it doesn’t really matter. Siena is completely off-limits if I want to keep my sister in my life.

“JUST SAY IT.” I turn the steering wheel to take us away from the third parking lot we’ve unsuccessfully checked for free spaces.

“I have no idea what you mean.” Siena’s voice is too calm to be believable.

“Really? Because the vein in your forehead is starting to pop, and I’m afraid you might blow a gasket if you keep your feelings in any longer.”

She rubs at her forehead while giving me the stink eye. “Fine. If *you* hadn’t overslept, we wouldn’t be having such a hard time finding parking.”

I rub her arm in a way I know will drive her insane. “See? Don’t you feel better now?”

She smacks my hand. “No, I don’t. You clearly don’t feel bad about it.”

“Sure I do,” I say. I *do* feel a little bad. But not too bad because I’m pretty sure Siena overslept, too. “You could have woken me up, you know.”

“Oh, turn right here,” she says, pointing to her phone, which is on the dashboard acting as our GPS again.

“Fourth time’s the charm,” I say, scanning the small lot for spaces.

“There! In the second row.”

“Nope, there’s a Smart Car there.”

She clicks her tongue in annoyance. “Stupid baby cars. There!” She points again, and she’s right. There’s an open spot, albeit a small one, near the end of the row.

“You really think I can fit in there?”

“C’mon, Jack. Have a little faith. Besides, that’s just how small parking spaces are in Europe, and you have no other option. We need to get to the market before the vendors close. The market only happens on Thursdays, and we need to get the guest favors decided on, or I really *will* blow a gasket.”

“Okay, okay,” I say, even as my heart rate climbs. This space is *small*, and, unlike the Smart Car a few spaces down, our vehicle is not. We’re in the monster van we drove from Paris, and it has a manual transmission and a terrible turning radius.

Siena shakes her head. “You’re going to have to turn wider than that. Caaareful.”

Clenching my jaw, I press the brakes hard enough that she jolts forward. “Oops.”

She stares me down. “Real mature, Jack.”

“Shall I just...?” I take the steering wheel in hand, then pretend to pass it over to her.

“Okay. Point taken. I’ll be quiet.”

It’s touch and go for the next couple of minutes, but Siena keeps her word—and her mouth shut—as I pull forward, reverse, pull forward, reverse, and pull forward to get us into the spot.

“The vein’s there again,” I say as I turn off the car.

“No surprise. That took an eternity.” She pushes the door as far as it will go before hitting the car beside us. It gives her about a foot of space to get out.

“Something wrong?” I ask innocently, opening my door and showcasing how much room I have on my side.

“Nope.” She slides her body through the tiny space like the stubborn woman she is.

Shaking my head, I get out of the car, then make my way around to her side. She's got one foot on the ground and the other still in the car, and I'm just in time to see her trying to shimmy her butt and hips out from between the door and car frame.

“Need some help?”

“Nope!” Her hips pull free, and she's not ready for the suddenness of it, so she hops backward as her leg slides out. She's stuck between the van and the car like a human pinball.

I reach for her arm and manage to keep her up as she stumbles against me and regains her balance. “Are you okay?”

Her face is red as she brushes the hair away and behind her ears. “Yup!”

I'm torn between guilt and an impulse to laugh. “I'm sorry. I really thought you would just come through my door.”

Siena pulls out her phone and, map pulled up on the GPS, holds it so she can tell which direction we're facing. “First thing you should know about me, Just Jack Allred, is that I never take the easy way out. This way.” She points ahead of us.

I follow along with her. “Duly noted—and observed. But you know that's definitely not the first thing I know about you, right?”

She glances at me from the corner of her eye as though she's not sure how to take my comment.

“The first thing I ever learned about you was how easily you scare.”

Why I feel the need to push her buttons by making references to the night we met is beyond me. Maybe it's a weird need to see whether she remembers it, since most of the time she acts like it never happened.

“The first thing I learned about *you* is that you're a creep.”

We take a set of steps leading down a cobbled, pedestrian alley that's surrounded on both sides by tall buildings of warm, golden stone, crooked black shutters, and dark, shingled

rooftops. Like the chateau, it feels surreal in its aged perfection, like stepping back in time.

“A principled creep, though,” I say.

She scoffs. “What, because you weren’t hitting on freshman girls?”

“Like I said, principled.” We turn a bend in the ever-descending stairs, and a view of a market square below opens, revealing white umbrella-topped vendor booths and people flitting amongst the wares on offer. Surrounding it all are the same dark roofs and honey-colored façades we’ve been walking between. It’s a scene straight from *Beauty and the Beast*.

We stop at the top to admire it all. “Man,” I say, “this place is something else. What’s it called?”

“Sarlat-la-Canéda. You probably recognize it from *Ever After*.”

“From what now?”

“*Ever After*,” she says, as if repeating it will solve things. “Only one of the best chick flicks in the world.”

“Do I look like a chick flick connoisseur?”

She folds her arms and studies me. She’s wearing a loose, white top and light distressed jeans. It highlights the darkness of her brown hair, which is held out of her face by the sunglasses on her head. She’s a stunner.

Does she find *me* attractive? I’m confident she did when we first met, but I’m not sure anymore. Except for that little zipper pull in her room last night—I’ve been chewing on that one ever since, wondering if it means what I think it means.

“You look like a *closet* chick flick connoisseur,” she says.

I imitate her, crossing my arms over my chest. “So what if I am? You saying I should come out of the closet?”

“I am. Half the fun of chick flicks is watching them with someone else.” She turns away. “But you know, it takes a

confident man to admit he likes chick flicks, and I get it if you're not quite there yet."

Chuckling, I watch her go down a few steps without me. I think I'd really enjoy watching a chick flick with Siena. She's not at all the swooning type, so I'm curious what she likes about them.

I hurry down the steps to catch up with her, and soon we're swallowed in the crowds of people perusing the booths. At the bottom of the stairs, just to our right, is a massive building—a church, from the looks of it. It has the biggest doors of any building I've ever seen. They're two sleek sheets of metal that meet in an arch at the top. They've got to be forty feet high. How many people does it take to open those things?

I tear my eyes away, and we start walking slowly. "So, what exactly are we looking for?"

"Favors for the guests. Madi wants something that's local. A gift to represent this region of France."

"Eiffel Tower keychains?"

"Not funny, Jack. In case you hadn't noticed, there's more to France than the Eiffel Tower." She pulls out her phone. "I did some research and made a list of some things this region is known for."

"Lay 'em on me."

She eyes me in that way that tells me I'm doing something right, even though she wants me to think the opposite. "Okay, so... strawberries, walnuts, roasted duck, *foie gras*, and truffles."

I snap. "Roasted duck. That's the one."

"Yeah. We'll just send all the guests home with a roasted duck in a knapsack dripping with cooking juices." She stares me down. "Are you going to be helpful, or are you here to make this harder than it already is?"

I snap again and point at her. "The helpful thing."

"Strawberries!" Siena points to the closest booth, where small plastic packages of juicy red strawberries are arranged

next to larger crates.

Despite the fact that neither of us speaks a lick of French, the woman in the linen apron next to the booth is more than happy to satisfy our desire for samples, and she hands both of us a napkin with two berries. I bite into the first one, perfectly firm with a burst of juicy sweetness.

“You going for a Carl’s Jr. ad?” Sienna reaches a finger over, using her napkin to wipe up the juice dripping down my chin.

I use my thumb to dab the bit hanging out by the corner of *her* mouth. “Better that than Dracula.”

“Is it, though? At least Dracula has skills beyond ruining a perfectly good dress shirt.”

“What, like convincing multiple women to be his wife?”

“Ew, no.” She punches my arm, which I make a half-hearted effort to avoid. “You *would* immediately jump to that.”

“Pfft. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you’re a guy, and guys are the worst.” She bites into her other strawberry, being careful this time not to let any of the juices dribble. “I obviously meant Dracula’s ability to talk to wolves.”

“Ah, right. Super useful skill.”

I feel eyes on me and glance over at the lady in the apron. She’s watching us with the hint of an indulgent smile on her face.

Siena clears her throat and throws her napkin and the top of her strawberries in the small garbage can nearby. “Thank you so much. Those are delicious.”

She nods, then picks up a couple of crates. “You take how many? Zree? Four?” That accent of hers is *thick*.

Siena and I glance at each other, unsure what to say, just as another couple walks up, taking the woman’s attention.

“You’re not really thinking of using these as favors, are you?” I ask Siena quietly.

“Gosh, no. Can you imagine a chateau full of wedding guest Draculas? And how in the world would we package and store them? They’d be moldy even before the civil ceremony. Let’s slip out while she’s busy.”

I clench my teeth, shooting a glance at the woman.

“What?” Siena says. “Let’s go.” She grabs my arm and pulls, but I don’t budge.

My conscience has officially kicked into overdrive.

“Jack, come on. What’re you doing?”

The couple shake their heads and walk away, and the lady turns toward us, her eyebrows raised in a hopeful question.

Siena’s hand is still tugging on the crook of my arm.

“We’ll take four,” I say without even thinking.

Her eyes light up, and she bustles about, stacking four of the crates and packing them in a thick brown bag. I chance a glance at Siena, who’s looking at me like she doesn’t know what to do with me.

The woman hands me the bag, a big smile stretched across her face. “*Quarante-cinq euros.*” Her expression turns pensive. “Forty-five euros.”

Whoa. That’s a lot more than I was expecting. Guess I should have looked at the signs with the pricing. I pull out my phone and look around for the card reader, but there is none. That’s when it hits me: we’re at a local market. It’s probably cash only. I have no euros. I’ve just made this lady’s day by telling her I want four containers of her home-grown strawberries, and now I have to crush her and tell her I don’t have any money.

“Do you have any cash?” I whisper to Siena.

She pulls back. “You’re joking, right?”

I shake my head and smile at the lady, hoping to reassure her that everything is fine. “Do you, though? I’ll pay you back.”

“No, I don’t. I planned to get some today.”

The lady is watching us with slight confusion, trying to understand why we're having this strange and rude private conversation right in front of her while she's waiting for payment. "I just need to go to the ATM," I say.

Her brow furrows. She's clearly not understanding me. Eesh, this is painful.

I pull out a credit card and lift my shoulders dramatically, making my face look sad. "No euros."

The lady's face falls, and I feel like a monster.

"I will come back," I say, making a walking motion with my arms. "For those." I point at the bag of strawberries, then do a thumbs up.

She does *not* look convinced, but she nods.

I put up my finger, hoping she understands I mean *be back in one minute*, and Siena and I leave the booth.

"Whew!" Siena says. "That was a narrow escape. Oh! Look, there's a booth with truffles!"

"We've got to find an ATM first. I don't want to make her wait too long."

She stops and faces me. "Wait, really?"

"Yes, really. I told her I was coming back."

She stares at me for a second. "Yeah, but I thought that was like the thing you do at Costco after trying a sample." She rubs her stomach. "*Mmm, so good! Where do I find these?* Then you walk super slow until they're distracted by someone else getting a sample."

My laugh comes out as a snort. "Yeah, Siena. I'm sure you've got them utterly fooled. They'd be shocked if they knew you didn't buy the food you sampled."

"Well, I'm sorry not all of us can compare with your amazing pantomiming skills back there."

"Hey, it got the message across, didn't it?"

“If the message was *I’m a lunatic American*, then yes. Loud and clear.”

I bump into her with my shoulder on purpose, and she bumps me right back but twice as hard, eliciting laughs from us both. It occurs to me that this feels a lot like flirting, and I shouldn’t be flirting with Siena. Probably shouldn’t have wrestled with her on the bed last night either. In fact, I’m sure I shouldn’t have, purely based on the way it made me feel.

But there’s a line between doing things that will get a rise out of her and wandering into dangerous territory, and I’m still well on the side of the former.

After last night’s call with Madi, part of me wonders why I’m even trying to be a good brother to her. She clearly doesn’t have a high opinion of me, despite seven years of squeaky clean behavior on my end—at least in relation to her friends.

It’s twenty minutes before we find an ATM that will accept my card.

“If we miss the chance to buy Madi’s wedding favors because of this, Jack, I will force-feed you every last one of those strawberries.”

I pause, cocking an eyebrow. “Will there be whipped cream involved?”

“What’s *your* guess?”

“Sadly, I’ll never know.” I pull the euros out of the slot and wave them in front of her face.

When we get to the strawberry booth and the lady sees us, the joyful look on her face is payment enough for our ATM scavenger hunt.

“She’s in love with you now,” Siena says as we walk away with a fifth strawberry carton added to the bag, courtesy of the grateful woman. “So what gives? Are you this obsessed with strawberries?”

“I have a soft spot for entrepreneurs. I know what it’s like to be desperate for someone to believe in your product enough to buy it.”

“I don’t think there’s any shortage of people believing in strawberries, Jack. But still, it’s sweet of you. Always knew you were a softy.” She pokes me in the stomach, and I flex instinctively.

She must not have been expecting it, since she clenches her hand into a fist and quickly turns her face forward.

“Hurt your finger there, Sheppard?”

“No, actually.” She clasps her fist with her other hand. “I was afraid I was gonna lose it amongst all the fatty fluff in there”—she sends a dodgy glance at my abs again—“so I’m just holding it close.”

“Must’ve been terrifying to come up against something so completely and utterly solid. You poor thing.” I rub her arm consolingly, and she smacks my hand.

JACK WASN'T KIDDING when he said he had a soft spot for entrepreneurs. Within half an hour, he's carrying two more bags, one with cheese, one with walnuts.

We considered pursuing the walnut option for favors, but I wasn't feeling it. They had less of a chic wedding feel and more of a threatening vibe once I learned that the word for walnut also happens to mean "to drown" in French. Seems like bad mojo for a wedding.

"I'm getting hungry," Jack says. "Should we stop and eat some of these things?" He holds up the bags in his hands.

"I'm hungry, too, but some of the vendors are cleaning up, and we haven't found the favors yet."

"Truffles!" Jack points to the booth up ahead. It's got the word in French and English on a large sign, along with the phrase *award-winning*. "Didn't you say that's one of the local specialties?"

"Yeah, let's go check it out." Truffles are classy, and most people like chocolate, so this could be the thing.

The booth itself is definitely promising. Small wicker baskets full of dark brown chocolates are set up along the natural wood table, with bottles of oil staggered around.

I look at the price tag on the baskets—most of them say about twenty-five euros for one hundred grams. Wow. That's crazy expensive, but if they're really good, I guess it could be worth it?

The man behind the table greets us in French, and both Jack and I say a little *bonjour* back.

“Americans?” he asks.

“That obvious?” Jack says.

The man only smiles. “Have you tried truffles before?”

“Yes. We love them, so your job here is pretty easy. Can I get... a pound?” He pauses and looks at me.

“They do kilos here.”

“Right. Can I get a kilo of”—he looks around at the different baskets and points to one full of deep brown truffles—“these?”

The man’s eyebrows shoot up, and he blinks a few times. “Of course. Do you wish to try them first?”

“That’s okay,” Jack says at the same time I say, “Yes.”

He looks at me. “I’m getting some no matter what. Can’t do chick flick night without chocolate, right?”

I scrunch my nose up in false sympathy. “That time of the month?”

“Hey, you’ll be thanking me later, missy.” He turns back to the man. “A kilogram, please.”

The man’s brows rise even higher, and I nudge Jack with an elbow.

“They’re expensive,” I whisper.

He nudges me back. “Live a little, Sheppard.” He smiles at the truffle man. “Everything we’ve tried today has been amazing, and truffles are *always* a safe bet. But, yes, she’ll try a sample.”

Looking gratified by Jack’s request and trust, the man gets a burlap bag and starts carefully scooping the truffles. They’re much more textured than the truffles I’m used to and with less cacao powder on the outside, but I’m salivating as I watch them go in the bag. I’m not actually mad Jack’s getting a kilo. We haven’t really had lunch yet—just a smattering of samples

from the booths—and some high-quality chocolate sounds amazing.

The man weighs them on the scale behind him. “These were found by our best pigs in the forest near Puymartin.”

Jack glances at me, and I do a little shrug. I never knew pigs were used to find cacao, but to be fair, I don’t know anything about cacao except that it rules my world. Heck, I don’t even know the difference between cocoa and cacao—or if there *is* a difference.

He ties the string on the bag and hands it to Jack, then turns to take a truffle from the same basket. He sets it on a cutting board, takes a knife, and cuts off a slice. It’s an incredibly thin slice, but this stuff ain’t cheap, so I get it. The inside is a lighter, milk chocolate brown, and I have a good feeling about this. The man cuts a second slice, then hands the first to me with his plastic gloved hand.

“*Merci*,” I say before slowly placing it in my mouth.

Immediately, something isn’t right. Maybe it’s the garlicky taste. Or maybe it’s the spongy texture.

Suddenly it makes sense. The price. The strange appearance. The pigs in the forest. (Okay, those still don’t really make sense.) These are not rich, chocolate truffles. These are the fungus variety. Whose idea was it to use the same word for two completely different foods?

“It is much better when cooked, of course,” the man says, noting my less-than-thrilled reaction.

“Cooked?” Jack asks with a frown.

I grab his hand to warn him just as he pops it in his mouth like a Pringle.

“Yes,” the man says, watching Jack with expectant interest. “They are a delicacy, you know. Perhaps you may shave them over a bowl of fresh pasta when you cook your girlfriend a delicious dinner.” He looks at me with a knowing glint in his eye, and I force my best responsive smile as I chew the fungus in my mouth.

Jack goes still, and his chewing slows as things click in his brain just like they did in mine. The chewing resumes. “So good!” He does a totally unnecessary thumbs up, and I’m afraid any second he’s going to start pantomiming again.

I swallow my mouthful. It’s not bad. It’s just that, when you eat something expecting rich, creamy chocolate and you get mushy sponge instead, it’s bound to be a disappointment.

And now Jack has a kilogram of disappointment to pay for. He is single-handedly bank-rolling this region of France.

The grand total is 250 euros, and we leave the booth, the bustling of the market at odds with our stunned silence.

“So,” Jack finally says, “chocolate truffles *don’t* grow in the forests of France.”

“As cool as that would be, I think we can confidently say they don’t.”

“And there *aren’t* special teams of pigs trained to sniff them out.”

I shake my head.

He sighs, looking at the bag of truffles. “Aren’t you supposed to be super cultured and well-traveled and stuff? You couldn’t have warned me I was thinking of the wrong truffles?”

“Well, if you hadn’t jumped the gun by buying more than two *pounds* of them before we had a sample, maybe we wouldn’t be in this position.”

Jack stops on the corner of the street, lifting the burlap sack and staring at it with a frown. “What am I supposed to do with a kilogram of fungus, Sheppard?”

I say nothing, pressing my mouth together because I think, for once, Jack is genuinely frustrated. But it’s not long before the laughter breaks through my stiff lips.

Jack stares at me, dead-pan. “Yeah, laugh it up. Must feel good not to be the one who just spent a small fortune on glorified mushrooms.”

I cover my laugh with a hand, my eyes filling with tears. In between fits of laughter, I manage to eke out, “You spent 250 euros on... fungus!”

Against his will, a smile builds on Jack’s lips. He gives a reluctant chuckle, and then both of us are laughing like maniacs in the streets of Sarlat.

Jack wipes at his eyes. “Guess we’re having truffles covered in walnuts and cheesy strawberries for dinner all week.”

Blinking away my own tears, I pat him on the back. “Just think of how happy those pigs will be, knowing you believed in them enough to buy their product.”

He gives a couple of pig snorts, and it almost sets me off again.

The ringing of the church bell across the square reminds me it’s noon, and we have yet to accomplish the entire purpose of our visit. The realization wipes the smile from my face.

“We’re running out of options.”

He sheds his Peppa Pig impression and puts on his game face. “Right. What was the other thing on the list?”

I pull out my phone and check. “*Foie gras*.”

He nods. “No idea what that is, but let’s do this.”

Thankfully, I’m a little more observant than Jack, so I’ve noticed a few booths advertising it. We head to the closest one, and I put a hand on Jack’s arm before we approach. He turns to face me, a question in his eyes.

“I think you’ve done enough for the local entrepreneurs today, Jack,” I say slowly and clearly.

Pressing his lips together, he stares at the booth like a man going to the gallows. “I promise not to buy anything else.”

I’m not sure I believe him, but hey, I’ve done my part. I’ve never had *foie gras* before, and when the men behind the table tell me it’s made of goose liver, I almost high-tail it out of

there. But Jack grabs my hand to keep me in place, still joking around with the guys.

They offer us a sample, spread on baguette, and I try to look grateful as I take it. I let Jack try it first—very selfless of me, right?—holding it just shy of my lips as I watch him chew. If chocolate truffles here taste like garlic sponge, the possibilities for goose liver are, quite frankly, nauseating.

“Mmm,” Jack says, his brow furrowed. Is it focus? Is he acting?

But then I remember his embarrassing pantomiming skills from before, and I feel safe.

Taking a deep breath first, I bite the bread and hesitantly begin to chew. My own reaction mirrors Jack’s. My initial reluctance turns into intrigued curiosity and finally to full-blown astonishment. Goose liver is *good*. Words I never thought to say.

Jack and I have to confer, though, because the most pressing question is obviously *is goose liver an appropriate wedding gift?*

We must not be speaking softly enough because the older of the two men doesn’t hesitate to chime in.

“But of course! *Foie gras* is a delicacy. We have provided it to many brides and grooms like yourselves.”

“Really?” Jack asks before I can cut in and inform the nice man we aren’t the bride and groom.

He nods vigorously. “Of course we would have a special price for such an occasion”—he smiles knowingly—“to help you celebrate your love.”

Jack slings an arm around my shoulders while moving his foot out of stomping reach.

“What do you think?” Jack asks me. “It’s in the budget, isn’t it?”

“Barely,” I say. “But we can’t just hand guests a tin can of *foie gras*, Jack.”

“Sure we can! Put it in a pretty bag with a pretty ribbon, and *voilà!*” He turns to the men for support.

They’re more than eager to provide it. “We also have an option for glass bottles, *madame*, if you prefer. Like this one over here.” He reaches behind him and shows me a small, tasteful jar.

I do prefer it. These tin cans remind me too much of tuna fish, and canned tuna is *not* a delicacy. I’m still not sold on the whole thing, but vendors are starting to close up shop. I don’t have anything against the *foie gras*. It’s delicious, and it’s a delicacy. It’s just not what I had envisioned, so my mind is having a hard time wrapping around the concept and anticipating what Madi will think. What would André have done in my shoes?

Definitely not bite into a mushroom expecting dessert.

After a bit more haggling, we have ourselves a deal. We’ll have to make a visit to the *foie gras* farm so we can get the glass bottles. It’ll be worth it to make sure the favors don’t look like cat food.

Evidently, that’s the new gold standard for this wedding.

Yikes.

THANKFULLY, Jack has the foresight—or maybe it's his conscience kicking in—to buy the two glass containers of *foie gras* the men had on hand. The man truly *is* a sucker for entrepreneurs. Secretly, I find it attractive.

I need to do a bit of testing to see if we can really make these things look decent. I brought a few things for the bachelorette party I can use to spiff them up. That's what I'll do tonight, since we told the *foie gras* guys we'd come by tomorrow.

If it *doesn't* look good, well... I don't really want to think about that right now. The spreadsheet is haunting me even *without* any issues with the wedding favors.

When we get back to the chateau, I rummage through the suitcases in my room to find the odds and ends I brought *just in case*. If I was smart, I would have made a spreadsheet detailing where I packed everything, but I was a little distracted by someone.

“Hey, Jack!” I call from my room, sitting back on my heels. “Do you remember where we put that canvas bag that had all those random ribbons and small bags and things in it?”

I hear his footsteps, then his head pops into my room. It's been like five minutes since I last saw him, but I swear he's gotten more attractive in that short time. Stupid Jack.

“You're asking if I remember where we put bags that were inside of a bag, which we then put inside of another bag?”

I sigh, setting my hands on my thighs and looking at the array of open suitcases. “Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m asking.”

He steps inside the room and turns off his phone. “I do *not* remember, but I can help look.”

I raise my brows, nodding at his phone. “What’s the occasion? I thought you made it a point not to have your phone with you?”

He stuffs it in his pocket. “Just some hiccups at work. That’s all.” He sets his hands on his hips. “All right, which ones have you looked through?”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I’ve got the canvas tote in hand. Well, Jack does. He’s the one who found it.

He frowns at the contents. “Where did you even get all this stuff? Did you have some past, secret wedding I wasn’t invited to? I’m hurt, Sheppard.”

I snatch the bag. “I’ll take that, thank you. And no, it’s not from some *past, secret wedding*, but if it was, dang skippy, you wouldn’t have been invited.”

He puts a hand to his heart. “And the hits keep coming.”

“If you must know, I bought it all off a lady a few months ago. She had a bunch of extra stuff from her daughter’s wedding, and I thought it might come in handy.”

Time to shine, burlap tote with random wedding contents.

Fifteen minutes after that, I stuff a spool of silver ribbon into the tote with a sigh. Pretty as it is, none of the stuff I have works with the jars of *foie gras*. The ribbon is all too thick, and the colors aren’t right. But it’s at least shown me the potential. Jack was right—with the right bags and ribbon, I think they’ll look pretty dang good as wedding favors. Good enough that I search on my phone for the nearest craft store, assuming that’s a thing in France.

“Bingo!” I cry out when I find what I’m looking for. Thank heaven for Google translate. “A craft store, and it’s only a ten-minute drive.”

Jack is staring at his phone, brow furrowed, but he glances up. “Want me to come?”

“Don’t you have work stuff to take care of?”

He sighs. “Yeah, but it can probably wait. If you’re going to a craft store, you should really be with someone who has an eye for this stuff.”

Chuckling, I shake my head as I grab my purse. “Much as I’d love to have your expert crafting skills on hand, I’ll have to make do without. I’d rather have your help tomorrow with assembling the favors.” I clench my teeth. “All 108 of them.”

“A hundred and eight?” He whistles. “Who knew Madi had so many friends?”

I put a bracing hand on his shoulder. “At least we’ll have your strawberries and walnuts to keep our energy up.”

“You sure you don’t want me to come?”

I hesitate for a second because, the truth is, I *do* want Jack to come. That’s exactly why he can’t. I need some time away to re-center myself, to detox from his attractiveness and the way he makes me laugh.

“Positive,” I say, heading toward the door. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

Unlike the drive to the craft store in my hometown, which requires a stint in the insane freeway traffic, the drive in France passes by two cliff-top chateaus and through three charming villages. No wonder Madi and Rémy want to live here. *I* want to live here. Maybe I *will* give Philippe a shot. He’s a more viable option than Jack.

The craft store is inside a sort of indoor mini-mall, the mainstay of which is a large grocery store. The parking lot is below, and I hold my breath as I head under the clearance bar. No lifted trucks are getting in here, that’s for sure, but since I

don't hear any scraping as the van passes under, apparently this ugly but serviceable vehicle is safe.

Once again, the parking spaces seem like they were made for bikes rather than cars, and most of them are full, but I manage to find a free spot next to a Smart Car, making it easy to pull in.

“Take that, Jack,” I whisper with smug satisfaction as I pull the parking brake. I have to shimmy my way out of the car again, but this time, I do it with more grace. I've perfected the parking space shimmy. If only Jack was here to appreciate it.

My phone buzzes, and I tap the lock button on my keys, then slip them into my purse and check my phone.

MOM

How are things going, sweetie? Dad and I just booked our tickets! I think we're the last ones. Unless Austin has changed his mind about coming.

TROY

I've got mine.

TORI

Me too!

SIENA

Things are... going.

Can't wait for you all to get here and see the venue

So I can put you to work!

GIF of maniacal laughter

TORI

Don't you already have enough help from Jack?
sly-faced emoji

DAD

Who's Jack? Jack Allred?

TORI

The one and only

TROY

Wait, what? I thought you hated him, Siena.

I silently swear to subject Tori to the worst wedding tasks when she gets here.

SIENA

Simmer down, y'all. He's helping with the prep stuff. He's Madi's brother, after all.

AUSTIN

Despite Siena's forced labor threats, I'm bummed to report that it's a no-go for me :(I talked to my manager last night. I already texted Madi to tell her I'm sorry.

Bless Austin for chiming in and changing the subject.

SIENA

You're so close, though!

Austin's in Bucharest right now, touring Europe as one of the opening acts for a band I'd never heard of, but which apparently has a decent following, especially in Eastern Europe. He's worked really hard, but I wish he could be here for Madi's wedding. She's close with my entire family.

We get it, though, Aus. This is a huge opportunity for you, and you deserve it! We'll party hard on your behalf.

AUSTIN

Just don't party too hard with Jack *wink face emoji*

Heaven help me. I turn off my screen before anyone else can make any stupid comments, then head into the mall.

The craft store is small, but the selection is surprisingly robust. After debating for ten minutes, I decide on small linen bags and a simple white ribbon. They have *just* enough for our needs, and I head to the parking lot, feeling anxious to get the favors done and dusted so I can move on to other tasks. It'll have to wait until tomorrow after we've gone to pick up the *foie gras*, though.

The parking lot is busier than when I arrived, and I have to wait for a few cars to pass by before I have enough room to open the back doors and put my purchases there.

Afterward, I suck in, squeezing between the big cement column and the van to get to the driver's door. I try to conjure a mental image of the spreadsheet so I can decide what to devote my time to when I get back to the chateau. If I wasn't drowning in uncompleted tasks, I would be tempted to see whether Jack wanted to check out a couple of nearby villages or take a tour of a chateau, but there's no time. It's not a smart thought, anyway. The last thing I need is to be wandering through dreamy French villages next to Jack with lyrics from *Beauty and the Beast* about meeting Prince Charming playing in my head.

If Jack's done with his work stuff, I'll find a separate task for him to do. Give us a bit more distance from each other.

Looking through my rearview mirror, I wait for the cars to pass, giving me the chance to reverse. It takes a while, but finally, there's an opening.

The car next to me isn't a Smart Car anymore, which means I have a lot less room on that side and a massive column on the driver's side. In my rearview mirror, I spot the other column behind me, the main obstacle to backing up.

I reverse straight, watching the front end of the van so I know when I can start turning the wheel. This is one loooong van, though, so by the time the front end is clear, I'm dangerously close to the column behind me. There are two cars waiting for me to move so they can pass by.

I shift into first gear with a sigh. "Geez Louise. How many columns do you *need* in a parking garage, France?"

My second attempt at backing out is no better than the first, and I feel the beginning prickles of nerves. But I got into the space; I can get out of it.

That confidence wears thinner and thinner the more I try, and being honked at twice and seeing the cars that line up every time I make the attempt isn't particularly helpful.

In fact, my hands are starting to shake. It's not just the stress of not being able to get out of this parking space. It's the thought—dramatic as it might be—that every minute I spend in this incredibly busy parking garage is time I'm losing to check other things off my to-do list.

Fifteen minutes later, my eyes are filling with tears, and all I've managed to do is get closer to the column on my side of the car. I have to fold in my side-view mirror for the extra wiggle room, but that means I'm reversing partially blind. It's terrifying, and even though I'm not claustrophobic like Madi, it feels like the space is getting smaller and the van is getting bigger.

Apparently, I will *not* be attending Madi's wedding. I will be stuck in this parking garage, living in this van. At least I'll have a grocery store upstairs. Maybe I can cook food on the engine.

I slam my hands on the steering wheel to jar myself out of those thoughts. I *will* get out of this space. I have to.

I put on *Survivor* by Destiny's Child to boost my confidence levels and put the van into reverse. Eyes hopping between the rearview mirror and the right side mirror, I press the gas softly, moving the van backward.

The waiting cars stack up, and my heart rate climbs like I'm doing a HIIT class rather than sitting in a van, lightly pressing a gas and clutch.

The song is so loud, it's not until the bass lets up from the chorus that I hear the grating noise. It's another second before I realize that it's coming from my left. And one *more* second before I realize that it's the side of the van, scraping against the column.

My heart plummets into my stomach, and I turn off the music entirely. I'm paralyzed. If I pull forward, I'll scrape the van even more. But I can't reverse, either—I'll *definitely* scrape it more if I do that.

Another car honks at me, and I take the only route I can: pulling forward, turning the wheel right in the hopes of putting some distance between the column and the van.

Soft scraping makes me cringe, and I stop as soon as the cars can pass behind me. My entire body shakes like a jackhammer.

I'm stuck.

THE SOUND of tires on the gravel brings my head up from my laptop. I've been emailing back and forth with my team at home about an unexpected issue with the app, but I think we've almost got it sorted out. They're all heading to sleep now anyway, so not much will happen until tomorrow.

I lean to get a better view through the window, but it's not Siena. Rolling my shoulders, I glance at the time on my laptop screen. She said she'd be home in an hour, and it's been an hour and a half. Not like I've checked the window a dozen times for her return or anything. She can stay as long as she wants at the craft store.

But maybe I should shoot her a text to be sure she didn't get snatched up by Philippe or some other smooth French dude who wants to whisk her away to his chateau.

I wander around the house looking for my phone. I'm always putting it in weird, thoughtless places. That's half the reason I don't use it often—I just can't find it. After a few minutes, I locate it in the bag with the walnuts. Gosh, that's a lot of walnuts. I don't even really like them. I'm more of a pistachio guy.

I've got a text, but it's not from Siena.

MADI

Hey, bro! Just checking in to make sure you're behaving yourself :)

JACK

Always.

MADI

I think you and I have different definitions of that phrase. Are you helping Siena or making her life harder?

JACK

I think it's well within my skill-set to accomplish those things simultaneously *wink emoji*

MADI

You're probably right.

Thanks for helping out, Jack. It means a lot to me. Go easy on Siena, though. She's had it tough lately.

I don't respond right away because I don't know what to say. I can't decide whether her thanks is genuine or if it's meant to be a passive guilt trip, coaxing me to do something worth her gratitude. As for the part about Siena?

Maybe I *should* lay off the teasing. Would she open up to me about what's been tough? I highly doubt it. Maybe Madi's talking about the breakup and the election loss.

The text disappears, replaced by an incoming phone call and the name Cheese Snips.

My heart kicks into gear. I forgot I even *had* Siena's number in my phone. But, just as importantly, this means she kept mine in hers. For seven years. Forget my idea of letting up on the teasing. I'm *definitely* going to tease her over keeping my number and guess what name she has it under. Probably something like *I'm Bringing Sexy Jack*.

Mouth stretched in a smile, I swipe to answer and put it on speaker, sitting at the table and leaning back. "Well, look who

finally called me back seven years later. What's up, Cheese Snips? I told you you'd regret not bringing me wi—"

"Jack?"

My smile wavers as there's a distinct sniffle. I turn off speaker and bring the phone to my ear, worst-case scenarios zinging around in my brain. "Siena, are you okay?"

"Um, yeah. I'm fine." Sniffle. "I just... I didn't know what else to do."

I sit forward in my chair, my heart racing. "You did the right thing. What's wrong?"

She gives a watery chuckle. "You're going to think I'm the biggest idiot."

Look at her, making jokes when she's crying. It twists my heart to hear and keeps me from making a smart remark back. "Impossible. That award is reserved for yours truly."

"Not after today, it's not." The humor in her voice gives way, replaced by the slightest wobbling. "Ugh, it's so stupid."

"You're killing me, Siena. Did you rob a bank? Elope with Philippe?"

"What? No!" She sighs shakily. "I... I can't get out of my parking space."

My hand flies to my mouth to stifle my surprise—and yes, a laugh. I clear my throat.

"I know," she says, her voice watery. "But I've been trying for half an hour, and it's just so tiny, and this van is so huge, and all these people are mad at me and staring at me, and... I don't know what to do."

I drop my hand, my desire to laugh disappearing with the vulnerability she's showing. It can't have been easy for her to call me, and that melts my heart a little. I mean, it's not like she had other options. Except Philippe. At least I beat *him* out.

"I'm coming," I say, putting on my metaphorical knight-in-shining-armor breastplate. Chivalry is not dead, y'all.

"How? I have the van."

Right. She has the van. I have nothing but my Chevrolegs.

Doesn't matter. I'll find a way.

“Don't worry about it. Just sit tight. Or go roam the craft store again. Whatever you want. Just shoot me the name of the store, and I'll text you when I get there.”

“Are you sure? I could call Philippe. He has a c—”

“No!” Whoa. That was intense. I take a breath and recapture my chill vibes. “Nah. Don't bother him. He's probably busy holding court with the local peasants or something. I'll be there. I promise.”

“What if *you* can't get the van out, Jack? I should probably have it towed or something. Though, I don't think a tow truck can fit down here.”

“No tow trucks needed. I'm coming. I'll see you soon.”



I'M JOGGING down the side of the road with sprawling, green fields to my right and a hill blocking everything to my left. The views are beautiful, but I'm not really in a state to appreciate them. According to Google Maps, I'll get to Siena in an hour. That time is based on walking speed, though, and I'm not walking. I'm in the solid middle ground between a jog and a sprint. I can probably do it in forty-five minutes.

But that's still too long. I tried Uber, but they don't operate in this part of France. Every time I look at my route on my phone and my ETA, all I can think of is Siena sitting in the van, crying.

Which is why, even though I've never done this in my life, when I hear the next group of cars coming up behind me, I stick out my thumb.

I'm that desperate.

The cars pass me, offering nothing but rejection to my poor thumb. At least it's quick, though. One of them even honks at me. I can't blame the guy—there's barely a shoulder

on this road, which means the cars have to veer toward the center to avoid sideswiping me. I'm literally living on the edge.

I pick up speed, wishing I could take off my shirt since it's somewhere in the high 70s. Somehow, though, I think the odds of anyone picking up a shirtless hitchhiker are even worse than my current ones.

Another car comes up behind me, and I stick out my thumb for good measure. The sleek black car passes me, then, to my surprise, slows and pulls to the side.

The window rolls down, and Philippe's head pops out.

Just my luck.

"I thought that was you," he says in his French accent. "Come on in."

I glance behind me at the cars approaching and hurry toward the passenger door.

"Where do you need to go?" Philippe asks as he pulls onto the road after letting the other cars pass.

I glance at the map on my phone. I'm not thrilled at the prospect of telling him I'm heading to a craft store. Not because I worry what he'll think of me. I just don't want him to invite himself inside because he guesses Siena's there. She's not wearing a cardigan today, which means it's anyone's guess what flimsy excuses he'll find to touch her. He'll probably tuck her hair behind her ear or pretend there's a snowflake on her eyelash despite the fact that it's July.

"Just here," I say, pointing to my GPS.

He nods. "Where is Siena?"

None of your business. "She had to do some errands." Now he's probably wondering why I didn't just go with her. *Keep on wonderin', Phil.* Some people might think I should tell him she's stuck in the parking lot right now, but if I do that, he's going to swoop in and woo her. He doesn't even need metaphorical armor. He has an actual medieval set in his pretty little chateau.

“Jack,” he says, readjusting his grip on the steering wheel, “you’ve known Siena for a long time. Do you think she would say yes if I asked her on a date?”

All of my muscles clench. I want to say no. Siena would expect me to, honestly. But even though I’ve been riding this line, trying to shut down Philippe’s game and making fun of him in front of Siena, telling him not to ask her out definitely falls on the other side of the line. The wrong side. It should be Siena’s choice, and if she really wants to go out with Philippe, who am I to stop her?

“I mean, she’s pretty busy with the wedding stuff,” I say, “but maybe.” Okay, I know it’s not the most encouraging response I could’ve given him, but I’m a work in progress.

I honestly don’t know if she’d say yes or no to Philippe, and it shouldn’t matter to me. I’m taking this brotherly protectiveness too seriously.

I text Siena to let her know what time I’ll be there. As much as I don’t like Philippe, I’m grateful to him for getting me to her more quickly. I have him drop me off just in front of the grocery store, and I pretend to walk in that direction until his car has driven out of sight.

When it disappears around the corner, I make a beeline for the parking lot. Siena’s waiting for me just at the bottom of the entrance. She’s not crying now, but her cheeks are a little pink and so are her eyes. Those subtle colors are vestiges of the vulnerability she showed in calling me, and they make me feel unbrotherly things. It’s pretty hard to think of someone like a sister when you kissed her the first night you met. I don’t know that you really come back from that.

I smile, and she laughs, softly shaking her head and turning it away like she’s embarrassed. “You really didn’t have to come, Jack. I could’ve called a tow truck.”

“Who needs a tow truck when you’ve got a man with mad parking skills?” Realizing that *you’ve got a man* makes it sound like I’m *her* man, I glance at her, but she’s got a cocked brow and the hint of a smile.

“Like your expert crafting skills?”

“I’m a man of many talents. Now”—I rub my hands together—“show me what we’re working with.”

“You’ve got a lot of confidence for a man who has no idea what he’s getting into.” She glances at me as we walk farther into the dimly lit lot. “It’s bad, Jack. Like, *bad*.”

I wave away her words as the van comes into view, even though inside, I’m getting nervous that I *won’t* be able to get her out of this tight spot. If we end up having to call a tow truck or, heaven forbid, Philippe, my pride will never recover.

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as you th—”

I freeze as a long, dark scratch across the driver’s side comes into view. There’s white paint on the edges. It’s not pretty, and I’m genuinely curious how it got to be that long. But I’m not about to get into that right now. Not when Siena’s shaken and humiliated.

“It *is* that bad,” she says, swallowing.

“What, that little scratch?” I cross my arms and shake my head. “Nah. Plus, I’m ninety percent sure I did that at Sarlat when I was trying to park.”

“No, you didn’t, Jack. It was me. The sound of the scraping is ingrained in my memory forever.”

“Was it like this?” I make a sound I never knew myself capable of. It’s like ten shrieking witches being burned at the stake. “Yup. That was me. Kind of surprised you didn’t hear it. You must have been too busy backseat driving.”

She laughs, but the smile disappears quickly as she examines the damage again. She swallows hard. “The rental company is going to charge me an arm and a leg to fix it.” She shuts her eyes, and the way she takes in a deep breath that trembles slightly tells me her emotions are still hovering just below the surface.

“Hey.” I grab her hand. “It’ll be fine. I promise.” I’m half-expecting her to jerk her hand away, but she doesn’t.

She sniffs and shakes her head, not meeting my gaze. “How will it be okay? I don’t even have a job, Jack, in case you missed the whole debacle of an election I was in charge of.” She turns her head even more, but it’s not quickly enough that I miss the tear that slips out.

Siena’s a proud woman, and it’s got to be killing her to cry in front of me. So, I do what any gentleman would do. I give her a way to hide her face.

“Come here,” I say, and I pull her into my arms.

Her resistance lasts all of a split second, and then she surrenders. She tucks her head into the nook between my neck and shoulder. Siena Sheppard is letting me hold her.

“I was so proud of myself for managing to park in the small space. For doing it better than you.” She’s half-laughing, half-crying.

I smile into her hair—hey, stop judging. It smells good, and I can’t really avoid it—and say, “The moral of the story is...”

“Jack causes trouble.”

“Wrong. The moral is to never challenge Jack Allred.”

Her little breathy laugh warms my neck, and I’m wracking my brain for something to say that will keep her right where she is. If I say something too nice, though, it’ll scare her off.

“You know I’m right.” Apparently, we’re going with cocky.

“It’s not funny, Jack. I’ve been charged 100 dollars to clean the floor mats in a rental car before. I can’t even imagine...” She doesn’t finish.

“Did you get the insurance?”

She shakes her head.

“But you used your credit card, right? They should cover the damages. Either way, we’ll figure it out together. Promise.”

Aaaand there she goes, pulling away and wiping her eyes. “I’m *not* a crier.”

My arms hang at my sides, suddenly useless and boring. “Really? I am. All the time. I’ve almost cried like six times today.” I start counting on my fingers. “First time was when I had to do that 700-point turn to park. Then when I ate that truffle. And then when I *paid* for the truffles. And then... well, you get the point. The only reason I *didn’t* cry was because I was scared you’d bully me.”

She punches me on the arm half-heartedly, and I grin. Evidently, I’m desperate enough for feminine interaction that mild violence is desirable.

I jerk my head toward the van. “Let’s get this thing outta here.”

She takes in a deep breath and gives me a look. “It’s not just the van, Jack, though that thing is a *beast*. A huge, maimed beast. It’s the cars trying to pass.” She gestures at them with her head. “They do *not* like waiting.”

“Don’t worry about them. I’ll take care of that. You just hop in there, and I’ll guide you through backing out.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re asking me to get back in that monster and try a fiftieth time? You *do* see that massive battle wound I gave the van, right?”

“I’m not gonna debate its origin story with you anymore.”

She narrows her eyes. “Now that you’ve seen how small the space is, you know you can’t do it.”

I laugh. “I’m gonna be out here telling you how much room you have—and keeping the angry drivers at bay. I promise not to let the van get scraped again.” When I arrived, I *had* meant to back up the van myself. But I think Siena needs this win.

And she *does* do it. It’s a tense few minutes, with cars flashing their lights and honking and their drivers yelling things in French that don’t bear repeating—mostly because I literally *can’t* repeat them. But, with centimeters to spare, we manage to get the van out safely.

Amidst a chorus of what I assume are obscenities, I grin at our unwilling audience and put out my hands to display Siena,

whose head is peeking through the window. “Ladies and gentlemen, the one and only Siena Sheppard!” I start clapping, but when the guy in the first car in line revs his engine, I scurry to the passenger side and hop in.

Siena shakes her head as she puts the van into gear, but there’s a smile on her face. “If one of these angry people shows up at the chateau tonight, threatening my life, I’m going to blame you.”

“They’ll have to take both of us, then. We’ve trauma-bonded now, Sheppard. There’s no separating us.”

She rolls her eyes, and we’re on our way.

“WHY DIDN’T you persuade me to spend money on these baguettes instead of pig fungus?” I take another piece from the little platter Siena made. Each one is topped with a slice of the cheese I bought at the market. Money well spent, I’d say.

“You never asked my opinion.” Siena ties the freshly cut ribbon she bought around the bag of *foie gras*. “In fact, you blatantly ignored it.” She sits back to survey her work. Despite having prepared the platter, she has yet to touch the food. She’s hyper-focused on what she’s doing. Madi’s lucky to have such a dedicated friend so absolutely determined to make her wedding perfect. “What do you think?”

I come behind her. “It looks incredible.” It really does. “Who knew you could make goose liver look so classy?”

She tips her head from side to side, then adjusts the ribbon slightly. “Thanks. Let’s just hope Madi feels the same way.”

“She will.”

She taps her phone, and the display wakes, showing the time. Behind is a picture of Siena and Madi. They’re resting their chins on their hands at the edge of a pool, their faces tanned, their smiles bright. They’ve been the best of friends for a long time, and that’s a good reminder for me.

“Shoot,” she says, hurrying to her feet. “I need to check out the grounds and ballroom.”

“Again?” I ask.

She rifles through her backpack, tucking her hair behind her ear when it falls into her face. “Yeah. I’m going to sketch out where things will go—what way the chairs will face during the ceremony, where to hold the cocktail hour, stuff like that.” She pulls out a notebook. “Want to come? You could lend your *expert eye*.”

I absolutely do.

But I shouldn’t. I can feel myself entering dangerous territory with Siena, and yet, if I *don’t* go, I have no doubt Philippe’s minions will let him know there’s a beautiful, single woman on the loose, and he’ll pounce.

“Enough with the begging, Sheppard,” I say, pretending to be totally exhausted by the request. “I’ll come, but it’ll cost you.”

She slips a pencil into the notebook, then shoots me a sympathetic grimace. “Take it up with my bankruptcy lawyer.”

I school my expression into something threatening. “Oh, *I will*.”



THE GROUNDS of Chateau Vidal are especially beautiful without Philippe draping cardigans all over Siena’s shoulders. Whether the trauma-bonding I joked about is real or Siena’s just happy to be free of her parking garage cage, the way she’s talking to me has shifted. Not a big shift. Just less bite to her comebacks, maybe. More willingness to laugh.

It makes me extra glad I came along. We discuss time of day, direction of sunlight, where the wedding party will be coming from, and more as Siena roughly sketches how things will look during the wedding ceremony.

“Yeah, I think this will work best,” Siena says. “That way, Madi can keep away from the eyes of the guests—and Rémy—while she makes her way to the aisle.” She frowns. “Who’s walking Madi down the aisle? You?”

I laugh. “Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

“Because Madi barely tolerates me. Trust me. There’s no way she’d ask me to do that. And I’m fine with it. She’ll probably have Rémy’s dad do it. Or maybe my mom.”

Siena looks at me like she wants to probe into things more, but she goes back to her sketch instead, and the topic shifts. I’m grateful for that. I don’t really want to get into things right now. I’ve spent my life making sure nobody thinks I’m trying to take my dad’s place in our family. Walking Madi down the aisle is about as literal as I could get to stepping into his shoes. Aside from actually *wearing* his shoes, which I wouldn’t because they were a size smaller than mine.

It takes an hour and a half to get through the ceremony, cocktail hour, and reception sketches. By then, the sun is going down, and our stomachs are grumbling. It’s been a long day.

“What’d you say that movie was called?” I ask as we pass under the vine-draped archway on our way to the cottage. It’s a warm night, and a couple of the brighter stars are twinkling in the dusky sky. “Forever and Always?”

She laughs. “*Ever After?*”

“Same difference. We should watch it tonight. Take a break from all the wedding stuff. It’s been a long day, and you deserve a breather.”

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy?”

“My personal motto.”

“Really? When you have so many others to choose from?”

I shoot her a look. “You want my personal motto to be Jack of all trades, but master of none? Jack be nimble, Jack be quick? Jack Sprat could eat no fat; his wife could eat no lean?”

She shrugs. “I was thinking more along the lines of Hit the road, Jack. Or Jack squat. Or even Jacka—”

“Hey!” I bump into her on purpose. “Watch your language, young lady.”

She laughs and retakes her place next to me, walking shoulder to cardigan-less shoulder.

“Fine,” she says. “Let’s watch the movie.”

I ROLL my head to the side, shifting my body, but my neck aches, and everything just feels wrong.

Blinking my eyes open, I squint at the light coming from the TV. It illuminates the coffee table, where a container of strawberries sits, littered with the uneaten green tops.

I glance beside me. Jack's asleep, his head tipping precariously toward me, just like it did on the plane. His breathing is slow and calm, making his chest rise and fall rhythmically under his t-shirt.

I don't think I should be allowed to see Jack asleep. Or awake, for that matter.

But at the same time, I'm glad he's here. I can't imagine what it would've been like to be in that parking garage today if he weren't. It's not just that, either. He's been unexpectedly helpful. He pointed out a lot of factors I hadn't thought of while I was doing the sketches. The favor presentation was his idea, too, and having someone to bounce ideas off of, even if he makes jokes half the time, has been a big deal. Whatever other things he may be, Jack is *not* a dull boy.

I'd meant to put him to work on separate tasks from me—that was part of my strategy—but the truth is, I'd rather have his help.

It's a scary thought. Every bit as scary as how my heart feels thinking back on the way he held me in the parking lot... as scary as the impulse I have to bring his head onto my lap

and run my fingers through his hair while he sleeps. Or maybe not just sleeps...

I shoot up fast enough that Jack stirs. When he settles back in, I head to my room for sleep.



“WE HAVE GOT to eat these strawberries faster,” Jack says, cutting the top off one and popping the berry into his mouth.

“I’ve been pulling my weight,” I say. “I ate most of them last night.”

“*You’re only here for the food,*” he mimics from the movie.

“You’re not wrong,” I say. “Let’s go. I told them we’d be there by ten.”

The drive to the *foie gras* farm takes twenty minutes, all on new roads. We pass by La Roque-Gageac, a village sandwiched between a cliff and a river, and then up into the hills, where the trees are so full that their leaves cast everything in a green hue. Every part of this place is a different kind of magic.

Boxes of glass *foie gras* jars are waiting for us at the farm when we get inside the small shop set at the front of the property. Jack and I help the two men from the market load the boxes into the car. The older between them talks to me about how to store the bottles until the wedding as I arrange the boxes in the back.

When Jack heads inside for the last two boxes, I know it’s time to pay the piper. I pull out my credit card with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I know Madi will pay me back, but especially after yesterday’s incident, I can’t help but feel the stress of money pressing in on me. What will I do when I get home? I have enough saved to survive for a few months, but I was confident enough in our campaign that I hadn’t really considered what would happen if we lost. Amy was going to hire me on her staff, but now she doesn’t need a staff.

“Ah,” says the man, noting the card I’m holding. “Our machine is inside.”

We pass Jack on our way in. The short-sleeve shirt he’s wearing offers a clear view of the muscles required to carry a huge box of glass bottle jars and goose liver.

“You can wait in the van,” I say to him. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The man goes behind the counter with his son. The two of them exchange words in French, and I wait patiently.

The old man looks at me as he sets the credit card machine back under the counter. “The payment has already been taken, madame.”

His son smiles. “Monsieur Allred paid.”

I glance behind me toward the van outside. Jack is in the back, shifting boxes around. I swallow the thickness in my throat. Apparently, I have the hormone levels of a pregnant woman today.

When I thank Jack in the van, he brushes it off, claiming that, as Madi’s brother, he has more right to her debt than I do.

After a quick trip to the grocery store and a stop at the caterers, we head to the chateau, our work cut out for us. Jack does the hard labor of bringing in boxes while I get everything else set up around the table. Scissors, ribbon, bags, and Jordan almonds.

I set my hands on my hips, glad, once again, that I’m not doing this alone. “Ready?”

“Hm?” Jack looks at me like he has no idea what I’m talking about.

“To assemble the bags. Cut the ribbons. Tie the bows.”

He shakes his head back and forth again and again. “I don’t do crafts.”

“What happened to your expert eye?”

“Expert eye. Not hands.” He wiggles his fingers, doing jazz hands.

“Jack,” I say. “You’re helping.”

“Siena,” he says, matching my tone, “I’ll ruin it, and I don’t want to ruin Madi’s wedding. I can consult and be the company credit card, but stuff like this...?” He shakes his head.

I grab him by the arm and pull him into a chair. “I’ll guide you through it. You’ll do great.”

“Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He reaches for a handful of Jordan almonds, and I smack his hand.

“We don’t have enough of those for snacking. There have to be five in every favor bag.”

He rubs his hand dramatically. “Why five?”

“Trust me. It’s a thing here—a French wedding tradition. Each almond represents a specific wish for the couple’s future. So, unless you’re *trying* to curse your sister’s marriage...”

“Well, I *wasn’t*, which is why I told you I don’t want to help with this. But now that you’re forcing me to”—he picks up a spool of ribbon—“all bets are off. What exactly are they supposed to represent? Pleasure, cavities, and obesity?”

“Yes, Jack. You nailed it.” I shut my eyes and think on my research, ticking each one off on my fingers. “Health, riches, happiness, fertility, and long life. You don’t want to mess with any of those.”

“No, I don’t. But why should Madi be the only one who gets those things?”

I put a hand on his shoulder, looking down at him with mock pity. “Aww, worried about your fertility, Just Jack?”

“I was thinking more about the riches and happiness, but good to know you’re thinking about my fertility, Sheppard.”

Well, now I am.

And he knows it, which is why he’s wearing that satisfied, mischievous grin.



IT'S a sizzling day at Chateau Vidal, and the wall-mounted air conditioning units are only in the bedrooms, which means it's hot as Hades in the kitchen and living area. When we take a break to make some dinner—a truffle pasta like the man at the market suggested—it only intensifies the heat.

But I'm a woman on a mission, and we get right back to work on the bags after eating. More than once, Jack tries to sneak some almonds when he thinks I'm not watching. But I *am* watching. Purely for supervising purposes.

“Hey,” I say at one point, “how did you get to the parking lot yesterday? Uber or something?”

Jack laughs—the sort of laugh that tells me there's a story there. “No. Though, I did try that. Apparently, Uber's only in Paris, so if I waited for my driver to get here, you'd still be in that parking lot.”

“So, what did you do?” He got there too quickly to have walked.

He pulls the ribbon into a bow and tweaks it. “Hitchhiked.”

My brows shoot up, and I wait for him to grin as evidence he's joking. But the grin never comes. He doesn't even meet my eye.

Jack *hitchhiked* to get to me?

“Nearly got myself killed for you, Sheppard. These roads don't have shoulders. Hence my desire for long life and good health.” He reaches for the almonds again, and I smack his hand.

Of course Jack hitchhiked, and *of course* he found success, because he's Jack. “Lemme guess. A hot young Sabrina type picked you up in her vintage convertible.”

He shakes his head, lips tucked in like he's trying to keep from smiling.

“Who, then?”

“Take a guess.”

“Jack, how in the world would I know who—” I stop, staring at him.

He nods.

“Oh my gosh. Philippe?”

“His royal highness himself.”

I cover my mouth, but it’s an exercise in futility, and the snort of laughter comes through loud and clear.

“See the sacrifices I make for you?” He shakes his head and gets back to his bow. It’s really endearing to watch him play with it and tweak it—and how it’s still not centered.

“That *is* a major sacrifice, Jack.” I rub his arm patronizingly, then go back to cutting another ribbon. “What in the world did you talk about on the drive?”

“Oh, you know, the usual stuff. Kingdom politics, royal drama, whether he should ask you out, the state of the succession...”

My head whips up. “What?”

“Yeah,” he says, putting a jar of *foie gras* in a new bag, “the peasants are trying to stage an uprising, so it’s been really stre—”

“Jack,” I interrupt. “He really asked you if he should ask me out?”

“Sure did.” He grabs five almonds and drops them into the bag.

“And?” I don’t even need to ask, honestly. “You told him I’m a nun or something, didn’t you?”

“Of course not. I told him to go for it.”

Why my heart is in my stomach, I couldn’t tell you. I should be glad he didn’t interfere like I assumed he would.

He’s looking at me with a quizzical expression. “I did the right thing, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, it can’t do any harm. Not that I really have time.”

“You should *make* time, then. You can’t work all day, every day, Sheppard.” He shoots me a teasing smile. “Especially not when owning a chateau hangs in the balance.”

Adjusting my fingers so the scissors aren’t rubbing on the skin that’s getting tender, I cut the ribbon at a diagonal. “Don’t be ridiculous. Philippe is just like any guy.”

“Yeah, if *any* guy owns a medieval chateau-slash-hotel.”

“No, I mean, he’s not serious. He knows I’m leaving. He’s probably got dates lined up with every other single young woman staying here.”

“And that bothers you?”

“It’s just predictable.”

“Because guys are the worst?”

I laugh at his reference to what I said yesterday as I wrap the ribbon around the bag I’m working on. “Exactly. What *is* it with guys and wanting a bunch of women? You really *are* Draculas, sucking the life out of each woman before you move on to the next.”

“Ouch.”

“The truth hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, if you really do think that’s the truth.”

“I have yet to be proven wrong.” I wince as I tie the bow. Pretty as it is, the ribbon isn’t exactly soft, and after cutting and tying countless bows with sweaty hands, my fingers are sore. I rub them together and reach for the next jar.

“I think we need a break,” Jack says, his eyes on my hands.

“Not even.”

“We’re roasting alive in here, and our fingers are raw.” He taps on my phone to wake the screen. “It’s 9:30, and we’ve been at this for hours. Come on.” He stands up. “Let’s walk

around. Get some fresh air. Eat some strawberries before they turn to mush.”

As nice as it sounds, I shake my head. “Madi gets here tomorrow. I really want to get these done.”

“Then you should take a break, or you’ll burn out. Madi wouldn’t want that. I promise.”

I use my forearm to wipe the sweat from my forehead. We’ve made good headway on the favors, but there’s still a lot to do. Jack’s not wrong, though. My back and butt both ache from sitting in this chair for so long. A short walk in the evening breeze won’t hurt, and we’ll come back rejuvenated.

“Fine.”

Jack gives me a hand to help me up. “Atta girl.”

WITH AS FAR INTO the summer as we are, it's just shifting from twilight to dark when we step outside. Coming out was the right decision. The cottage must have been acting like an oven, since, warm as the night is, it's cooler in the fresh air.

I roll my shoulders and take a deep breath. It even smells like summer: cut grass, fresh air, and strawberries.

Jack offers me a big, juicy berry from the container he's holding, then takes one for himself. We bite into them in sync as we make our way along the path that leads past the keep and toward the gardens. The lights in the windows of the chateau contrast with the cool night sky and cast a warm glow on our path.

The whole scene is like something out of a movie—and not a dystopian thriller. Chateau Vidal screams romance. Right in my ear.

“We should probably talk bachelor party,” I say, dropping the leafy top into the empty side of the container.

Jack chuckles softly, glancing over at me with a smile. That dang smile.

“What?” I hurry to wipe the edge of my lip in case I'm dripping strawberry juice again. It's one thing for him to touch my lips when we're in a public market, surrounded by shop owners and tourists. Having him do that here in fairytale romance land would be... well, suffice it to say, my experience in political strategy has not equipped me to withstand the sorts of pressures this place has introduced into my life.

“You don’t know how to relax, do you?”

I scoff. “I’m *amazing* at relaxing.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“What? I *am*. Check with me after the wedding, and you’ll see.”

“Uh-huh.”

I shoot him a look. “The party is coming up really soon, Jack, and I have no idea what André was planning. Madi and Rémy get here tomorrow, and I want to be sure they see we have things under control.”

“Fine.” He shuts the strawberry container and takes it in one hand, facing me. “Let’s hash out the party details, but then? We’re going to relax properly.” He puts out a hand to shake on it, and I pinch my lips together.

It’s not that I don’t want to relax, but it makes me feel less guilty for hanging out with Jack if we talk shop on our break.

“Just fifteen minutes of relaxation,” he says, keeping his hand out.

I hesitate. Fifteen minutes... that’s reasonable. “Fine. After we settle on a solid plan for the bachelor party.”

He gives a nod, and I shake the devil’s very solid hand as he looks at me in a way that tells me I am way out of my depth here.

“So,” he says, turning away and continuing on the path. “Bachelor party. Let’s think...”

We’re almost to the little archway draped with greenery, and I eye it with suspicion. It’s beautiful in a surreal way—a way that makes me feel like I’m stepping into a different world. Right now, I need to stay with my feet planted firmly on Planet Earth.

Jack snaps. “Got it.”

“Really?” It’s a relief not to have my brain the only one on the task. After all, I’ve never been to a bachelor party, and even though Jack may not know the guys who’ll be coming to

it, he's got the perfect personality for this. He makes everything he does fun, he knows how to put people at their ease, he's hot...

That last part, while true, is completely beside the point.

"I'm thinking a Moulin Rouge themed night," Jack says as he pushes the greenery aside for me to pass through. "Hire a few dancers, play some music, raid the chateau's wine cellar."

I stop under the arch, staring at him with a look that conveys how I feel about his idea. "You are officially fired, and our deal is off." I brush past him to head back the way we came.

"Wait..." He catches my hand and tugs me backward until I face him. "I was just teasing. I'm sorry. I'll be serious now. Promise."

I meet his gaze. To his credit, he looks genuinely repentant.

I pull my hand from his and cross my arms. "Prove it," I say, like we're third graders.

Jack *does* prove it. Before we've even made it to the pool and ruined part of Vidal, he's come up with an idea that, reluctant as I am to admit it, is perfect. Rémy specifically requested his bachelor party be focused on enjoying time with the guys rather than being disgusting specimens of male promiscuity. He didn't say it quite like that, but that's what he meant.

Jack's idea is for them to hold the party at a chateau we passed on our first day. They had a sign out advertising jousting, archery, and other medieval pastimes, but the bachelor party hadn't even crossed my mind when I saw it.

"I can call tomorrow to see if they have availability," he says.

"And if they don't?"

He lifts his shoulders. "I'll come up with another brilliant idea. Easy peasy."

I roll my eyes, but I secretly believe he'd manage it.

“And now, *madame*,” he says, “it’s time for you to hold up your end of the agreement.”

I pull out my phone. “It’s 10:15. I’ll set a timer for—”

Jack swipes my phone from my hands. “No phones. That’s part of the deal.”

I try to grab it back, but he hides my phone behind him and steps away.

“That was most definitely *not* part of the deal,” I say.

He shrugs as I walk toward him threateningly. “Should’ve read the fine print.”

I smile. He’s stepping closer and closer to peril without even realizing it. But my smugness fades; if Jack steps into the unlit pool right now, my phone is going with him.

He notes my shift in expression and glances over his shoulder. He doesn’t stop stepping backward, even though there are just a few feet between him and the edge.

“You sure you want to pursue this, Sheppard? Or are you ready to relax?”

My hands itch to shove that stupid attractive smile into the pool and take the phone loss. But reason wins out, and I stop where I am.

So does Jack. “Good choice.” Keeping my phone out of reach in one hand and the carton of strawberries in the other, he glances at the pool. The inhabited part of the chateau is far enough that not even the window lights reach here, making the water look dark and cold. “Want to go for a swim?”

“I hesitate to state the obvious, but the pool’s closed—”

“Looks open to me.”

“*And* security makes the rounds every half hour. If you’d listened to Philippe’s tour, you’d know that.” Immediately I know I made a mistake mentioning Philippe.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Oh, ze tour? You mean ze tour when he invited you to see ze ruins wiz him?” He does a showy gesture and spins around, putting out a hand toward the

tower on the opposite side of the pool. It's completely dark, but I can make out the sign hanging across the doorway telling people to keep out.

“He did *not* invite me to see the ruins. And again, if you'd been listening instead of practicing your ridiculous accent, you would remember he specifically said the ruins are off-limits.” I slip off my sandals. “I'm going to dip my feet in the pool.”

“In the *closed* pool? Siena Sheppard,” he says, “you shock me.” But he's setting down the strawberries and my phone behind him, then taking off his shoes as he says it.

I dip a toe into the cool water, then take a seat on the edge as Jack sits next to me. My phone is on the grass, out of my reach, but I'm kind of glad for the opportunity to ignore it, even for fifteen minutes. I'm envious of Jack in that way. He's not at all tied to his phone, and I wonder if that's part of what makes him such a fun, free spirit. Working on the campaign had me constantly checking texts and emails and the news, and I haven't settled into my usual routine. Maybe after the wedding it'll be easier.

Jack reaches backward, stretching toward the grass until he's almost lying down. His shirt comes up, and I get the glimpse I never asked for of the lower rungs of his abs.

He returns from his acrobatic trek with the strawberries and holds out the carton expectantly. “We still have another case of these to get through, you know. All of us have to do our part.”

“At least Madi and Rémy can help us finish soon.” I reluctantly take another delicious strawberry. “Though, I think Rémy has an interview first thing in the afternoon. Then he needs to try on his suit in case—” I stop, realizing based on the way Jack is looking at me that I've migrated into wedding talk.

“You're making me a dull boy, Sheppard.” He sets the carton beside him. “Madi always said you were the one that was more fun between the two of you.”

“I am!” I swing my feet gently under the water. “Or was. The election ruined me.”

“How so?”

I sigh and let my head drop so I’m looking at the sky where thin clouds are making their way across, dimming the twinkling stars behind them. “I don’t know. I don’t want to mess up something important again.” I shut my eyes, remembering the moment when it finally hit me; we were losing, and the margin could have been reversed if I hadn’t made a couple of crucial mistakes.

“Why do you think it’s your fault Amy lost the election?”

I point to my chest. “Campaign manager.”

“Yeah, but you can’t manage everything. Life’s not that simple.”

“I still messed up. I missed a really crucial event registration deadline, and I chose to put Amy in a debate she wasn’t ready for. Among other things.”

“Hey.” Jack waits until I look him in the eye. “You’re doing amazing. You can’t mess up the wedding because it’s not a win-or-lose situation, Siena. Madi is incredibly lucky to have you.”

I shake my head and break my gaze away.

“I’m serious. I don’t know anyone whose best friend would drop everything and fly across the world to be a combination wedding planner and maid of honor for three weeks. I’ll be lucky if my friends even show up for my wedding. Heck, if my *family* shows up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, even though I’m secretly touched by his words. It’s not often Jack is serious. “Madi would do the same thing you’re doing for her.”

His smile isn’t terribly convincing, and for once, I wonder what’s happening behind all the joking and teasing. Does Jack really think he’s not valued by Madi and his mom? I know he and Madi haven’t had the smoothest history, but she loves him

and has always wished they were closer—and that he'd stop dating her friends.

Ugh.

“Besides,” I say, looking at my feet. “Much as I hate to admit it, my coming here would have been a complete disaster if not for you.”

“Nah, you would've figured it out.”

“Is that the message you got when you picked me up at the parking garage yesterday and I was nearly hysterical?”

“I figured that was just a ploy.”

“A ploy? To accomplish what?”

“To summon me. Because you missed me.”

I huff a laugh through my nose. “You're somethin' else, Just Jack.”

He kicks up a foot to splash a few drops onto me. I lean back to avoid them and am mostly successful.

“Watch it,” I say, “or you'll summon security, and our fifteen minutes will be cut short.”

He nudges me with his shoulder. “You're probably *hoping* for that. Your mind's trapped in that spreadsheet, isn't it? Cell D43.”

I nudge him extra hard with my shoulder, so he has to grip the edge to keep from falling into the pool.

“D36,” I say.

He chuckles, and we both look at our feet, the soft swishing of the water the only sound. My mind isn't on the spreadsheet. It's not even on the wedding. It's on the guy next to me and how much I'm enjoying this—sitting next to the pool with him, dipping our feet in—and how I *shouldn't* be enjoying it.

Jack's staring at the water, a slight frown on his brow. This would sure be a lot simpler if he wasn't so easy to be with and if he wasn't so preposterously attractive.

“Do you ever think about that night?”

My breathing stops, and so does the swinging of my feet. Jack’s still staring at the water, gripping the edge with his hands and leaning forward with his arms straightened so I can see the outline of his tricep muscle.

“What night?”

He glances over, but I flick my gaze to the water and keep my face impassive. The way my heart is hammering is evidence of precisely the night he’s referencing, though.

His gaze lingers, burning my cheeks with each second. He turns it to the water and shakes his head. “Never mind.”

My stomach squirms. I’m a terrible person.

“You ready to head back?” he asks, his voice way too normal for the question he just asked.

I scoff. “Who’s the dull one now? You tryin’ to cheat me out of my fifteen minutes?”

His responsive smile sets my conscience more at ease. “No, I just thought your fun-o-meter might be maxed out.”

I look at him, and we enter a stare-down. “You want fun?”

He puts a hand on my shoulder, the teasing light in his eyes belying the concerned expression he wears. “Careful now. Wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Our stare-down lasts all of two seconds before I shove him into the pool. But I’ve made a fatal miscalculation. His hand is still on my arm, and he takes me with him, plunging us both into the cold, dark water.

I burst to the surface for air at the same time he does, my toes barely touching the bottom.

Jack’s smiling—just as he always is—and he runs a hand through his dripping, disheveled hair, combing it out of his face, acting like this is some stupid cologne ad instead of war.

I push off the bottom of the pool and use the momentum on the way down to shove his head into the water. But, again,

he pulls me with him, and after a struggle, we both emerge, gasping for air.

“You want to go again, Sheppard?” he says breathlessly. His hands are grasping my wrists, keeping me from pulling the same move. He’s a few inches taller than me, which means his head and shoulders are above water. It also means his t-shirt is plastered to those shoulders in an entirely unhelpful way.

I consider my options, wondering if I can swipe his feet from under him. A movement behind him catches my attention. It’s a flashlight in the distance, and it’s coming toward us.

“Security,” I hiss.

Jack glances behind him, then pulls me by one hand toward the opposite side of the pool.

“Shh,” I say, mostly to the water as we do our best to run through it.

We reach the edge, and Jack lifts himself out of the pool. Even amidst the rush to get out, I can’t help but notice his body. I blame the water. And also his body.

“Come on.” He’s reaching his hand toward me, waiting while I admire his impromptu change into a skin-tight suit.

He helps me out of the water and, keeping hold of my hand, pulls me onto the grass.

Clothes dripping with salty pool water, we run toward the ruins, sending glances over our shoulder at the increasingly near flashlight, which is casting its beams over the grass and toward the pool.

Jack ducks under the danger sign strung across the tower doorway, then lifts it for me, and I slip underneath.

If I thought it was dark outside, it’s nothing compared to the darkness in the cold, damp base of the ruined tower. I blink a few times to bring things into focus, and a narrow, winding stone staircase comes into view.

“Over here,” Jack whispers, pulling me away from the staircase and toward the curved stone wall.

The sound of our labored breathing and our clothes dripping on the dirty stone floor fills the small space, and we strain our ears for sounds of the security guard.

Jack, whose face is barely visible beside me in the dark, is smiling, and I almost call him out on it until I realize that I'm smiling, too, like a sopping wet lunatic on the run.

A faint stream of light shines into the tower, and both of us still, eyes locked on each other, backs pressed against the icy wall as we await our fate. But we wait and wait, looking at each other, listening.

After a couple minutes, Jack shuts his eyes and presses his head against the wall. My eyes have adjusted more fully, and I take the opportunity his closed eyes offer to look over him—the water dripping from his hair onto his forehead and cheeks, the shape of his chest and arms. It's been seven years, and despite spending so much time with him over the past couple of weeks, the memory of how it felt to kiss him seems to dim. What's left is mostly a feeling, and I wonder if it would be any different now.

“Yes,” I say softly, my heart drumming as I turn my eyes away from him and to the dark ahead. I can't bring myself to meet his eye.

His head turns to me. “Yes, what?”

I take a few uneven breaths before I answer. “Yes, I think about that night. All the time.”

The silence that follows my response is too much for me, though, and I turn to look at him, my head against the wall. He's so much closer than I realized.

Slowly, deliberately, he steps out from the wall and in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine.

I couldn't move if I wanted to; I can barely *breathe*. His eyes close slowly, and his head tips toward me, and since I can't move or breathe, I figure I may as well give up my sight, too.

Just as the world goes black, his lips meet mine.

The warmth of his mouth makes the stone on the wet clothes on my back colder than ever, and I shiver. He wraps an arm around me, pulling me toward him. Despite the fact that he's wet, he's not as cold as the stone, and I embrace the contact, setting my hands on his chest.

Just like that, I remember how it was to kiss Jack Allred. I remember how it felt for him to unclasp my extensions. I remember the sound of the Dr Pepper fizzing on the ground and the soda splattering my ankles. I remember the feel of his chest against mine and his breath on my face.

But this? This is the kiss I was hoping for when I went home to my apartment and fell asleep thinking about him. It's the follow-up kiss I never got—the kiss I knew I couldn't have. It tastes like strawberry, something I thought I'd never want to eat again after the last couple of days.

I was wrong.

His hands move up my back and end up in my hair, threading through it and keeping our mouths together.

“Excusez-moi!” The voice and light come simultaneously, and we break apart, shielding our eyes from the blinding beacon the flashlight casts on us. It lowers enough for my eyes to adjust and take in the security guard staring at us from the doorway.

THE MAN SHINING his flashlight yells in gibberish. Or maybe it's French. My brain is admittedly not at peak-function at the moment because half-a-second ago, I was completely lost in the task of kissing Siena Sheppard. It's going to take a hot minute for the flame to die down.

"We're sorry," Siena says, apparently not struggling as much as I am.

"You cannot be here," the security guard says in heavily accented English. "You see ze sign, no?" He tries to turn it toward us, but the rope it's attached to prevents it.

I bite my lip because his accent sounds exactly like the one I use to impersonate Philippe. But Siena isn't laughing.

"We're leaving right now." Siena moves toward the doorway, and the security guard steps aside while she passes under, and I follow behind.

"I found zis by ze pool." The security guard reveals a phone in his hand. "I assume it belongs to you."

"Oh, yes, thank you," Siena says, taking it from him. Even with just the light of the flashlight, I can see her cheeks turning red. Her hair is wet, hanging in loose, clumpy waves. "Again, we are *so* sorry. It won't happen again."

Is she talking about the trespassing or the kiss? *I'm* not sorry about any of it, to be honest, which is why I keep my mouth shut.

“We’ll be going now,” Siena says. I kind of expect her to grab my arm, but she doesn’t. She shoots a nervous grimace at the security guard and walks toward the cottage.

I nod at the guy, then skip up to Siena’s side to keep pace with her. She’s chewing her lip, her eyes straight ahead.

“That was bad.” She runs a hand through the wet hair my fingers were in just a few minutes ago.

“Really?” I say. “I thought it was pretty amazing.”

“*Really*, Jack. We can’t do this. The last thing I want is for Madi’s wedding to be ruined because of some dumb, impulsive decision.”

Ouch. That one hurts. Kissing her may have seemed impulsive in the moment, but the second we started, I knew I’d been wanting to do just that for the past seven years. Why in the world did I wait so long?

“This is Madi’s wedding we’re talking about,” she says. “We can’t be causing problems like this. It’s not fair to her.”

Oh. Right. That’s why. I’ve spent the last seven years *not* kissing her because of Madi. Or because of myself and the choices I’ve made in the past.

Yet, as I glance at Siena beside me, it also seems unfair not to kiss her ever again. I like Siena. A lot. It’s not just the kissing I like, though, and acknowledging that to myself is both exciting and scary.

But right now, Siena needs to be reassured all her hard work on the wedding isn’t ruined.

“Hey,” I say, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder as she brushes the greenery aside and passes under the archway. “It’s okay. It’s not a big deal.”

She turns toward me, but I can’t read her expression. “Right. Not a big deal. We both just got caught up in the magic of the place.”

“Exactly,” I say. “It could’ve happened to anyone.” I mean, it’s not *exactly* right, but we can get into the nitty-gritty later when she’s not so stressed.

She swallows. “Let’s just forget it happened.”

I open my mouth to say *not likely*, but I think better of it.

When we get to the cottage, the bags and ribbons and boxes of *foie gras* are an unwelcome reminder of all the work we have in front of us. But rather than sitting down and getting to it like I expected, Siena disappears into her room, telling me not to worry about the favors and she’ll finish them later.

I hear the unzipping of a suitcase, and I assume she’s changing her wet clothes for dry ones. I grab some of my own and head for the shower. Maybe a deluge of freezing water will help cool my feelings. Then I can help with the favors without obsessing over whether or not I’ll get to kiss Siena again.

Once I’m rinsed off and in my sweats, I head to the table, but she’s not there. Eager to be helpful, I get started on my own, hoping when she comes out, it’ll reassure her even more that she’s got help and things aren’t ruined forever.

But she doesn’t come out of her room.

It’s almost two when I crawl into bed, the favors finished and my eyes drooping with fatigue. Despite that, it’s a while before I can fall asleep. Every time I close my eyes, I’m kissing Siena or hearing the words, “We both just got caught up in the magic of this place.”

Is she right about that? *Was* it just a dumb, impulsive decision?

Not for me, it wasn’t. And if Siena meant what she said about thinking a lot about that night seven years ago, doesn’t that mean it wasn’t impulsive for her, either?

Maybe the *dumb* part is the real problem. I can definitely see the argument for that descriptor, even if I don’t like it.

When I wake in the morning, it takes a few minutes to find my phone and see that it’s 9:30.

I curse and hurry to put on a shirt, listening for any sound of Siena in the cottage. But she’s not in the living area when I

come out. The door to her room is open, and she's not in there either.

Maybe Philippe kidnapped her while I was asleep and has locked her in one of his towers. If I'm going to rescue her, we're going to need those hair extensions.

I open the front door to check for the van, but it's nowhere in sight. She must have left.

I rub my forehead and look around the room. My gaze lands on a note at the edge of the table, and I hurry over to it.

Jack,

Thank you so much for finishing the favors. You really didn't have to do that. I was so tired after I changed. I figured I'd finish them in the morning.

I'm getting some things done on my list. I'll be back before Madi and Rémy arrive.

Siena

She doesn't tell me specifically where she is. She's avoiding me, and I'm not sure whether it's because she regrets kissing me or because she feels like she makes poor decisions when I'm around. Maybe those are the same thing.

Sighing, I sit at the table and pull out my phone. I debate sending a text to her to ask if she could use any help. I don't want to suffocate her, though, so instead I search for the number of the chateau I told her I'd call this morning about the bachelor party.

My luck may be out with Siena, but thankfully, things go smoothly talking to the chateau, and I schedule the party for 7:00. It's a family-run establishment, meaning we'll be done before 10:00. Hopefully that's not a problem. Rémy isn't the partying type, so I'm hopeful.

Feeling more anxious than usual, I hop on my laptop to do some brainstorming, hoping it'll pass the time before Siena comes back. I'd like to be more helpful, but I have no way of knowing what to do without that spreadsheet. I'm also nervous about doing more harm than good. I couldn't help but notice a

few tweaks Siena made to the favor bags this morning. She has a particular way of tying bows, and the bags I worked on last night looked suspiciously different.

When the gravel crunches and the front door finally opens, I slam my laptop lid shut—super graceful and not at all in a way anyone could call “overeager”—and hop off the bed. Realizing it’s not going to help anything for me to slide into the kitchen breathlessly, I force myself to stop in front of my door for a minute before opening it.

“Oh, hey,” I say, the picture of not-at-all-studied nonchalance.

“Hey.” The forced quality of her smile tells me I wasn’t wrong about her avoiding me. I hate that I’ve complicated her life when I came here to relieve some of her burden.

“How did it go?” I ask as she opens the fridge and pulls out her water bottle.

“Good. I got a lot done.”

“You should’ve woken me up. I would’ve helped.”

“You needed sleep. I’m sure you were up late doing all that work. I still feel bad about it.”

“Don’t. I’m here to help, Siena.”

I don’t usually call her by her first name, and the way she looks at me tells me she realizes that. There’s wariness in her eyes, like any second I might jump on her and kiss her to death or something.

“Hey, I’m sorry about last night. I shouldn’t have done that, and I *really* didn’t mean to stress you out. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says, playing with her water bottle lid. “I wasn’t thinking either.” She takes in a breath. “Let’s put it behind us and focus on Madi, yeah? I really want her wedding to be perfect.”

“Yeah. Definitely.” How exactly do you put something behind you when you’re thinking about it constantly? “Oh, I

called about the bachelor party. We're all set for 7 o'clock on Monday."

"Perfect. Thanks so much for doing that. It was such a great idea."

"Even if the bachelor party is over by 10:00?"

She laughs, and I relax a little to see a genuine smile from her. "You'll win points from Madi, that's for sure. And I doubt Rémy wants to be out till all hours of the night two days before the wedding. Besides, the bachelorette party will end pretty early, too. Madi wanted to spend a quiet, relaxing evening with the girls."

Crunching gravel brings both of our heads around, and Siena hurries over to the window.

"They're here!" She looks at me, and in her eyes is... a lot. She's probably worried Madi will be able to see we kissed last night just by looking at us. To be honest, I have some of those fears, too. But I'm also afraid she *won't* know. I don't like being dishonest, especially given the history. But the alternative is to cause major problems, and it seems selfish to do that just to relieve my conscience on the week of Madi's wedding.

I like Siena, and yeah, I'll probably dream about kissing her every night going forward, but I *don't* want to ruin Madi's wedding, and her finding out about what happened would do just that. It would be ugly for all of us.

So, I pull up my bootstraps. "Let's go greet the guests of honor."

Rémy's just coming around the car to open Madi's door when we get outside. Madi steps out, and her gaze lands on me, then Siena. Her eyes light up, and she runs over and throws herself at Siena in a way that a guy like me can only dream of doing.

While the two of them have their reunion, Rémy comes over and gives me a hug. I'm a big Rémy fan. For a long time, I thought I was going to end up with Madi's ex-boyfriend Josh for a brother-in-law. That was the other reason I kept a

distance from Madi for a couple of years—I couldn't stop myself from making comments about him. Not only was it making Madi hate me more, it was putting me in the place I had avoided my entire life: in the shoes of Dad.

Thankfully, things worked out. Rémy isn't just better than Josh; he's probably the best I could have asked for in a brother-in-law: chill, funny, and he loves Madi the way she deserves.

When Madi turns to greet me, she's happy, but it's nowhere near the same level of excitement she showed for Siena. Silly as it is to hope for that type of enthusiasm about my presence, it stings a little to see her shift from fifth gear to the clunky energy of first.

The chateau door opens, and out come the bellhop and Philippe. Hooray.

I glance at Siena, who notices him and tucks her hair behind her ear in a self-conscious way that strikes my heart with a lightning bolt of jealousy.

Philippe greets Madi and Rémy in a way that some might call calmly confident, but I would describe as annoyingly arrogant, then smiles at Siena. “*Bonjour, Siena.*”

Madi and Rémy exchange a meaningful glance, clearly realizing exactly who he is, and I'm left with a smoking, obliterated heart and my first sense of actual regret for last night's kiss. It took me an inordinately long time to stop thinking about the first one, given how little I knew Siena, and it looks like I'm in for the same delightful treat this time.

“You guys must be exhausted from the wedding and travel,” Siena says.

“Not really,” Madi says as Rémy wraps his arm around her and kisses her hair. “It's just a one-hour time difference from London, and we never really adjusted.” She turns to Philippe. “Would you mind having our bags taken to our room? I want to spend some time with my best friend.” Her eyes shift to me. “And my brother.”

Nice save, sis.

“Of course,” Philippe says. “I will bring the key myself afterward.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Madi says. “We can stop by the front desk.”

“I insist,” Philippe says, his gaze moving to Siena. “Perhaps I can have a word with you then, *madame*?”

Siena’s eyes widen slightly, while my heart shrinks three sizes. “Of course,” she says as her cheeks go pink.

Philippe gives a little bow like we’re in Camelot’s court. Then he and the bellhop see to the suitcases.

When we get inside the cottage a couple minutes later, Madi’s gaze lands on the massive collection of wedding favor bags.

“Oh my gosh, are these the favors?” She walks over and picks one up while Siena’s thumbs fiddle nervously in front of her. “They look amazing! Is it *foie gras*?”

“Yeah, it is. Is that okay?”

“Of course! It’s absolutely perfect.” Madi sets it on the table and surveys the rest of them. “They really look amazing.” She shakes her head in awe. “I can’t imagine how you managed to get all of this done.”

“It was Jack, really,” Siena says. “It was his idea to do the bags, and he stayed up really late last night cutting and tying ribbons, so they’d be finished for your arrival.”

Madi looks at me, almost like she’s seeing me for the first time.

“Well, that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” I say, uncomfortable being looked at this way. “Siena hasn’t stopped working since she got here.”

Her face blanches a bit, and I silently curse myself for making her think about what happened during the short time she *wasn’t* working. Clearly, it’s not a happy memory for her.

“Thank you so much,” Rémy says, looking between us. “We owe both of you. But now we’re here to help. Firstly, by

making sure your whole suite isn't taken up by wedding favors."

Madi looks around. "Oh yeah. I hadn't thought about the fact that you've both been staying in this place. Eesh. Have you been driving her absolutely crazy?" She cocks a brow at me.

I frown, pretending to think. "Was there another option?"

Madi comes over and gives me a side hug. "I'm just kidding. Thank you so much for helping. I've been worried about her overdoing it."

"She is," I say, feeling weirdly emotional with Madi's arm around me and mine around her. It's the most sibling-like gesture we've shared in a long time.

"Well, not anymore!" Madi says, letting go of me and walking over to Siena to take her by the hands. "You, my dear friend, need to take a break from the work. Relax a little and enjoy this slice of France."

Siena studiously avoids my eye. Madi couldn't be torturing her more if she tried.

"It seems"—Madi says significantly—"like Philippe is more than willing to provide that service."

Siena rolls her eyes, but her cheeks go pink again. "There's still a ton to do for the wedding."

Madi waves aside the excuse. "We can divvy up the responsibilities to give you enough time for a date. Right?" She looks at me.

I don't even hesitate, digging my heel into the charred remains of my heart and rubbing it into the floor. "Of course. Easy peasy."

Siena looks at me. Maybe it's because I'm transparent as a page protector, and she can tell how *not* easy peasy it is for me to take on more responsibility so Philippe can schmooze his way into her heart.

There's a knock on the door, and the way Madi squeezes Siena's hands tells me exactly who to expect on the other side.

“WHAT’S THE POINT, THOUGH?” I hiss at Madi, holding her hand to prevent her from opening the door. “I’m leaving in a week.”

“A week and a half,” Madi hisses right back. “And the point is *fun*. Sound familiar?” She scoffs and shakes her head. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with you. My, how the tides have turned!” She angles her body toward Jack. “Help me out here. You’re the king of dating for fun. Tell Siena she should go out with Philippe.”

Jack’s mouth slides open, wordless. I don’t know whether to laugh or try to save him.

He chuckles. “Yeah, you should go. Have some fun. It’s just one date. Not a big deal.”

Not a big deal. That’s exactly how he described what happened between us last night—a prime example of him *dating for fun*, I guess. The thing is, to me, it *was* a big deal. Not just because I feel terrible for betraying Madi’s trust, but because kissing Jack was like taking the lid off a pot of water and realizing that it’s boiling. Hearing him encourage me to go out with Philippe feels a lot like he just threw that bubbling water on my heart.

He’s being smart, though. Whatever happened between Jack and me last night, it can’t happen again. Of all the ways I could screw up Madi’s wedding, messing around with her brother is numero uno.

Maybe turning up the temperature with Philippe will help me realign my priorities—and make me think less about kissing Jack a third time.

I open the door, and Philippe appears on the other side. His gaze moves to Madi behind me, and he holds out a key. “*Voilà, madame*. Your room is ready for you to use whenever you please.”

“Thank you,” Madi says, taking the key from him. She looks back at Rémy. “We should probably get you ready for your interview, right?” She glances at me and winks as she puts out her hand for Rémy’s. “Maybe we can come by afterward and talk about the schedule for the week?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” I say, avoiding Jack’s eye and how quickly my heart is beating while Philippe waits for the opportunity to talk to me.

Madi and Rémy leave, and there’s an awkward moment when Jack leans on the table and Philippe and I look at each other and then him.

“Oh, right!” Jack stands up. “I’ll give you two some privacy.” He wags his eyebrows at me, then heads to his room, leaving me alone with Philippe.



TEN MINUTES LATER, Philippe opens the door for me to head into the cottage. The chivalry is noted and appreciated, but in some ways, it makes me feel weird. It’s something I’m not used to, which makes me think there are probably a bunch of peasantry things I do that will peg me for the commoner I am. Not just a commoner—a bit of a failed one. Philippe’s family must have done some pretty impressive stuff back in the day to land—and keep—a chateau, while I couldn’t even get a shoo-in candidate to win in the primaries for local office.

Jack is cutting up strawberries at the kitchen counter with his back toward me as I turn to close the door. But Philippe is still standing there, which is exactly what I meant. What is the proper etiquette for this scenario? I’m not used to being asked

to go for a stroll on castle grounds as part of the whole asking-on-a-date thing. Most guys just shoot a text or, if they're old school, call me. If they're real jerks, they'll send me an unsolicited picture by DM.

Maybe there's something to be said about a return to King Arthur days. Though, on second thought, I don't know that I'd prefer being sold to the highest bidder.

"Until tomorrow night, then," Philippe says with a handsome smile.

"Until tomorrow night." Apparently, I'm embracing the formality of this whole thing, which is good because Philippe reaches for my hand and plants a kiss on the back of it.

I force a smile because I forgot my fan and haven't fluttered my lashes in, like, well, ever. I also don't have a servant to shut the door, so I have to do it myself.

After I do, I take in a big breath and turn around.

Jack is grinning at me, his strawberry-juice covered knife in hand.

"You look like you just stepped off the set of a slasher movie."

He glances at the knife, then brings it to his mouth and licks the edge slowly. It would be chilling except for the fact that he can't keep a straight face to save his life.

I shake my head. "You're going to cut yourself, and then it'll be *real* blood on the knife." I make my way toward my room, wondering whether it's okay to wear my maid of honor dress to a date. It's the only formalwear I brought, but what if I spill on it?

No, not *what if*? I absolutely will.

"You're really not going to tell me how it went?"

I stop in my tracks. I had hoped to avoid this. The prospect of Jack teasing me about a date with Philippe isn't all that appetizing, and I suspect it's because I don't *want* him to be able to tease me about it. For some dumb reason, I want him to be sad about it.

I shrug. “It went fine.”

He raises his eyebrows, prompting me to expound.

“It’s not a big deal, right?” I immediately regret the choice to echo his words from earlier. It sounds so bitter, and I’m *not* bitter. Or at least not much. I’m sixty-five percent dark chocolate. Borderline bitter.

Jack holds my gaze, like he’s trying to decide whether my word choice was intentional or coincidental. “That little hand kiss said otherwise.” He cleans the knife with a dish towel. “I also couldn’t help but notice His Royal Highness didn’t offer a private tour of the chateau to Madi and Rémy, despite the fact that *they’re* the ones getting married here.” He cocks an eyebrow.

“I’m sure he will once they’re settled in. He probably doesn’t want to overwhelm them.”

“Uh-huh. So, where’s he taking you? The Court of Napoleon? The ruins at Amboise?” He wags his brows.

“Maybe if it were the Middle Ages or *Ever After*. But since it’s the 21st century, we’re going to a restaurant.” I leave off the part about how it’s incredibly exclusive and almost impossible to get reservations at. “Like I said, not a big deal.” I don’t know why I’m highlighting that part yet again. Am I reassuring myself or Jack? If it’s the latter, I’m an idiot. He clearly doesn’t care—at least not beyond how fun he finds it to tease me about Philippe. Jack was the one who told him to ask me out, after all.

Most importantly, though, none of this matters. Jack is and always has been off-limits. The momentary lapse in common sense that led me to kiss him last night was just that—momentary. The best thing about all of this is that now I can skip the part where we spend a month hanging out and then he throws up deuces just like every other guy I’ve dated. I’d pretend to be fine even though inside I’d be crushed and resenting him so hard, and Madi would be furious with both of us, and Madi and Jack’s relationship would be back in the dumps, and the earth would explode. Trust me, the sequence of events is crystal clear.

So, you see? This is for the best. Jack's cool. I'm cool. We're all just the cool emoji. There's nothing at all weird about kissing your best friend's brother twice, seven years apart, and not telling your best friend so her wedding can be perfect, all while you share living quarters with her brother.

Standard issue situation here. DEFCON 5.

I've just gotta stay focused on what matters. What matters is *not* ogling Jack while he cuts more strawberries and *not* remembering how his kiss tasted like said strawberries and *not* suddenly having a craving for strawberries despite having eaten twice my body weight in them over the past couple of days.

Glad we've got that all cleared up.



“GUYS, we *really* don't need to divvy up tasks so I can go on this date. I'll manage; it's only going to last two hours, tops.”

“Unless it doesn't,” Madi says significantly.

Rémy flips his laptop around so it faces me, my colorful spreadsheet staring back. “Whether the date lasts ten minutes or seventeen hours—”

“Over my dead body,” I interject with horror.

“—this bloodbath of a spreadsheet is evidence that divvying up the tasks is absolutely necessary.”

“Agreed,” Madi says. “I never intended for you to sacrifice your entire life for this wedding, Siena.”

“I'm not! I've been having a great time. I'm in *France*, Madi.” I refuse to glance at Jack or to think about what Madi would say if she knew about last night. But I can't stand for her to think I've been working nonstop when the truth is... different.

Ugh. I am the worst maid of honor in history, and no amount of work can make up for that fact.

Snacking on the strawberries Jack cut, we discuss the tasks that have to be accomplished this week, everything from seating charts to payments and checking with vendors. It's simultaneously a relief and added stress because when I delegate a task, I have to relinquish control over that task, and after the election debacle, that ain't easy.

Oh, man. Just listen to me—I'm a massive control freak. I didn't used to be like this, I swear. Heck, I was the girl who showed up at a stranger's party *alone* the first weekend of college. Now I'm the girl who won't even consider a party that's not on her meticulous schedule.

“Um, hi,” Jack says after about ten minutes of planning, giving an abrupt wave of the hand. “Not sure if you guys saw me here. Despite appearances, I'm not just here to be eye candy. I *can* help.”

“You are helping,” Madi says. “You're doing the bachelor party and going with Rémy to his tailoring appointment.”

“Basically running the show,” Jack says.

“The bachelor party is a big responsibility,” I say.

“Yeah, as big as the bachelorette party, which you're doing in addition to...” He starts counting up the red cells.

“Okay, point taken.” I'm oddly reluctant to give Jack tasks. Relying on him doesn't feel conducive to my goal of feeling entirely and completely neutral toward him.

“How about this one?” He points to a random cell, then leans toward my laptop to squint at it. “Follow up with the band.”

“That's my assignment,” Madi says.

Jack puts his palms up. “Hey, no need to get territorial. Just figured you might want less things to worry about the week of your wedding. The thought of marrying this guy”—he elbows Rémy next to him—“has got to be as much as any woman can bear.”

Rémy chuckles, and he and Madi share a look that has anticipatory-newlywed-bliss tattooed all over it.

“See?” Jack says, pointing to their silent exchange. “You’re already getting lost in those eyes. Let me call the band.”

“Fine,” Madi says. “But it’s not calling, right, Siena? Haven’t you been emailing with them?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I’ll forward the thread to you.”

“Great.” Jack pauses. “What exactly am I emailing the band about?”

I type his name into the cell. “Just to check that they have everything they need and know where to go the night of the reception. They cost an arm and a leg, so they’d better.”

“Should’ve saved some money and had Austin do the music,” Jack says.

“We discussed that option since Madi and Rémy’s first dance song is one of his originals,” I say, changing the color of the cell to reflect that Jack is handling it, “but he’s on tour. He’s the only one in my family who won’t be here.”

He leans in closer toward me, and my Jack sensors are whirling around like crazy as he peers at the screen.

“Did you black out my cells?” he asks.

“Your name is in white,” I say defensively.

“Real subtle, Sheppard.”

“What? Black Jack. It just makes sense.” I glance at Madi, wondering what she’ll think of the sort of terms Jack and I have settled into over the past couple of weeks. But she’s smiling at me like she appreciates me giving him a hard time.

Jack shakes his head. “Okay, Black Jack it is. What else can I do to help?”

AFTER DIVIDING up the tasks for the wedding, the work begins. Madi and Rémy head to their room to triple-check they have all the documents they'll need for the civil ceremony at the city office that will take place the day before the wedding.

"You surviving?" I ask after shutting the door behind them.

Siena's staring at the spreadsheet, the tip of her thumb between her lips. "What?"

"You look like you're about to select-all and change everything to red."

She laughs and shuts the laptop lid. "Just familiarizing myself with the new plan."

"And dying a little inside. Admit it."

She gathers her laptop in her arms. "I'm not! I really appreciate everyone's help. Yours included."

I close the lid of the container with the cut strawberries. We made a good dent during the meeting, but we still have a whole other case left, and time is running out. Soon they'll be rancid strawberry puree. "Listen, I know how hard it is to delegate. That's basically my job. I'm the brains behind the idea, but I don't have the skills to do most of what it takes to make it happen."

"I thought you were the eye candy."

I grin at the jibe. It's evidence things are somewhat normal between us. Which, to be clear, they aren't. Not for me, at least. Unless it's considered normal to think about and want to

wrap your arms around a person every 2.5 seconds. “I’m a man of many talents.”

“And a master of none.”

“Ouch, Sheppard,” I say with a smile. “I promise to be a master of the tasks I’ve been assigned for the wedding.” It won’t be hard. My jobs are pretty easy. I feel a little like a toddler whose mom has given him some unnecessary, easy assignments just to get him to stop asking to help her with the important stuff. But I shouldn’t complain. I’d rather excel at the easy stuff than mess up the hard stuff. This is Madi’s wedding, and aside from the fact that I want it to be the happiest experience possible for her, it’s as important—maybe more important, honestly—to Siena, and her feelings have begun to matter to me. A lot.

Which is why I’m really trying to be happy about her date with Philippe. If it’s what she wants, why would I stop her? It’s not like anything can happen between us. Anything more, I should say. In fact, as far as Madi knows and for all intents and purposes, nothing *has* happened between us.



EVERYONE IS busy working on our respective tasks for the evening, including me catching up on some work with the exercise app. Siena crunches numbers, surrounded by a plethora of receipts when I come out of my room around seven o’clock, feeling peckish.

“Can I join the party?” I ask.

“I’m almost done,” she says. “I can’t get the physical receipts to match the charges on my credit card. Which reminds me—I need your receipts. You’ve paid for a lot of stuff, and it all needs to be recorded.”

I wave a hand and head for the fridge. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Jack,” she says. “They’re wedding expenses, and I promised Madi I would keep perfect track of them. You’ll

make a liar out of me if you don't hand them over."

"Fine," I say. "But only if you agree to take a break."

She stares at me warily, like she's trying to discern what I mean.

"Not *that* kind of break," I say, slightly irritated that the idea is so unpalatable to her. I've always thought of myself as a decent kisser, but maybe I'm wrong. "A movie or something." I frown as I scan the contents of the fridge: milk, eggs, truffles, strawberries, and an opened can of *foie gras*. "And definitely food. I can't bring myself to eat another strawberry or another piece of spongy fungus tonight, no matter how much they cost. What do you say?"

She mulls it over, chewing the inside of her lip.

While I want to spend time with Siena, I also genuinely think she needs these breaks. So this isn't entirely selfish. It's also not entirely selfless. It's selfless-ish.

Her eyes narrow. "Are you picking the movie, or am I?"

"That depends... what would you pick?"

Her mouth tilts up at the side in a way that's evil incarnate. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"That's why I asked. But fine. You can pick. I can't promise to keep my mouth shut if it's a dumb movie, though."

She cocks a brow. "Whereas if it's *not* a dumb movie, you'll be quiet as a church mouse?"

"Are church mice quiet? We had mice in our house once, and let me tell you, they squeaked up a storm, not to mention the sound of their nasty little claws scratching whenever they ran. But I will do my best to watch in relative silence if that's what you want."

"*Complete* silence," she says. "I learned my lesson with *Ever After*. You barely took a breath the entire time."

"Ironic of you to say, since you were snoring three-quarters of the way through. But fine. I'll be quiet."

She looks like she's enjoying this power move. "Or else we turn the movie off and go back to work." She obviously thinks she'll be back working in a matter of minutes.

I weigh my options for a minute. I can be quiet. It's not that hard to watch a movie in silence, especially if I'm interested in it.

"Deal." Apparently, I'm desperate enough to spend time with Siena that I'll agree to wear a metaphorical scold's bridle and watch whatever movie she chooses.

It takes a while, but we find a food delivery app and order in Chinese, which we eat while watching *Sharknado 4*. That's right.

There's only one couch in the living area, but Siena takes a seat at one edge, and I get the message loud and clear, seating myself on the opposite side.

Half an hour into the movie, I've had to bite my tongue no less than ten times. Being a church mouse sounds deceptively easy. I will probably have severed my tongue by the end of this movie if I mean to keep my promise.

"Something to say?" Siena asks, looking at me with an expression of false interest as sharks start flying around.

I pinch my lips together and shake my head, pointing at my Kung Pao chicken and giving a thumbs up.

She reaches over and steals a forkful. "Mmm. So good."

I stare at her, silent.

"Is there a problem?" She helps herself to another forkful. I can't complain, really. Every time she takes a bite, she gets closer to me, setting off my pulse, which sounds extra loud in my vowed silence. But once she has her forkful, she retreats to her side, complete with a gloating smile.

So, I set my Kung Pao chicken on the coffee table and reach over to steal a bite of her sesame chicken. She pulls it out of my grasp, and I lose my balance, barely catching myself from falling onto her. But fair is fair, and I'm definitely having

a bite of that chicken. I may be a quiet church mouse, but I'm not a cowardly one. I'm Fievel from *An American Tale*.

"Hey!" Siena says, pulling away as far as she can. She has to retreat onto the arm of the couch, where I follow dauntlessly, confident she has nowhere to go. *Vengeance is mine*, quoth I.

She raises the little white box of chicken above her head, and I smile because I'm taller and have a longer wingspan than her. This is child's play. Quite literally. I have become a child again to be stooping to this level. Next thing you know, I'll be pulling her pigtails and saying "Neener neener neener!"

I bring a leg up, preparing to stand on the cushions to get my chicken.

"Jack!" she shouts, her body wobbling precariously on the edge of the couch arm as she watches me with wide eyes.

I pause, pointing to the box of chicken she's holding above her. She shakes her head.

So, I do what has to be done. I tickle her.

Her arm shoots to her side, and she doubles over to protect her vulnerabilities, throwing her off balance and toward me. I have no choice—*no choice*, you hear?—but to fall back, my arms around her, protecting the cherished sesame chicken from certain death by sandwiching it between us as I lower myself onto the arm of the couch.

Siena's laughing and pulling away, and even though I want to keep my arms around her, I reluctantly let her go.

"You're ridiculous!" she says, rising on her knees and checking the area for sesame chicken.

My strategy worked really well, though, and only one stray piece fell out. It sits on my chest.

Our eyes meet for a split-second, then both of us reach for it. My hand gets there first, but hers wraps around it, trying to wrest the piece of chicken from my grasp. I bring my hand to my mouth, though, and manage to get it in there despite her efforts to prevent me.

Defeated, she pulls back again and watches me chew while I give her a thumbs up.

It's a miracle I've survived the past two minutes without making a sound. If there was a competition for church mice, I'd be crowned king.

She reaches for my hand, turning it over to look at my palm like maybe the chicken is still there. But all that's left is sesame sauce and a couple of seeds.

I smile, but she's not watching me. Her hand is cradling the back of mine, and she's staring down at it, a slight frown on her brow.

My smile fades, and my heart rate kicks up a few notches from its already quick pace. What's she thinking? Her thumb runs softly over my knuckles, sending chills up my arm and all over my body.

My focus is fixed on her face, trying to understand what's happening, wishing I could peek into her brain for a split second. We were just wrestling over Chinese chicken, but now she's staring at my hand like she's having an epiphany. She adjusts her hand, sliding her fingers up behind mine. I open mine slightly, making room for hers in the spaces between, dying for a peek into her thoughts.

Her eyes flick to mine, and we stay like that for a few seconds as my body lights on fire thinking of kissing her again, here and now.

She pushes our hands up and toward me so they're right in front of both of our faces. They look good together, and I think she agrees because she's staring at them, too.

Her mouth draws up into a subtle smile, and I match her expression with my own. Suddenly, she pushes my hand into my face, wiping the sesame sauce down my forehead, my nose, my chin.

Sticky-faced and stunned, I keep my eyes shut until her hand releases mine. When I open them, she's making herself comfortable again in her old spot. She sets the box of sesame

chicken in her right hand, looks at me, and gives a thumbs up before turning to the movie.

AFTER THE HUMILIATION of the sesame chicken episode, I keep my distance for the remainder of the movie. The courageous mouse has covered in his corner.

But Siena takes pity on me halfway through and gives me permission to talk. My relief is significant, because you know what? It's really hard *not* to seem embarrassed by what just happened when I have nothing but silence at my disposal. To be clear, I *am* embarrassed. She got me good with that little move. But she'll never know it wounded my pride, so I keep up an infrequent but teasing commentary on the movie as a cover.

The next day, we switch things up, and I go with Rémy to a suit fitting and to pick up a few decor items in the van. I really like Rémy, and when the topic of dating comes up, I'm half-tempted to tell him about these growing feelings I'm having for Siena—not mentioning her by name, of course—because he seems like a guy I wouldn't mind having as not just a brother-in-law but an actual friend.

But I refrain because what's the point? Siena's not about to pursue anything with me—she's too loyal to Madi. She's right to be. I've never managed to have a successful, long-term relationship. Probably because I've never really tried. The thought of being relied on in that way and then inevitably disappointing someone? I haven't been able to bring myself to do it. It's much easier to keep things fun and surface-level.

When we get back to the chateau, it's almost dinnertime, and Siena's in the bathroom taking a shower. *There's* a visual I

don't need right before she leaves on a date with Philippe.

I pull out my laptop and check my work emails at the table while snacking on strawberries. It's close to dinner, but I don't even know if I'll eat anything else. Or maybe I should go to the restaurant Philippe's taking Siena to. I could find a booth in the corner and keep a watch on him, make sure he doesn't get too handsy.

Who am I kidding? This is Philippe we're talking about. He couldn't keep his hands off her "cardigan" five minutes after meeting her.

I mean, to be fair, I kissed her the first night I met her, but that's different.

How? It just is. Hoity toity people like Philippe probably think they have a God-given right to kiss any woman they want.

I rub my forehead harshly, trying to force away the imagery of him kissing her. My attempt fails, and I stand up to take the strawberries back to the fridge.

The door to the bathroom opens behind me, and I whip my head around, then still.

Siena's wearing a long-sleeved black dress that brushes the floor. The dress sparkles subtly while her dark hair, pulled back and sitting low on the nape of her neck, shines in the late afternoon light coming through the windows.

"What?" She rubs her red lips together.

She's nervous to go out with Philippe. This is worse than I thought. And she's wearing lipstick. Is that good or bad? I feel like lipstick could be interpreted either way—an excuse not to kiss someone, or a sort of *come hither* invitation to think more about her lips.

I pick my jaw up off the floor. "Nothing. I just didn't know people dressed up to go to McDonald's here."

She shoots me a look and drops some lip gloss into the little clutch she's holding. "You should get out more."

I chuckle and play with the strawberry carton in my hands. I can't help but notice she didn't tell me where they're really going. The dress she's wearing says this isn't just any restaurant. That dress says a lot of things, actually, and I want to blind Philippe before he can try to interpret them all.

"You should probably shut that," Siena says, nodding at the fridge. The door is wide open, entirely forgotten in my slack-jawed admiration. "Electricity isn't cheap here."

"Eh." I set the carton on the shelf even though my eyes beg me to look at Siena again. "What's a few bucks to King Philippe, right?"

There's a knock on the door, and our eyes meet.

Siena pulls her phone from the clutch. "He's early." She drops it back in and readjusts her dress—another nervous gesture.

She holds my gaze for a second, and if my eyes could talk, they'd say *Don't go*. But I bite my tongue—something I got really good at last night—and she turns toward the door, so either she didn't get the message, or she ignored it.

"Wait," I say.

She stops, looking at me with an unreadable but intent expression.

I point to her back. "The tag."

"Oh, shoot." She looks over her shoulder at the little white rectangle poking out of the hem at her back. She reaches an arm around, but it's in an awkward spot.

"I got it." I pull the tag out of the dress, purposely *not* noticing how my fingers brush against the soft skin of her back, then take the paper and the plastic line between my fingers.

"Just be careful," she says, trying to watch what I'm doing over her shoulder.

I could say the same to you. In fact, I'm thinking she should wear that cardigan tonight. But it's not my job to police

what she wears or doesn't wear. I want her to be happy, and if going out with Philippe in this dress makes her happy, so be it.

I hold the plastic line tightly in my left hand, then tug on the tag with my right until it pops off.

The front door opens, and Madi's face peeks in. Her eyes widen as her gaze comes to rest on us.

Realizing how close Siena and I are standing and how it must look with me right behind her, I hold up the tag. "Got it."

But Madi's not looking at me. "Oh. My. Gosh. You are *stunning*."

"Thanks," I say, turning and showing off my jeans and t-shirt.

"Not *you*," she replies.

Siena runs her hands down the dress. "Are you sure you're okay with me wearing this? I think I'm too big for it."

Madi and I both shake our heads at the same time, and the gesture brings Madi's focus to me.

I freeze. I shouldn't be thinking about how well Siena's clothes—or Madi's clothes—fit her. "I'll just throw this tag away." I head to the garbage can, putting distance between Siena and me.

"You should just keep it, Siena," Madi says. "It looks better on you."

"I'm not keeping a dress you bought for your honeymoon, Madi. I shouldn't even be wearing it."

"Except that I'm the bride, and I demand it."

Siena laughs lightly. "Only you could pull off a tyrannically kind flavor of Bridezilla."

There's another knock on the door.

"Is that him?" Madi whispers like Philippe isn't just the king of the castle but also a superhero with special hearing powers.

"Probably," Siena replies, rubbing her lips together again.

“I’ll get it,” Madi says.

“Nah, I got it,” I say. Even if I can’t supervise their dinner or what happens afterward, I want Philippe to have a reminder that I’m looking out for Siena.

I open the door to a smoothly dressed Philippe. Tailored blue suit, neatly tied tie, and hair full of gel keeping it in place. There’s enough of it that I’m hopeful it’ll keep his hands in place, too.

“Good evening,” he says. “Is Siena here?”

No. “Yeah, just a second.”

“*Invite him in,*” Madi hisses at me.

“Oh”—I open the door wider—“yeah, come on in.”

Philippe smiles like something’s funny, and I realize as he steps inside that it’s a bit presumptuous for me to invite him into his own cottage. But his smile is short-lived because as soon as he’s inside, he catches sight of Siena. Watching him see her for the first time dressed to the nines is like the peek into their date I never wanted. Is that how I looked at her? Like a lovesick puppy?

Her eyes are up there, Romeo.

“You look amazing,” he says with that slick accent I’m ninety percent sure is used exclusively to pick up chicks.

“Thanks,” Siena says curtly, her cheeks pink. Compliments make her uncomfortable.

“I hope you guys have a great time,” Madi says.

I’ve never been so annoyed by my sister, and that’s saying something. One time I had the doubtful pleasure of babysitting her ex-boyfriend for an hour at a basketball game while she “ran to the car to get something.”

Philippe smiles at Madi, then at me. “The brother and sister are here to see us off on a date. Very fitting.” Am I just imagining it, or is there some smugness in his gaze as he looks at me?

“Oh, Jack’s not Siena’s brother,” Madi explains. “He’s *my* brother.”

“I know,” Philippe says. There’s definite victory in that expression as he turns his focus to Madi. “But Jack told me he has known her for so long, he is like a brother to her.”

“Oh,” Madi says in a bewildered tone. I imagine she’s surprised because *she* hardly thinks of me as a brother, much less that I’m like one to Siena. “Well”—she goes over to Siena and hugs her—“have a great time!”

“Yeah,” I say, going over and taking the hug that, as a brother, I’m entitled to. “Have a great time.” As I wrap my arms around her, I whisper so softly, I’m not sure she’ll even hear, “You *do* look amazing.”

The way Siena doesn’t meet my eye after we pull apart tells me she heard.



I CHECK my phone for the fifth time. For what, I don’t know.

But tonight, I’m a different person. Maybe I’m hoping for a text from Siena, asking me to come get her like she did at the parking garage. But she doesn’t.

I’m going a little crazy, trying to stay focused.

When Siena’s been gone for an hour, I give up, get up, grab the last carton from the fridge, and head to Madi’s room. I need to get rid of these strawberries. And these thoughts.

“Jack,” Madi says in surprise when she opens the door to my knocking. “What’re you doing here?”

Perfect evidence of what a great brother I am, right? She could hardly sound more shocked if I were the police.

Her gaze moves to the strawberries in my hand, and I hold them out.

“I thought you might want some of these before they go bad, and I wondered if you need any help with whatever you

guys are working on tonight.”

“Oh. Thanks. Rémy went to pick up one of his friends at the train station, and I’m just about to put together the gifts for my bridesmaids.”

“Want some help?” I try to look nonchalant when, in reality, I’m desperate for a distraction.

Her brows go up. “You wanna help me put together bridesmaid gifts?”

“More than I’ve wanted anything in my life. We’re overdue for some sibling bonding time, don’t you think?”

She laughs and steps aside for me to come in. “All it took was coming to France for it to happen.” She leads me to the small desk against the wall. Almost every inch of it is covered by bags.

I look around at the room. It’s nice, but it’s just a hotel room. No kitchen or anything.

“You guys should have taken the cottage,” I say. “This is your wedding.”

“Eh.” She pulls up a stool in the corner of the room and sits on it, leaving the chair to me. “We figured we’d order food or go out every night, so we didn’t need a kitchen. You guys are here so much longer, and eating out gets pricey.” She glances at me as she reaches for a bag. “I still can’t believe you’re here. I thought I might come and find one of you had strangled the other.”

“You mean you thought you’d find *me* strangled?”

She laughs. “I mean, yeah. Siena would definitely be the strangler in that scenario. Has it been hard getting along?”

“Here, switch me.” I pull the chair out. “I’ll take the stool. You’re the captain here.” Yes, I’m stalling. But how exactly do I answer these questions of hers? *We’ve gotten along fine. A little too fine, in fact, and I’m going crazy knowing she’s out on a date with Philippe.*

She takes the seat. “It’s been okay, then?”

“Yeah,” I say, adjusting the stool that needs no adjusting. “It took some work to get her to let me help, but I’ve managed a bit.”

Madi grimaces sympathetically. “Siena’s a stubborn woman.”

“That she is.”

“Thank you, Jack. For helping her. For helping *me*. It really means a lot that you’re here.”

I swallow, a potent mixture of guilt and tenderness swirling up inside me. I haven’t been there for Madi in the past. No, that’s an understatement. My influence in her life has probably felt like a net negative to her, and that’s a sucker punch realization to have just as she’s about to choose a new main man in her life.

But I want to deserve her words of gratitude. I can’t and don’t have any desire to take the place of Dad, but I want to be a better sibling. Siena’s been more of a sister to her than I’ve been a brother.

I reach my arm over her shoulders and pull her to me in a classically awkward side-hug. “I’m sorry I haven’t really been there for you before now.”

She squeezes me back, leaning her head onto my shoulder. “Oh, you’ve been there. Popping in to make snide comments about Josh and stealing my friends.” She pulls back and shoots me a saucy look.

She’s teasing me, but once again, it hits closer to home than she realizes. Not that I’ve stolen Siena from her, but I can’t imagine we’d be having this sibling moment if she knew everything.

It makes me feel terrible. But if Siena isn’t interested in anything between us, there’s really no point in saying anything. Madi’s fear has always been me breaking up another friendship, and there’s no way that’ll happen. Siena and Madi have bypassed the best friends category and slipped firmly into bosom buds.

“I mean”—she pulls a few jewelry boxes out of a bag—“you were *right* about Josh, of course—”

“Aha!”

“*But* so was Siena.” She cocks a brow. “Even though she never liked him, and she ranted about him from time to time, she still tried to support me. She was there through everything.” She heaves a sigh. “Which is why I don’t know what to get her for a maid of honor gift.”

“I thought that’s what all *this* was.” I open one of the boxes and touch the small gold pendant at the end of the chain. It’s simple, and I like it. Suddenly I’m imagining clasping it around Siena’s neck, so I snap it shut. This is what happens when you watch too many chick flicks.

“It kind of is. I’m giving her everything I’m giving the bridesmaids, but she’s my best friend *and* my maid of honor, not to mention the de facto wedding planner, so I’ve been trying to think what I can add to it. I want her to know how much I appreciate her, you know?”

“Definitely. You know what Siena really wants, though, right?”

She shakes her head.

“For you to have the best wedding day possible.”

She sighs, taking the box from me and opening it. “I know, and I will, but... I don’t know.” She stares at the necklace, her brow knitting. “Losing that election really messed with her. It’s like she’s out to prove something with this wedding.”

“Prove what?” I can’t help myself. My curiosity about Siena knows no bounds.

“That she’s not a failure, I guess? That’s what her mom thinks she’s doing, anyway. I’ve told Siena I don’t expect things to go perfectly. I’ll be content to have the people I love here and to marry Rémy. That’s all I really care about. Everything beyond that is just cream on top. Anyway, I’m worried about her.”

Now I am, too.

I'm also determined to take on more responsibility. I've shied away from that in my family for a long time, but this little taste of connection with Madi? The knowledge that Siena sees this wedding as some sort of reflection on her worth?

Those things are enough to make me itch for more work. Even if it's assembling bridesmaid gifts.

IF I THOUGHT the dress was too small for me *before* eating, all doubt has now been removed. I imagine this is how wearing a corset feels. Except this isn't meant to be a corset. It's meant to be sexy. Post-dinner belly pooches don't lend themselves to sexiness very well, though.

However unsexy I am, the whole experience is a visual feast. Somehow, Philippe managed to get us a private dinner in the gardens of Marqueyssac.

Okay, who am I kidding? He managed it because he's a big deal around here.

These are not your average French chateau gardens (because apparently staying at a chateau for a week has made me an expert on those). The hedges around the pink chateau are trimmed in circular shapes, making them look like undulating, green clouds. There are paper lanterns lit around the outdoor seating area, which is set under a canopy of vine-covered trellises. Beyond the hedges, we have a view of the valley below—the Valley of the Five Castles, Philippe tells me it's called.

The only thing to mar the experience—besides my makeshift corset—has been the peacocks strolling around, squawking like they're personally responsible for destroying any romantic moment anyone might have considered having.

But, honestly, even if those things weren't factors, I don't think much would be different. Philippe is handsome, and this place is magical, but I don't feel any desire for romance with

him. I keep wishing Jack were here. He'd love the peacocks; Philippe hasn't even given any indication he's aware of them, which is pretty miraculous in and of itself. They are *loud* and genetically evolved to grab your attention. Even if it means screaming.

Basically, they're a lot like Jack.

He's a dork. But I love him.

Whoa.

Not *love* love him. Just *love* as in he's pretty funny and I happen to enjoy spending time with him even though he's aggravating and cocky and attractive and... whatever. It doesn't matter. Tonight is about enjoying time with *not*-Jack. It's about resetting my compass, because mine seems to point south, as in things-are-going-to-go-south-very-quickly-if-you-don't-get-a-handle-on-yourself.

"Wow," I say after the waiter takes away our dishes. "That was delicious."

Philippe smiles, and I have to hand it to him: the guy is attractive. He really won the life lottery with his good genetics and the whole chateau inheritance thing he has going on.

"I'm glad you liked it." He stands and comes over to pull out my chair. The combination of that and this ancient chateau make me feel like I've stepped back a couple of centuries.

We walk to the car as I try to suck in my stomach so this doesn't look like a maternity dress. I probably should have eaten a couple of bites and called it quits, but I love food too much. Sue me.

But not really. I'm so broke.

It's dark by now, and since our drive is primarily through countryside, it's just us, the headlights, and the road, with a car passing by every couple of minutes and a chateau lighting up the hill about as often.

When we get back to Vidal, I force myself not to look at the cottage and wonder what Jack has been up to this whole time. When Philippe asks me if I'd like to go on a walk around

the gardens, I say yes, just to spite my wish to satisfy that curiosity.

“So,” Philippe says as we make our way toward the side of the chateau, “the wedding is this week.”

I take in a deep breath. “Yes. It’ll be here before we know it.” I’m not ready. I can’t help the feeling that something will go horribly wrong and the most important day of Madi’s life will be entirely ruined because of me.

When I started running Amy’s election, I was *so* confident, and so was she. We talked about her time in office as though it was a given, making plans, discussing my role. When little mistakes were made by me or my volunteers, I’d brush them off because we had it in the bag. We were polling so far ahead.

Until we weren’t. The loss blindsided me. Looking back now, I can see how each of those little mistakes shifted our trajectory just enough to lead to failure. So I’m not making mistakes with Madi’s wedding. I’m not taking success for granted.

“How long will you stay after the wedding?” Philippe asks as we near the swimming pool. There’s a solitary person in it—an old lady doing water aerobics. Good for her.

“Just long enough to do a little clean-up. I leave two days after.”

“And Jack, too?”

I glance over at him, but his gaze is ahead. “I actually don’t know when his flight leaves.”

“*Salut, Maurice,*” Philippe says to the security guard walking toward us.

“*Bonsoir, monsieur,*” Maurice replies, glancing at me and taking in my clothing. Does he recognize me as the sopping wet woman he found kissing Jack in the ruins?

Philippe stops, and the two of them have a short conversation in French. It sounds more friendly than business-like since both of them are smiling, and that makes me uncomfortable.

I let out a sigh of relief when we continue without Maurice.

“Are you friends with all of your staff?” I ask in what I hope is a conversational tone rather than one that screams *are you close enough friends that he told you about Jack and me?*

“To different degrees, yes.” He tosses his head toward the security guard as we make our way around the edge of the pool. The old lady is jumping up and down, bringing her arms in and out with each jump. “Maurice has been here since I was a little boy, so he is almost like family.”

I make a mental note to tell Jack that Philippe isn’t too snobby to be friends with his servants, but then I realize that even using the word *servant* will probably defeat my point. Why do I feel so anxious to defend Philippe to Jack, anyway?

“Would you like to see the ruins?” he asks.

“Oh. Um, I thought you said they were closed to visitors.”

He offers his hand. “Not when you’re with *me*.”

I should be swooning right now. That’s standard procedure when a handsome man offers to take you to his forbidden castle ruins. Romance 101. But I’ve already seen them with Jack, and I doubt Philippe can top that experience.

I give him my hand, feeling more nauseated than swoony. He leads me toward the roped off tower and, instead of ducking under it like Jack and I did, he unclips the end, gesturing for me to pass through while never letting go of my hand.

He re clips the security rope and turns toward me. The night is darker than it was when Jack and I were in here, but the light of the pool casts a shimmering blue hue over the stairs and Philippe’s face. “This tower was part of the original chateau. It was ruined in a siege almost five hundred years ago.”

“Wow, impressive,” I say, keenly aware that I’m in almost the exact spot I was when Jack and I kissed. If he knew I was thinking about it while I was here with Philippe, he’d be grinning from ear to ear, I’m sure.

Curse you, Jack Allred.

“Yes, very impressive.” Philippe holds my gaze in a way that simultaneously throws doubt on what exactly we’re calling impressive and gives me a fair idea what he’s planning to do next.

I freeze because *what should I do?*

I’ve heard a technique people use when there’s a place or object that’s associated with negative memories. Rather than avoiding that place, they intentionally seek it out and make new memories there. They take away the power of the past by painting over it with the present.

Maybe that’s what I should be doing here: kissing Philippe so this crumbly stone tower doesn’t have Jack and strawberry kisses graffitied all over it. Why *shouldn’t* I kiss the nice, future French vicomte? Madi ordered me to have fun, and what’s more fun than a foreign romance? It worked pretty well for her.

Philippe takes a step toward me. “And yet, it has never been more impressive than it is now.”

Alarms are going off in my head because that’s a line if I’ve ever heard one. He’s probably said it a dozen times. Maybe that’s what he talked about with Maurice. *Hey, don’t come by the east tower because I’m wooing another tourist for the next few minutes.* Tomorrow it may be a different girl. Maybe that’s the real reason this place is roped off. It’s for the exclusive use of Philippe and his dates.

As he starts coming in for the kiss, I don’t know what else to do, so I step back.

He pauses, his brow wrinkling. “What is it?”

“Philippe,” I say, trying to gather my thoughts. “I’m leaving soon.”

“Two days after the wedding,” he confirms.

“Yeah. Which means this”—I gesture between us—“can’t go anywhere.”

He's quiet for a moment, then touches a hand to my bare shoulder. "Why can we not enjoy each other for the small time we have together?"

"I don't see the point in something so short-lived."

He brushes his thumb along my shoulder. It's not a creepy gesture. Just an invitation, a reminder that he's here and knows what he wants. "But short can be beautiful. Like a firework."

I chuckle softly. He has lines—I'll give him that. Fireworks *are* beautiful. But my whole dating life has felt like fireworks. Short and beautiful. But all they leave behind is smoke and a burnt-up box. I'm ready for a longer-lasting light. An LED bulb or something.

"Nice as this has been tonight, lovely as dinner was, I can't do *this*." I pause as a little knot of misgiving ties up my stomach. "I hope this doesn't affect how things work as we approach the wedding."

"Of course not." He unclips the security rope again. "May I walk you to your cottage?"

"Thanks, but that's not necessary." Now that I've shut things down, I just want to be done. "I'll let you get back to your Friday evening. I know the way."

I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE LET Philippe walk me to the cottage, but I'm eager to be away from him. Away from everyone. It's not his fault. That near-kiss put me in a weird mood.

Almost as weird as the water aerobics the lady is doing. She looks like she's trying to do something more like water hip-hop now. But judging by the ring on her finger, she's had more success getting men to commit to long-term relationships than I have, so I should probably be jumping in with her instead of judging her geriatric rib isolations.

The cottage is dark when I reach the door, which means that Jack is either asleep already or he's not home. Either scenario suits me. I'm fresh out of desire to be around guys who are just in it for the fireworks and fun. I wish I could be a Cyndi Lauper girl, but I'm not. I clearly hate fun.

I don't even bother turning on the light when I get inside. I go straight to my room and throw myself onto the bed, staring at the dark ceiling. My hopes of turning my brain from Jack by going out with Philippe are sitting in a pile of charred ashes on the floor. What is it about me that's a magnet for guys who see me as nothing but a good time? Why does my heart insist on throwing itself into games of emotional hot potato?

I reach behind me, feeling around until my fingers find purchase on the pillow. I pull it over my face, hold it down around the sides of my head with both hands, and give a good scream. It sounds pathetic, muffled by the pillow. Pathetic like me.

I scream louder, which I realize is irrational because the entire point of the pillow is to muffle the sound, but I'm still annoyed by how much effort I can put into it and how little result I get.

“Siena?”

Eyes wide, I pull the pillow from my face. Jack's standing in the dark doorway, looking at me with a furrowed brow.

“Did I wake you?” I ask, a little hope in my voice. Maybe my screams weren't as pathetic as I thought.

“No, I just barely got here.”

“Oh.” I sigh, resting my arms on the pillow. Pathetic, after all.

He's perplexed. “Were you trying to wake me up by screaming into a pillow? Interesting choice.”

I put the pillow behind me. “No. It was dark when I got here, but I saw the car in the parking lot when we pulled in, so I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was at Madi's helping her with a few things.” He flips on the light, and I wince, covering my eyes.

“Off! Turn it off!”

“Okaaay...” He flips the switch again, and I drag my hands from my eyes. “Did Philippe turn you into one of his Dracula brides or something?”

“It's sunlight that hurts vampires, Jack, not fluorescent light.” I drop onto the bed, my energy suddenly sapped by his teasing comment. I'm not really in the mood for bantering with Jack. I want to mope in the dark and then hopefully get some wedding stuff done.

“I need to brush up on my lore, obviously. But seriously, are you okay?” His footsteps approach the bed. “Why are you in the dark?”

“I'm just tired.” It's true. I *am*, but it's a lot more than physical fatigue. Jack doesn't need to know that, though.

“I’m not surprised.” He takes a seat on the edge of the bed. “You’ve been working crazy hard—and not just since we got here. Madi says you were going full throttle for the election, too.”

Not full throttle enough. “I’m fine, honestly.”

“How was the date?”

I can’t even suppress my sigh.

“That good, huh?”

“It was fine. The food was amazing, the location was incredible, and Philippe was...” I don’t know how to finish. He wasn’t disrespectful or pushy or anything. But I still feel a little disappointed with what happened. I’m not sure what I was expecting.

Jack’s brows pull together. “Did he do something?”

I laugh softly through my nose. Jack’s so quick to want to believe the worst of Philippe. “Are you going to challenge him to a duel?”

He smiles, and I look away. That smile has gotten me into trouble too many times now.

“He’d probably sentence me to death or something. But you didn’t answer my question. Did he do something?”

“Holster your pistol. He was perfectly respectful.”

He nods. “Good. So, you had a good time?”

I stare at the ceiling. “Yeah, I did.” Mostly.

He’s quiet for a second. “Planning for round two?”

“No.”

There’s a pause. “Why not?”

I sit up, not wanting to answer. “What is this, twenty questions? Why do you care so much?”

“Sorry. I was just curious.”

My frustrations bubble up like shaken soda, spurting out now that Jack’s poked a hole. “Curious about what? It wasn’t a

big deal, Jack. You know that. Just like what happened between us wasn't a big deal."

He stares, the whites of his eyes obvious in the dark room. In his surprise, I can see how irrational I'm being. He doesn't deserve this rage, but I can't stop myself. I scoot toward the edge of the bed, trying to steer clear of touching him at all. "Just for once, I'd like to *be* a big deal to someone." I head toward the door, no particular destination in mind except to get away. If I had a swimsuit, I would join Ethel in the pool. Take out my frustrations with some splashy elbow jabs and body rolls.

Jack grabs my hand, stopping me. I don't even turn. Looking at Jack has never done me any favors, and I'm clearly in a dangerous headspace. Ethel is my only hope.

"Siena," Jack says, his hold on my hand firm. "You *are* a big deal."

I shake my head. Trite reassurances are the last thing I want right now.

"You're a big deal to me."

I force myself to breathe, not to take him too seriously. Jack's a charmer, and I put stock in what he's saying at my own peril. He's just trying to get me into a good mood. But I don't want to be in a good mood right now. I want to be mad at all men everywhere.

"When I said your date with Philippe wasn't a big deal," he says, "I was trying to convince *myself*, Siena. Not send some cryptic message to you about what I thought of our kiss."

I shut my eyes. I'm still turned away from him, but he's got my hand, and I'm not even trying to break free. My body language is the communication equivalent of quantum mechanics. "You kissed me the first night you met me, Jack. That's your MO, according to Madi."

Jack tries to pull me to face him, but I stand my ground like a stubborn toddler, so he walks around until he's in front of me. He stares me straight in the eye. "First of all, that's *not*

my MO. Call me old fashioned, but I don't bring my sister along with me on dates for her to even *know* my MO. But more importantly, I kissed you outside my apartment that night because I felt something different with you."

My heart is attempting to burst through my rib cage. But if I break character, I'd be doing a disservice to the reputation of stubborn toddlers everywhere. I have to hold my ground. "And a few days ago?" I say it like it's the clincher in my case against him. The jury is prepared to return a unanimous verdict of guilty.

Instead of acknowledging the expertness of my question, he looks at me like he's questioning my intelligence levels. "I kissed you a few days ago because for the last seven years, I'd been thinking about doing it again." He holds my gaze, all traces of humor gone. "And just so we're perfectly clear, not wanting to hurt my sister is the only reason I'm not doing it right now."

Wanted: functioning pair of lungs. That's the sign I'll be putting up around the chateau grounds tomorrow, assuming I'm still alive. Even if not breathing doesn't kill me, the smolder in Jack's eyes will.

I want to kiss him. Now. No, five minutes ago. No, I never wanted to *stop* kissing him, and the way he's looking at me tells me he's seriously considering the idea of going for it, just like I am.

We've already kissed twice. What could it hurt to do it a third time? Just to *really* be sure it was as good as I remember it.

He drops my hand and squeezes his eyes shut. "But we can't. We can't do it to Madi."

"I know," I say, both relieved and disappointed.

He's completely right. We flew all the way to France to make Madi's wedding as perfect as it can possibly be, and while I wasn't there for the times Jack dated her best friends, I've heard about it enough to know how it affected Madi. It can't feel good to know that the people you thought valued

you as friends ditched you the moment your brother was no longer in the picture.

Even though I really don't think a breakup between Jack and me would mean the end of my friendship with Madi—she's more like a sister than a friend—I can't quite kick the fear that just knowing Jack and I wanted to try would make her never want to talk to either of us again. Especially during her wedding week.

I've had a couple of fun weeks and a couple of decent kisses with Jack. Okay, way more than decent. But who knows whether anything real would come of it, even if we tried, which I'm not even sure Jack wants to do.

Either way, I can't possibly jeopardize what I have with Madi—all seven years of it—for such a massive question mark.

Part of me wonders if Jack's glad to have the excuse of his sister to end things before they even begin, but I'm proud of him for choosing her this time. I wish I wasn't the one being passed over.

He's watching me closely, like he's trying to read my thoughts.

I stretch my mouth into a smile. "It'll be fine." I channel all my confidence and nonchalance. "We managed to be friends last time. We can do it again. For Madi."

He nods. "Does this mean you're going to be rude to me again?"

"Did I ever stop?"

He laughs softly. "No, not really. But I always knew it was a cover." His lip pulls up in a mischievous half-smile, and our gazes hold for a minute, our smiles slowly dwindling as we realize what questions we're agreeing to leave unanswered.

"Well," Jack says with a deep breath. "I guess this is goodnight?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

There's a pause, and half of me wants to press my lips against his in a parting kiss. But the smart half of my brain—okay, the smart quarter of my brain—tells me that won't end the way it should. Or won't end at all.

“Goodnight, Jack.”

Hi, my name is Jack Allred, and I'm a serial dater.

That would have been an accurate way to introduce myself until now. My general rule has been a two-date maximum. Enough to enjoy someone's company, but never enough to fall for her or for her to fall for me. It hasn't been perfect, of course—there are some persistent women out there—but my track record is pretty dang good.

Or it *was* until Siena.

The irony of this isn't lost on me. For one, we've never even gone on a date. Second, the first time I desperately want to take a girl out, I can't.

In the past, if I felt like a girl was creeping into my thoughts a little too much, I'd handle it by going out with someone new. Here at Chateau Vidal, unless I intend to stalk the tourists in the breakfast parlor, that's not really an option.

But even if it was, the thought isn't appealing, and that is a new and terrifying thing for me.

So, I've taken the only route available to me over the past four days: thrown myself into helping with the wedding. Staying in the same cottage together, Siena and I haven't been able to avoid each other, but she's been in and out constantly. And when she's in, she's almost always in her room. Just like she is right now.

I hate it. But I also appreciate it.

But I still hate it.

My body zings with nerves; I take in a breath and knock on her bedroom door.

“Come in.”

I open the door but don't enter. It's hard enough keeping my thoughts and hands in line as is. I don't need to make it harder on myself by stepping into a private space with Siena.

She looks at me from where she's sitting on the bed—the bed we wrestled on when we first got here two weeks ago.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” Her tone is upbeat, but the look that passes between us says something like, *This sucks, but this is how it has to be.*

I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. “I think your family just pulled up.”

She glances at her laptop. “Oh, wow. I lost track of time.”

“Ha! I've had the opposite problem.”

She stares me down like I've just mentioned The-Problem-That-Must-Not-Be-Named.

“Sorry,” I say with a grimace. It's true, though. If time hadn't passed in a completely normal way for the first week and a half of this trip, I'd be tempted to think the French not only speak language differently than me but also do time differently. “Anyway, I'm going to go help with their baggage.”

She shuts her laptop. “I'm coming.”

Madi's always talked about Siena's family in a way that, if I'm being honest, is pretty annoying. It's like she considers them as family more than me. So, I guess I've been jealous.

But greeting the Sheppards outside and helping with their luggage, I suddenly get it. Not just any family flies to France to attend the wedding of their daughter's friend. They really care about Madi, and that makes me feel a hundred types of guilty. My determination not to get pegged in the role of replacement dad left a gap in Madi's life that she evidently filled with the Sheppards.

I can't blame her. In fact, I envy her.

They've got the sort of family dynamic you'd expect on prime-time TV, full of fun and banter. Her parents embrace me like I'm a prodigal son, and Troy offers me a solid bro-hug. As for Tori, her welcome is lacking, but that's only because she's fast asleep in the back of the rental car.

"Has Siena been behaving herself?" her dad asks in a stern tone that's undermined by the fact that he's got his arm draped around her. He destroys it entirely by placing a kiss on her hair.

"Oh, she's been a handful, sir," I say. Their family vibe can't help but put me in a better mood and get me out of my head a bit.

"That's my girl," he says, grinning.

Siena slips from under his arm and peeks in the car. "Tori."

"Don't do it," Troy says, backing away. "Don't wake the monster."

"Tori," Siena says louder, ignoring her brother's warning.

Eyes still closed, Tori swats at her, then pulls her hood over her face. "Leave me alone." Her words are slurred as she nuzzles her head into her backpack. She and Siena are two years apart in age, but they don't look like sisters at first glance. Tori's long blond hair hangs over her shoulder in a messy braid. Siena and Troy look much more alike, with their dark coloring.

Troy shoots Siena a significant look.

"Fine," Siena says, "but you better not sleep through the bachelorette party."

"I won't let her," Mrs. Sheppard says. "But she'll be much more pleasant with a few hours of sleep under her belt. Our flight was completely full, and she had a middle seat. Between strangers."

Siena and I share a glance, both thinking of our flight here. I had a middle seat, and I woke up on Siena's lap.

Gosh, that sounds good right now. I wonder if she's thinking the same thing.

Mr. Sheppard clears his throat and starts pulling bags from the car trunk, and I scramble to help. Between the five of us and the bellhop that shows up, we've more than got it covered.

"Is Philippe gone?" I ask the bellhop.

"Monsieur Bédard," the bellboy says emphatically, "is taking care of chateau business at the moment."

"Right, of course," I say. "Designing the armor for the next siege and all that."

"*Pardon?*"

"Nothing," I say.

"Who's Philippe?" Troy asks as we go through the massive front door and into the chateau.

"The guy who's inheriting this place." I chuckle as I catch a glimpse of the man himself down the hallway, chatting up a pretty blonde. "Behold *chateau business*."

Troy raises his brows. "Apparently, business is good."

"Shut up," Siena says, and I laugh even though I'm wondering whether it bothers her to see Philippe flirting with another girl. Man, I really hope not.

We take the bags to the two rooms they've got on the second floor and leave the Sheppards to get settled in. The door shuts behind us, putting Siena and me together in the corridor. There's nothing but silence as we walk toward the staircase.

Leaving Siena's family was like turning on my awkward switch—a switch I didn't know I even had. But it's there, all right.

"How's stuff coming along for the wedding?" I ask.

"*You tell me*. You've been doing a lot the past few days."

"Meh. Just a little help here and there."

“And it’s all been okay?” There’s that stress creeping into her voice. I can’t hold her hand like I want to, but I can reassure her, at least.

“Yup. Everything is on track. Rémy’s suit alterations will be done tomorrow. I’m waiting on the email back from the band confirming they’ve got everything they need for the reception. The flowers will be delivered Wednesday and stored in the chateau’s fridge room—because naturally every medieval chateau had a walk-in fridge.”

“And the bachelor party?”

“We have reservations for dinner at 6:00 and an appointment for 7:00 at the chateau.”

She takes a deep breath.

“It’s all going to be great.”

“Yeah.”

“Just focus on having fun at the bachelorette party tonight. But not *too* much fun.” I cock an eyebrow at her. “What’re you ladies doing, anyway?”

“Just dinner and spa night.”

“Is that bachelorette code for a *Magic Mike* performance?”

“Yes, Jack,” she says with one of the looks I’ve come to live for. “That’s what it is.”



I’M the first one outside when the time comes for the bachelor party. I pull my phone from my back pocket. I made sure to bring it tonight just in case anything goes sideways or Siena needs some help. Before I know it, this pocket computer will be glued to my face.

I refresh my email as I wait. No dice. I sent an email to the band two days ago and haven’t heard back. Siena forwarded me the one from when she booked them, and after a quick glance at their last response, the guys seem to speak English

sparingly. That's why things have been done by email, I assume. That and the ridiculous cost of international phone calls.

But I'd really like to get the confirmation for my own sake and Siena's. I scroll to the email signature and copy the phone number into the dialer.

It rings and rings, then finally goes to voicemail. I leave a slow, clear message, asking them to confirm they've got everything they need for Thursday and offering my phone number and email in case they have any questions.

Troy, Rémy, and two guys I don't know come out just as I'm finishing up.

Rémy introduces me to his friends, Vincent and Jean-Paul, and we all climb into the rental van together and head to the restaurant.

While it's not the most exciting bachelor party I've been to, the dinner is really enjoyable. The food is good, and Jean-Paul and Vincent are cool dudes with surprisingly good English.

When we get to the chateau for our tournament, we're led downstairs by a middle-aged guy explaining the different types of competitions we'll be engaging in: jousting, archery, and sword-fighting.

He opens a closet of medieval gear—tunics and plastic helmets, breastplates, and pauldrons spray-painted to look like metal. It's a lot more juvenile-looking than I had anticipated, and the size of everything tells me this is something more often done by teenagers, but no one seems to mind. In fact, everyone embraces the goofiness of it.

Apparently, donning medieval gear is in Frenchmen's blood, because Rémy, Jean-Paul, and Vincent finish pretty quickly. They start talking and joking in French, testing out the swords while Troy helps me clip the front of my breastplate to the back.

"So," he says as one piece snaps into place, "what's going on with you and my sister?"

I turn my head, wondering if Siena talked to him or something. “What? Nothing. What do you mean?” *Real smooth, Jack.*

He laughs and comes to my other shoulder, working on that side. “The awkwardness between you two was reaching radioactive levels at the castle.”

I scoff but can’t find the words to respond.

“I know my sister, Jack. I’m just wondering how well *you* know her.” He lifts a brow. It’s a teasing expression, but there’s something in it that tells me he’s not just playing around with this conversation.

“I know her better than I did two weeks ago,” I say evasively, fiddling with the belt around the bottom of my breastplate.

“How much better?”

I glance at Rémy, grateful to see he’s still talking with his friends instead of listening to this.

Troy raises his brows. “Oh, is this a secret, then?”

“There’s no *this*,” I say.

“The way she was looking at you begs to differ.” He steps in front of me, most of the humor gone. “Look, man, I know a bit of your reputation. Just don’t mess with Siena, okay?”

His comment hits me square in the chest, and this plastic breastplate doesn’t shield me at all. “I’m not *messing with her*.” I can’t blame Troy for taking me to task. If I were him and knew anything about me, I’d do the same. But how do I defend myself against his insinuations when I can’t admit what’s happened—or what I want to happen?

“Good,” he says, grabbing one of the weapons from the wall next to us. “Because if you do, I’ll run you through with this.” He holds up the lance, and even though it’s made of plastic, and some of the color has rubbed off, I kind of believe him.

“That would be impressive,” I say. “But, like I said, unnecessary.”

“Yeah?” He shoves the lance into my chest, his eyes half-playful, half-serious. “Prove it.”

Apparently, we are *fully* embracing a return to adolescence, right down to the insults and comebacks. I’d like to say I’m above it, but when you put on a tunic that fits more like a crop top, and when your phony plastic breastplate is pressing uncomfortably against your pecs, there are things to be proven.

Hey, if Troy Sheppard needs me to pummel him in jousting to believe I’ve got Siena’s best interests at heart, that’s what I’ll do.

The arena is upstairs, a decent-sized hall with ten-foot cardboard paintings along both walls, depicting our imaginary audience. In the front of the paintings on either side of the hall are a half-dozen folding chairs.

Our guide, Laurent, comes over and hands me a stick.

“Your mount, my liege,” he says in his thick accent.

I stare at the stick and the stuffed horse’s head at the top. Apparently, I will be pummeling Troy from the imaginary saddle of a hobby horse.

Troy is laughing until he realizes that *his* mount has seen better days—the mane is tangled, and the stuffing is coming out of a spot just under the nostril, looking a lot like boogers.

Laurent asks us our names, then announces us in his best French medieval MC voice as “Sir Jack Allred” and “Sir Troy Sheppard.”

I hold my stick-horse mount with my left hand and the plastic lance with the other hand. On the end, the lance has a bulb of foam, as if it being plastic wasn’t enough to make it harmless. Rémy and his friends are doubled over laughing at the sight of us, and even though Troy and I are smiling now, we are also dead serious. This is a fight to the death.

Standing in the middle of the arena, Laurent holds up a flag with a coat of arms on it. I can’t even understand the words he says, but when the flag comes down and he hurries out of the line of fire, I start charging, and so does Troy.

It's surprisingly difficult to control a hobby horse *and* keep a lightweight lance aimed straight while running, but my eye is on the prize: the upper right side of Troy's chrome spray-painted breastplate.

We collide, his lance hitting me just above the belly button, mine hitting him between the ribs, and both of us stumble, then fall to the ground with our trusty steeds.

Rémy and Jean-Paul are next, then Troy and Vincent. We each go twice, but I don't get matched up with Troy again. Since the next event is archery, pummeling is out of the question.

But since most of my arrows hit much closer to the bullseye than his do, I'm the *de facto* winner.

The final event—sword-fighting—arrives, and Troy and I exchange a look that communicates clearly that we intend to fight each other. But Laurent is in charge here, and he pairs me with Jean-Paul. I manage to beat him, barely. I get a breather while Rémy and Troy fight. Rémy has definite skill with plastic swords, though, and he finishes Troy off within less than two minutes.

I clap, but secretly I'm disappointed. Way more disappointed I won't get to fight Troy with fake swords than any man in plastic knight armor should be.

I beat Vincent, which pits Rémy and me against each other for the final battle.

Rémy beats me handily, raising his sword at the end in victory.

Troy claps offensively loud, while Jean-Paul cries out, "For Madi!"

We head to change out of our armor, and I'm embarrassed by how much I'm sweating beneath my tunic. I'm also trying not to think about how often these things are or are not laundered.

"Your last couple nights as a single man, Rémy," Vincent says. "How does it feel?"

He chuckles as he pulls off his tunic. “Like I wish it was Thursday already.” The civil ceremony at City Hall is Wednesday, but all the big celebrations and the religious ceremony are on Thursday.

“Really?” Jean-Paul says with surprise. “I cannot imagine feeling so anxious to surrender my liberty to a woman.”

“Me neither,” Vincent says with a laugh.

“How did you know?” I’m too curious to stop myself. “That you wanted to marry her?”

Troy glances at me, and I try to look like I don’t really care whether Rémy answers or not. I’m just making polite conversation, you know?

“She had a boyfriend when you met, no?” Vincent says.

“Yeah,” Rémy says, “she did.”

“The world’s biggest idiot,” I say.

“Really?” Jean-Paul asks, pulling up a sock.

“Yes, really,” Rémy confirms.

“Man,” Troy says, unclipping his breastplate, “must have been hard to see your sister with somebody like that.” He shoots me a glance, still with that same mixture of serious teasing.

Loud and clear, buddy. The fact that he’s comparing me to Josh is more hurtful than he realizes. I *do* appreciate Siena. I’ve never met anybody like her, and while she could probably do better than me, I couldn’t do better than her.

That’s a sad thought, since she’s not an option.

“It was bad timing,” Rémy said. “She was just getting out of a long, hard relationship, not to mention the fact that she had a plane ticket home and no plans to come back to Paris. The odds were stacked against us. A lot of people would have thrown the idea out.”

“So why didn’t you?” I avoid Troy’s eye. Circumstances weren’t really in Rémy and Madi’s favor when they first started dating. Yet, here they are, about to get married.

Rémy shrugs as he sets his armor in the closet. “I think both of us were worried about it not working out, but I knew I would always wonder if we didn’t give it a try. So, I told her the truth about how I felt.”

Evidently, the breastplate was doing more than I thought, because now that it’s gone, Rémy’s words hit me like a real lance. I don’t want to live with regret either. I’ve had a taste of that these past seven years, always niggled by the question of what might have been between Siena and me if things had been different. That was after just a couple of hours and one kiss.

Now?

I blow a breath through my lips. I know her so much better, and I want her so much more. It’s not a question of whether I’d regret not giving things a chance with Siena. It’s a question of how long that regret would last.

But Madi... she’s been so much more affectionate with me this week. It’s been amazing to feel the camaraderie and appreciation. But inside, I’ve been feeling like a steaming pile of turds because I’m not being completely honest with her. My new World’s Best Brother title is a complete sham. And I don’t want it to be.

THESE PAST FEW days have been a doozy. I'm exhausted, I'm stressed, and I'm sad, not to mention the quickly approaching problem of how I'll support myself once I get home. I have an untouched email in my inbox from Richard Harrison, the guy who beat Amy Stewart in the election. I can't bring myself to look at it yet. There's just too much going on, and I have an irrational fear that the email will be full of gloating or him thanking me for handing him the election on a silver platter.

The wedding stress isn't strictly necessary. Things are all coming together better than I could have imagined, despite the fact that I've delegated a lot of the tasks. I don't know what I was thinking, telling Madi I could handle it all. The help I've gotten from her, Rémy, and Jack has been crucial. I shudder to think what would be happening if I had been here alone until now. Or worse—if I hadn't changed my flight and had been trying to organize it all from home.

In that way, losing the election was for the best. But since it also destroyed my only means of earning an income until I find a new job, the jury's still out on whether it's a net negative or positive. My degree in political science has only fit me for specific jobs, and campaign management was always my plan. Now I'm not so sure.

Before heading out for the bachelorette party, I shoot off a couple of resumes for online job postings. They don't really look interesting, but I'm not in a position to be picky.

I shut my laptop, grab my purse, and rub on some lipstick before heading out the door. I've got to let go of my stress

tonight. It's my job to make sure this party is everything it should be: a celebration of Madi's future and the wonderful friendship we've enjoyed with her.

I clench my eyes shut. I'm a massive fraud of a friend. Not just because of what I've been keeping from Madi, though, believe me, that's been eating away at me. The thing that makes me feel worse? The number of times I've been tempted to just go for it with Jack. How terrible does that make me?

I don't even want to know, but watching him work so hard for the wedding these past few days has not helped my case against him. I know it's for Madi, but part of me also wants to believe it's a little for me, too. It's like I'm hoping to see signs that Jack's not just all about fun and games, because maybe that would mean...

No.

I can't even go there. Especially not tonight.

I sneak a peek in my parents' rental car and am relieved to see that Tori isn't still sleeping in there. I might have lost my mind if she was.

"Looking for me?"

I turn and find Tori approaching. She's shed her crumpled hoodie, crazy blonde hair, and baggy eyes for a little black dress and sleek waves.

"You clean up nice," I say.

"Amazing what a cat nap can do."

"I don't think three hours qualifies as a cat nap, Tor."

She scoffs as she comes in for a hug. "Have you ever met a cat? They can sleep for ages."

She's got a point.

"I can't believe you've been here as long as you have," she says as we pull away. "How's it been?"

The words are innocuous, but the look she gives me as she says them is anything but.

“Fine.” I glance at the chateau for any sign of Madi and the others, hoping to fend off a discussion I really don’t want to have right now. Two of our old roommates arrived a couple hours after the Sheppards, making us a party of five tonight.

“Fine?”

I can actually *hear* how high Tori’s eyebrows are. “Yeah. Fine.”

“Oh my gosh. You guys kissed again, didn’t you?”

“Tori,” I hiss, looking around like Madi might pop out of the trunk or a nearby tree at any moment.

Tori’s brows inch up even higher, and she hisses right back, “Oh my gosh, you kissed him! I was totally joking when I said that. You little dog!”

I swallow the swear words that come to my mouth and face my sister. “It was a stupid choice, just like it was last time. And Madi doesn’t know, so *please* keep your mouth shut. I really don’t want to ruin everything.”

“I’m not going to tell her,” Tori reassures me. “I care about her, too, you know. Hence flying across the world sandwiched between a man who smelled like pickles and a woman who snored.”

I nod quickly, trying to calm my nerves and watching the door for any sign of Madi.

“So, what’s the plan?” Tori asks. “Are you just going to wait until after the wedding to tell her? Or are you not going to tell her at all?”

I shake my head. “I have to tell her. It was one thing the first time—it happened before I knew her or understood why Jack wouldn’t want to tell her. But now?” I cover my face with my hands. “Ugh, I’m such an awful friend!”

“You’re *not*,” Tori says, pulling my hands into hers. “What happened exactly? Was it just a spur of the moment thing?”

“No. I mean yes. It was...” I don’t know how to put into words what this last kiss was.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“No.” It sounds pathetic, and it’s such a lie.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t. I can’t.”

“Don’t and can’t aren’t the same thing at all.”

“They have to be!” I sound like a crazed woman. Who am I kidding? I *am* a crazed woman. I’m crazy about Jack.

The door opens, and Madi and the others emerge.

“It’s okay,” Tori says calmly, squeezing my hands, then dropping them. “You and Madi are too close for something like this to come between you.”

I nod, but I’m not sure about that, and I don’t want to test it.

But right now, I just need to get myself together, so tonight feels like the party it is.

It’s not as hard as I feared it would be. It’s impossible not to have fun with this group of women, and our dinner is full of the sort of laughter that gets us plenty of looks from fellow restaurant-goers and more than one eye roll from our waiter.

But since Madi doesn’t seem to mind, neither do I. Tonight feels like the beginning of the wedding, and I want it to set the stage for the most incredible start of Madi’s new life.

After dinner, we head back to the chateau, where Philippe was kind enough to let me reserve the spa for the evening. He’s been mercifully normal since our date, bless his heart. Madi asked me about the date the day after, and when I told her I didn’t see us going out again, she didn’t push for more detail. Bless *her* heart.

I considered going out with Philippe again in the event Madi needed any reassurance, but that just felt wrong. Besides, it’s clear that Madi’s not worrying about Jack and me. Part of that is definitely because her mind is focused on marrying the love of her life in two days. The other part of it, though, is that she would never imagine the truth of what’s

happened between Jack and me, which is a really depressing thought. It stinks when people think worse of you than is true, but it's equally awful when they believe better of you than you deserve.

Armed with copious amounts of chocolate, swimsuits, and all the trimmings for great pedicures, we head into Vidal's spa. It's not the ritziest place around, but with a steam room, a hot tub, and massage chairs, it's just what the doctor ordered. Madi was really clear she didn't want anything fancy—just a night with the girls.

“Gosh, it's good to be with all of you again,” Madi says, looking around at us from her massage chair. We're all wearing thick white bathrobes and towels on our heads.

“Tell me about it,” says Ranae. “I saw you when you came home for a while last year, but I never really got to hear about how all of this”—she gestures around at the chateau—“happened.”

“Me neither,” Jill says. “I mean, I heard about how you initially met, but none of the other goods... like your first kiss. Please tell me it was on top of the Eiffel Tower.”

Madi's smile is so adorable, it's almost sickening. “Not quite. More like a tiny elevator.”

Ranae's eyebrows shoot up. “You're joking!”

Madi shakes her head.

“They kissed so hard they actually broke the elevator,” I say.

Madi points her finger at me. “That is *not* true. Or it can't be proven, at least.”

“That must've been one heck of a kiss,” Jill says.

“It was,” Madi confirms.

“Did you know immediately, then?” Jill asks, hungry for more.

“What, that I'd marry him? No. But it was... different.” Her expression turns thoughtful. “Just *being* with Rémy felt

different.”

I try to keep the smile on my face, but my mind is with Jack. Those kisses have been different. Maybe even break-an-elevator different.

“I think we need to hear the *whole* story,” Tori says, adjusting the settings on her chair and leaning her head back, eyes closed. “Beginning to end.”

All of us nod, even though I already know it.

“Siena should tell it,” Madi says. “She’s the reason there’s even a story to tell.” I shake my head. “She saw Rémy’s value before I did. She sent me money, so I didn’t starve on the streets of Paris. She encouraged me to just enjoy myself with him instead of forcing myself to wallow in my breakup with Josh.” She looks at me in a way that makes my eyes sting, then reaches her hand over for mine. “I owe it all to you, including this perfect, amazing wedding week.”

I shake my head, guilt threatening to swallow me whole. If ever there had been a thought of confessing things to Madi or of really pursuing things with Jack, it’s gone now.

I want to be the best friend Madi thinks I am—the best friend she deserves.

IT'S 11:30 at night, and I've put a load in the chateau's paid washing machines, shot off four emails, looked at and solved an app issue, and polished off the final strawberries despite not being hungry.

Siena's still not home, and my nervous energy is driving me crazy. I check my phone for the tenth time since I got back from the bachelor party—a new personal record—but there's nothing from her there, either. Not like I really expected there to be, but the disappointment is palpable despite that.

I'm sitting on the table, swinging my legs and trying to decide whether I should go for a forbidden swim or give it up and go to sleep when the sound of tires on gravel meets my ears. I perk up like a dog whose owner is getting home from work.

Car doors shut, followed by muted conversation and laughter, then muffled goodnights. The crunch of footsteps approaching the door comes next, and my heart rate shoots up like a bottle rocket.

I should probably pretend to be busy doing something, but the door opens before I can think of anything believable.

Siena stops short at the sight of me. Her hair is pulled up high on her head, but the lower quarter doesn't reach the tie. She's got no makeup on, and she's wearing sweats.

“You're back already?” she asks.

“Medieval tournaments go more quickly than you might think.”

She steps inside, slipping off her shoes. “Did you have fun? Did Rémy enjoy it?”

“Yes, and yes. At least, the amount of laughter points to that.” I leave out the part about her brother and me fighting over her honor. “What about you?”

“It was great! Just the usual spa night and girl talk.”

Girl talk. Those two mysterious words have me on edge, but for no good reason. I wouldn’t have come up in that conversation, and even if I had, I don’t think I’d want to know what was said.

Siena pulls out the tie holding her hair up and brushes the stray pieces near her neck toward the ponytail, using her fingers. They all fall where they were before, but she doesn’t seem to mind. Or notice.

“Speaking of girl talk,” I say, heartbeat pushing a thousand beats per minute, “can I talk to you for a sec?”

She turns toward me, her brows pinching together. “Sure. What’s up?”

Such a casual way of asking me to bring up a not-at-all casual topic. But I’ve got to do this. You’d think that, after all the time I spent waiting for her to get here, I’d have rehearsed a good way to say this.

Nope. I’m winging it.

I take a second, trying to decide how to lead into what I want to say, and Siena’s brows pull tighter together.

Better go for it before I freak her out too much.

“I know the other night we decided we’d just be friends.”

She holds my gaze, giving the slightest of nods to acknowledge she knows what I’m talking about.

“The problem is, I don’t *want* to be just friends with you, Siena. I don’t know that I’ve ever really wanted that. It’s what I’ve forced myself to do, and obviously, I haven’t been very successful at it.”

Flashes of our kiss in the ruins run through my mind, and I'm pretty sure they're doing the same for her.

I take a step toward her. "I don't want to pretend anymore, and I don't want to lie anymore. Not to myself. Not to you." I take in a deep breath. "And not to Madi. I want to tell her."

Siena's eyes widen.

"Not just about what's already happened. I want to tell her what I *want* to happen. I want to give things with us a real shot."

She looks away, shaking her head. "You don't really mean that, Jack."

I grab her hand. "I do mean it. This is serious business. We're at DEFCON 1, Sheppard."

She laughs and finally meets my eye, skepticism etched on the lines on her forehead. "Nuclear war?"

"Yes," I say definitively, even though I had no idea that was what DEFCON 1 meant.

"We can't tell Madi, Jack. We don't even know what this *is*."

"I just told you. DEFCON 1."

She smiles, but I know she's serious, and I understand her misgivings.

"The only way to find out is to give it an actual chance, right?"

She swallows. "What if it fizzles after a few days?"

"It won't."

"You don't know that."

"*You* don't know that I don't know that."

She shoots me a look and pulls her hand away. "None of this is real, though." She looks around at the cottage. "We're at a chateau in France. This place is designed to make people feel like they're in a romance movie."

“I think it was actually designed as a fortress to protect against brutal attacks, but go on.”

She shoots me an unamused look. “I don’t think we can assume it’ll continue once we’re back home. I bet it’ll all feel like a dream.”

“A dream,” I repeat. “You mean the part where I paid the equivalent of my life savings for fungus? Or the part where you snored embarrassingly loud on the airplane? Because, quite frankly, this experience would have been more like a nightmare than a dream with anyone else. But that’s the point. With you, even those crazy moments have been fun. Is it just me who feels that way?”

She holds my gaze, biting at the inside of her lip, then looks away. “No, it’s not. But we still can’t tell Madi.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she cuts me off.

“Not *yet*. We’ve got to at least wait until after the honeymoon. Then, *if* we still feel the same way”—she takes in and lets out a big breath—“we’ll tell her. I mean, I plan on telling her about the... kisses, regardless. But not right now. I really don’t want to ruin her wedding, Jack.”

I rub my chin. “Yeah, I know. You’ve worked so hard.” I get it. I do. It’s kind of a lose-lose situation, though. If we don’t tell Madi, we preserve the happiness of the wedding, but both of us are wracked with guilt. If we *do* tell her, we do the right thing but put a massive damper on the biggest days of her life.

I don’t know if Madi will forgive me when she finds out what’s been happening behind the scenes, but I’d rather tell her the truth than have her in the dark *and* live with the regret of wondering what might have been with Siena.

But telling her will have to wait.

I take in another breath and look up at Siena. “Okay. We’ll tell her after.”

She nods, and our gazes hold. Something about the way she looks right now has my stomach in knots. Maybe it’s the contrast with how she looked the night of her date with

Philippe. He might have had her when she was all done up, but I get her like this: in sweats, no makeup, and half her hair undone. I don't envy Philippe at all.

I force my feet to stay planted where they are. "I want to kiss you so bad right now."

Her gaze drops to my lips, like she's considering it. She swallows. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I disagree. But I'll refrain, anyway. Just know, though, that next time I kiss you, Sheppard, I'm kissing for keeps."

She meets my eyes, her own filled with hesitation and hope.

I startle as my phone rings in my pocket. "Geez, that's loud." I scramble to get it out. The number is international, and I swipe to answer, desperate to stop the jarring ringing. This is exactly why I always have my phone on vibrate.

"Hello?"

"Is this Jack Allred?" The speech is halting and heavily accented.

"Yeah, this is Jack."

"This is Martin from Phénix. I received a message from you earlier this evening."

I glance at Siena and put up a finger to let her know I'll just be a second. "Yeah, thanks for returning my call."

"Of course. I am sorry we did not see your emails earlier. Antoine was out of town, and he is the one who takes care of that. I wanted to check with you on a point of confusion."

"Yeah, sure, what's up?" I walk over to the counter and point out the empty strawberry container to Siena.

She raises her brows, and I take a bow, confirming I'm the one responsible for finishing them.

"In your message, you mentioned Thursday."

I chuck the empty container in the garbage can. French garbage cans are made to hold the equivalent of two kids'

juice boxes, so it clatters to the floor. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“I think there is a mistake. The original booking email said Wednesday.”

I pause, my hand on the empty carton. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. I verified before calling you. We confirmed for the ninth.”

I don’t say anything, trying to process what’s happening.

He continues. “Sadly, we have booked another event the evening of the tenth—another wedding.”

Still crouched, I look over at Siena. Her eyes are on me, wide and intent, like she senses something’s not right.

“I see.” I stand up, forgetting all about the stupid carton.

“Do you by chance need music on the 9th?”

Oh, man. This is bad. Really bad. “Um, no. We don’t.” That’s the day of the civil ceremony at City Hall.

“That is too bad.” He sighs. “The deposit is non-refundable at this date, as it is too late for us to book another event, but because of the situation, we will return half.”

I barely hear him, trying to decide how in the world I’m going to break the news to Siena. “That’s generous. Thank you. I can call you tomorrow to figure all of that out.”

When I hang up a minute later, there’s a long, uncomfortable silence. I consider lying to Siena, telling her that everything’s fine. But I can’t. I can’t lie to her. Something tells me she’d notice the lack of a band.

“What is it?”

I hesitate.

“Just tell me, Jack. Put me out of my misery.”

I set my phone down on the table. “The band can’t make it.”

I'M DEAD INSIDE, gaping at Jack, trying to comprehend what he just said. When the seconds tick by, Jack takes a few steps in my direction. "It's okay. We'll figure something out."

The band isn't coming. The band Madi was super jazzed about will not be providing the music at her wedding. How is that okay? "Something like what?" My words sound as dead as I feel.

Jack shrugs. "I'll play the kazoo or the recorder or something. It'll be great. Very original."

When I don't laugh, he takes my hands again, his expression more serious. "Really, though, just leave it to me. The chateau has a speaker system, right? I can DJ. I did it once at a high school dance, and it was a pretty big hit. I promise to play less Usher at the wedding, though."

I pull my hands from his and get out my phone, navigating to my email and typing in the search bar. This can't be real. There has to be a mistake. I pull up the email thread I had with the band and scroll through it.

Jack's eyes are on me as I scan the initial emails I sent back and forth with them.

There it is: July 9th. Crystal clear. "I really told them the wrong date." I stare at the error, sick inside. How could I have made such a stupid mistake? The ninth is the civil ceremony, *not* the reception. It's like the election all over again, and I'm ruining Madi's wedding just like I ruined the election. I've

already ruined my friendship with her; she just doesn't know it yet.

Jack takes the phone from my hands and puts it on the table next to his. "Hey." He tips my chin up and meets my gaze. "I'll handle it, okay? The band is my responsibility. Cell D32 says as much. Don't you worry about it."

Gosh, I want to do what he's saying. I don't want this weight on my shoulders. "Handle it how? I'm assuming they can't come on the wedding day?"

He shakes his head. "They're booked for another wedding. But I'll figure something out. I've got this."

I can't believe I messed this up. The image in my mind of the perfect reception with lovely music playing in the background has been completely destroyed. All that's left is the gaping hole of awkward silence that will inevitably happen between reception events. That or Jack scratching records.

I shake my head at his reassurance that he's got this, but why? Clearly, *I* can't be relied upon to get things done. Jack would probably do better. But what if he doesn't?

"Give me a chance," he says. "Let me do this for you. For Madi."

I meet his gaze, thinking about the times he's mentioned not wanting to help for fear of messing things up. He seems to think that's how Madi sees him: a big screw-up.

But right now, he's offering to take this on. And right now, I'm feeling ready to shed the burden onto his shoulders. Heaven knows they're solid enough.

I swallow and nod.

He smiles softly, a hint of sympathy there. "It's all going to be okay."

I shut my eyes. "I don't want it to be okay, though, Jack. I wanted it to be *incredible*."

He plays with a lock of hair that didn't make it into my ponytail. I should stop him, but I don't. It's comforting, having

him here with me, sharing in this terrible moment. It would be so much worse alone.

“Yeah, that’s what I meant,” he says. “It’ll be *incredibly* okay.”

I laugh reluctantly. “That sounds worse than okay.”

He scrunches his nose. “It does, doesn’t it? But it’s not. Prepare to be amazed.”

He’s trying so hard to make this less awful than it is, and I appreciate it more than he knows. I have to accept that Madi’s brother might be the DJ at her wedding and that the couple’s first dance might be to Usher.

My phone dings, and I pull it out. It’s another email from Richard Harrison. I sigh and shove it back in my pocket.

“Text from Philippe?”

I laugh. “From my nemesis.”

“I thought *I* was your nemesis,” he says with a cocky smile.

“I don’t know, Jack. Did you beat me in an election?”

“Not yet.” He nods at the phone. “What does your nemesis want?”

“I don’t know. I can’t look.”

He puts out his hand. “Let me see.”

I stare at him for a second, then take my phone back out and give it to him. This moment can hardly get worse than it already is, and having Jack with me is better than looking at that email on my own.

His eyes scan the email contents, and I watch him for any sign of what it says. His brows go up.

“What?”

“He wants to take you out.”

“*What?*” I grab the phone. “He’s married.”

He lets me take the phone. “I’m just kidding. But he does want you. For the next part of his campaign.”

I skim the email, my heart pounding. Richard Harrison wants *me* on his campaign? I don’t even know what to do with that information. He’s been a rival for so long, trying to entertain the idea of thinking of him as a boss just doesn’t compute. How would Amy feel about that? It would be a betrayal.

“You going to do it?” Jack asks.

I turn off the screen. “I don’t know. I can’t even think about that right now.”

He nods. “Come on.” He jerks his head toward the couch. “Let’s turn on a movie.”

I look at the soft cushions and remember the last time I watched a movie with Jack. The Chinese chicken fight tested my willpower to levels that would be hazardous in my current state.

“Not a good idea,” I say.

“Why? Because you can’t resist this?” He runs his hands down along his waist and does a little shimmy.

I laugh in spite of myself, keeping quiet. It *is* why I think it’s a bad idea.

“I promise not to throw myself at you, Sheppard. The distraction could be good.”

I’m more worried about me throwing myself at *him*.

He smiles like he’s mic’d my thoughts. “I won’t let you come on to me either, okay? I told you I’d wait, and I meant it.”

I meet his gaze, and there’s sincerity there. I trust Jack, which is a revelation all its own. A scary one.

Since I really could use the distraction, I say, “Fine.”

He rubs his hands together. “Excellent. Now, what shall I choose?”

And that's how I fall asleep watching *Good Burger*.

I DON'T REMEMBER at what point in the movie I fell asleep, but when I wake up, I've got the blanket from my bed draped over me, and I'm lying over the length of the couch. Jack is nowhere to be seen.

He was good for his word, though. He kept his distance last night, but the way he cheered me up by putting on such a ridiculous movie and defending it at all costs made me wish I could curl under his arm and fall asleep to his laugh.

I reach for my phone on the coffee table and am relieved to see it's only 7:30. Tomorrow is the civil ceremony. I can't believe it's almost here.

My stomach tightens at the memory of last night and what happened with the band, and I throw off my blanket, unable to sit still a second longer.

My eye catches on a ripped piece of paper on the table, and I frown, going over to see what it is.

Good morning! Went to pick my mom up at the train station. Be back soon. Please eat some fungus for breakfast. It's starting to go bad, which seems impossible given that it's FUNGUS.

PS Stop worrying about the music for the wedding. I got this.

I set the note back down with a sigh. It's getting harder to manage my expectations when it comes to Jack. But what if I'm right about him, and we get home and he ghosts me?

It hurts just to think about; I can only imagine how it'll feel if it happens. Or if we dated more, I fell harder, and *then* it happened. He seems so certain he'll still feel the same way when we get home, but I'm not nearly as sure about that. Everyone assumes the newest relationship will be different, but usually, it isn't.

I take a quick shower to distract myself from my thoughts, and by the time I'm out, I can hear Jack in the kitchen. Ignoring the desire to make myself look as good as possible before going to see him, I slip on some yoga pants and a loose shirt. Today is a day for getting things done, so obviously I have to wear exercise clothes. Dress the part, right?

Jack glances up from where he's pulling out his laptop at the table.

Sigh. That smile will be the death of me.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," he says, setting his laptop down and putting his hands on his ribs like a stout middle-aged woman.

"What's that?"

"You fell asleep during the movie last night."

I clear my throat and turn away, running my brush through my wet hair. "Yeah... so sorry about that. It was so riveting, I can't figure out how it happened. Must be leftover jet lag or something."

"*Good Burger* is a classic."

"Mhm. I'll finish it later. Definitely."

"Oh, you'll finish it tonight, Sheppard. And you'll like it."

There's a quick knock followed by the door opening to let Madi in.

"Hey!" she says, glowing like you'd expect someone to be who's getting hitched at City Hall tomorrow. "How's it going?"

There's no music for your wedding, I've kissed your brother twice, and I think I'm falling in love with him.

I clap my hand over my mouth to keep the words in, and Madi frowns. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just had an itch.” Rubbing my lip, which I’m fairly sure has never itched in my life, I glance at Jack, who’s half-amused, half-curious.

“Thanks for getting Mom,” Madi says to him. “She’s exhausted. She tried to fight me on it, but I forced her to take a power nap. Things are all on track for the wedding anyway, so she might as well.”

My stomach tightens. I wish I could just let this moment pass, but it’s not an option. Madi deserves to know I messed up a big part of her wedding day. “About that... I have some bad news.”

“Oh?” The shift in her expression makes a wave of nausea roll in my stomach.

“It’s about the band,” I say. “I—”

“It’s my fault,” Jack says, cutting me off. “I told them the wrong dates.”

I whip my head around, staring at him. What is he doing? This whole time, he’s been so worried about messing something up, and now he’s taking the blame for something he *didn’t* mess up.

Madi’s mouth opens wordlessly, her gaze fixed on Jack.

“What does that mean?” Madi asks.

Jack meets her gaze. “It means they won’t be here on Thursday.” He shakes his head slowly. “I’m so sorry, Mads.”

“Jack...” I can’t let him do this. Especially because Madi knows it was me who was working with the band initially.

“Everything was set up right,” he says, ignoring me, “but in my follow-up, I screwed up the dates. I was thinking of the civil ceremony, and now they’re booked somewhere else the day of the reception. But it’s going to work out. You have a list of songs you wanted the band to play, right? I can work on getting them ready on a playlist tonight and be the DJ for the

ceremony and reception. I'll stay up as late as I have to. I know it's not ideal, but—"

"It's okay, Jack," Madi says. "Something was bound to go wrong. There are so many details, it would be more than a miracle for everything to go exactly as it was planned. I'm just grateful you've been here to help. It's been good spending more time with you."

I'm not sure who's more surprised between Jack and me. I don't know what I was expecting. It's not like Madi's a tyrant. I guess it's just the guilt I'm shouldering from the other things she doesn't know about yet. I'm half-tempted to confess the whole thing right now while we're sharing unfortunate information.

"But..." Madi says, drawing out the word. "I hope Troy will be okay taking over during the ceremony." Her smile, soft and affectionate, grows as she looks at Jack. "I want you to walk me down the aisle."

Jack's mouth hangs open, silent.

"I was going to have Rémy's dad, Michael, do it, but"—she shakes her head—"I'd like for it to be you. If you don't mind."

Jack blinks a few times in rapid succession, and I'm almost certain I see a sheen in his eyes. His Adam's apple bobs. "I'd love to."

He wraps his arms around her in a bear hug, rocking her from side to side. Now I'm the one getting teary-eyed.

They break apart. "Got to start practicing." Jack slides his feet backward, holding an invisible hat like Michael Jackson. "You did say moonwalk you down the aisle, right?"

Madi socks him in the arm. "No. I didn't, and I will shove you out of the aisle if you even try."

He considers it. "Might be worth it. We'd probably go viral. Can you record it, Siena?"

"No," I shoot back, glad to find my voice is stable. "Because I'll be too busy body slamming you for ruining the

ceremony.”

“Another reason to do it!” Jack says, like I’ve just sold his idea for him.

My face burns, but Madi is just shaking her head at her brother. “I better have Michael ready to step in.”

“No, no, no,” Jack says, waving his hands. He freezes. “Wait... is Michael your father-in-law?”

“Yeah...”

“So, your father-in-law’s name is Michael Scott?”

Madi heads to the door, shooting a glance over her shoulder at him. “Bye, Jack.” She smiles at me. “Bye, Siena.”

The door shuts behind her, and I whirl around to Jack.

“Why did you do that?”

“What? Michael Scott is a legend.”

I shut my eyes. *Heaven grant me patience with this man.* “Not the Michael Scott thing. Why did you tell her it was your fault?”

He shrugs. “It kind of is.”

“Yeah, kind of. Except not even a little bit.”

“Hey, if I’d helped more with the plans and preparation before we got here, you wouldn’t have had so much on your plate to begin with. *And*”—he stops my attempt to interrupt him with a raised finger—“maybe if I’d reached out to the band sooner, they would have been able to do something about the mixup.”

“Both completely hypothetical and a major stretch.”

“Not if you have an open mind.”

I laugh. I always laugh when I’m with Jack. I’m keeping my distance, but all I want to do right now is hug him. Whatever his rationale, the only reason I can think of for him to take responsibility for something that was obviously my fault is out of concern for *me*. He risked making Madi angry

with him—not that she’s really one for a full-on tantrum—to spare me, and that’s one of the sweetest things I can imagine.

But I refrain from hugging him. It’s getting hard enough to keep my guard up as is, and I need my reason fully intact for this wedding.

“Thank you,” I say.

He offers that beautiful half-smile of his. “I got you, Sheppard.”

I WAKE up early the next morning and make my way over to the main part of the chateau. Between Mom getting here and everything unfolding last night, I haven't been able to talk to Troy about DJ-ing with me.

Now that it's time to have that conversation, I'm feeling a lot less chipper that he'll be up for it. We never really resolved things from the other night—and I'm still not entirely clear if there's actually something to resolve—but I knock on the door, anyway.

It takes a minute for the door to open, and when it does, Troy's bedhead and barely open eyes make it clear I woke him.

“Hey, man, can I talk to you for a second?”

“No,” he says, but he turns around and leaves the door open for me to come through.

I follow him in, and he falls on the rumpled bed. “If you were hoping to get approval to date my sister, waking me up at the crack of dawn when I'm jet lagged was the wrong move.”

I stand by the wall a few feet away from the bed and lean on it. “I'm not here about that. I'm here because I need your help.”

He opens one eye and glares at me.

“It's for Madi. For the wedding. The band that was supposed to play for the reception can't come anymore.”

He lifts himself up on his elbow, frowning at me. “That sucks. But what does it have to do with me? Or you, for that matter?”

“It has to do with us because I told Madi we’ll step in and DJ. You can do whatever you want the rest of the time, but I need you to work the music during the ceremony because I’m going to be walking Madi down the aisle.” I still can’t believe she asked me to do it. My feelings since then have been a bizarre mixture of grateful, guilty, and nervous. It means she’s coming to trust me again, which would be amazing if it weren’t for the fact that she *shouldn’t*.

It’ll all come crashing down after the wedding when we have the talk, and that makes me incredibly sad.

Troy stares at me, considering my request. He swings his legs over the bed and runs a hand through his brown hair. “Okay. Yeah. I can do that.”

I put out my hand, and he takes it in a bro shake. “Thanks,” I say. “I know you’re not my biggest fan, so I appreciate you doing this for my sister.” I pause. “And because you know if you don’t, I’ll destroy you in jousting again.”

He gives a laughing scoff and shakes his head. “In your dreams, Allred.”

I turn to leave, only to stop short. “Hey, can I get Austin’s number? Madi was having the band play one of his songs for her and Rémy’s first dance, but it’s not on any of the music apps I have. I want to see if he can send me the track.”

He grabs his phone from the nightstand and hands it to me once he’s on Austin’s number.

I add him to my contacts and hand the phone back. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I head to the door, only to hear Troy call over, “I’m still serious about my sister, Allred.”

I sigh and close the door behind me.



IT'S early afternoon when we get to City Hall for the civil ceremony. Madi's wearing a knee-length, white dress with cap sleeves, while Rémy's looking smooth in a fitted navy suit.

We're a small group—Rémy's parents, Mom, the Sheppard family, and the four of Madi and Rémy's friends. This is how Madi wanted it to be for the civil ceremony, and she and Rémy are all smiles as they embrace everyone in preparation for the ceremony. Tomorrow the celebrating happens, but today is when they officially seal the deal.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my suit pocket, glancing at the text preview and frowning.

"I'll be right back," I say to Mom before slipping farther from the group and making a call.

When I return a few minutes later, my frown has been replaced by a smile and a bundle of nerves.

"There you are," Madi says when she catches sight of me. She comes over, and I wrap her in a tight hug. "So happy for you, Mads."

"Thanks, Jack," she responds softly while holding me tightly.

We head inside and make our way upstairs to the marriage room, which has a dozen or so chairs set up in front of a mahogany desk.

Madi and Rémy take their seats in the middle, with Siena and Mom next to Madi and Michael Scott and me next to Rémy. It should be André in my place as one of the witnesses, but Rémy made me feel like he really wanted me to be one when he asked me to step in. He's a good guy.

The mayor, a middle-aged woman in a navy business suit, will be running the ceremony. She stands behind the mahogany desk, wearing a sash the colors of the French flag, draped from shoulder to waist, and holding a leather folder in her hands.

She reads from her folder in quick but clear French. Thankfully, they've provided an interpreter since otherwise, the mayor could be initiating my sister and her soon-to-be husband into the Illuminati, and I'd be none the wiser.

After verifying she has the right couple for the scheduled ceremony, she says a few general words about marriage.

"Marriage is the ultimate leap of faith," the interpreter translates, "choosing *today* to tie all of your tomorrows to someone else's, pledging to make the sacrifices that will maximize your happiness and success together, whatever good, bad, and hard the future holds."

From the corner of my eye, I glance at Siena next to Madi. Her focus is on the interpreter, giving me the opportunity to really look at her. Her hair is pulled back, braided and twisted so there are none of the usual stray hairs hanging at her neck.

It's insane to be thinking about Siena as I listen to these words about marriage, but I guess I've passed into crazy territory, because I *am* thinking about her.

Maybe it's not insane, though. I've dated a lot of women over the years, and things with Siena were different from the start.

"The act of marriage," the interpreter continues, "is a promise to be there for one person above all others, to lean and be leaned on, to trust and be trusted."

I take in a breath, feeling the weight of those words. That sort of responsibility—that vulnerability—has scared me my whole life. But as I look at Siena, it's something I can see myself taking on.

She glances over at me, her cheeks turning pink as she finds me looking at her.

I offer a little smile, but my thoughts are somber. Even though I want to take on the responsibility of being there for Siena, to show her I'm serious about it, that opportunity is tied to losing the trust of my sister. It seems like a lot to hope Madi will give me a fourth chance to prove I'm ready to be a real brother to her, but I've got to hope for it.

Madi and Rémy stand and approach the desk as the mayor reads from the civil code about spousal expectations in France. Two minutes later, they're asked the question, both responding with a happy *oui*.

They're pronounced married, and just like that, after less than fifteen minutes, Madi is a married woman, kissing her husband. Kissing him *thoroughly*.

I'm grinning so widely my lips might split, but I can't help sneaking another glance at Siena.

She's looking at me, too, smiling every bit as widely. Hopefully, she realizes right now that *this*—the moment Madi and Rémy got married—is what all this has been about. No mistake in the planning can overshadow this moment.

IT'S LATE MORNING, and the sun has crested the chateau walls and treetops, filtering through the archways of the cloisters where we're setting up for the reception. I've been awake since six, helping Siena and her family decorate for the outdoor ceremony, the cocktail hour that follows, and the reception that follows *that*. Siena has her game-face on, entirely focused on putting together the puzzle pieces she's worked so hard for months to collect. She's wearing sweats, her hair wavy from yesterday's braids but held up with a claw clip.

I'm strangely nervous on her behalf. I want this day to feel successful for her sake as much as for my sister's.

My phone buzzes—look at me, keeping my phone on me at all times—and I whip it out anxiously. When I see the text there, I do a fist pump.

“What's that for?” Siena asks as she carries a centerpiece to the table nearest me.

“Oh”—I stick my phone back in my pocket—“nothing. My team won.” Seems like a believable excuse.

“What team is that?” She tilts her head to the side, then shifts the centerpiece slightly right.

I clear my throat, stalling while I think what teams could feasibly be playing right now—and can be trusted to have won their most recent game. Just in case Siena intends to fact check me. “Barcelona.”

I could have named an ice hockey team, though, and she wouldn't have noticed. She's barely listening, too focused on whether things are in place, down to the tiniest detail.

I take a look around. The space is unreal, like something out of a fairytale—assuming there are any fairytales that take place where monks once lived.

Gold chairs surround each of the tables, which are draped in cream tablecloths and laid with china, silverware, and an inordinate number of wineglasses. In the middle of each one is a centerpiece like the one Siena just brought over: a tall, thin gold vase with a spray of greenery and pink and white flowers emerging from the top. At the end of the line of creamy stone, vaulted archways is a long, rectangular table full of framed pictures of Madi and Rémy from the last year and a half.

“This is incredible,” I say.

Siena takes in a deep breath, and I resist the urge to put my arm around her and admire her hard work together.

“I'm worried the flowers will wilt in the heat,” she says.

“It's pretty cool in here with the shade and the stone.”

“True.” She straightens suddenly. “Shoot! I forgot something. I'll be right back.”

“Let me go get it,” I call out, but she's already gone.

I try to look at the room with Siena's critical eye, and I shift a couple of chairs just as Madi walks in.

Her eyes are wide, and her jaw drops open as she looks around. I wish I could capture her face right now; Siena deserves to see it.

“Oh. My. Gosh,” she says, blinking.

“I know.”

“Where's the mastermind behind all of this?”

“She went to grab something. Apparently, this place isn't quite magical enough without it.”

Madi laughs. Her hair is wet, and she's in lounge clothes, which makes it hard to remember this is her wedding day. Or the second of her wedding days, at least.

“What can I do to help?” she asks.

“Nothing.” I move behind her, put a hand on both of her shoulders, and push her toward the exit. “It's your wedding day. You should be relaxing. Or tying your garter or something.”

She wriggles free of my grasp and laughs as Philippe comes up to us.

“Jack,” he says like we're childhood friends instead of... whatever we are. “I understand you will be doing the music. Where would you like the equipment for the sound system?”

“Just over there would be great.” I point to the wall opposite the pictures of Madi and Rémy.

He nods. “We have a small stage if you would like. Otherwise, we can set it up on the ground.”

Madi shakes her head. “Oh, there's no need—”

“A stage would be great,” I say at the same time.

She gives me a funny look.

“A good DJ needs to be able to gauge whether his music is hitting the spot,” I defend.

She rolls her eyes and turns to Philippe. “Thank you for doing this.”

He gives a shallow bow. “You are very welcome, madame. I have also talked to one of our employees, who will be happy to provide translating services during the ceremony and reception.”

“Oh, thank you! That will be so helpful. You guys have been amazing, and I can't imagine things turning out any better than they have.”

“I am pleased to hear. I hope you will think of us for the next wedding.” He looks at me with a small, knowing smile.

Madi laughs and puts her hand on my shoulder. “Definitely, though, that’s a long way out.”

“My security footage says otherwise,” Philippe says with a little brow wag.

My smile evaporates.

“Security footage?” Madi turns to me. “Oh my gosh, Jack. Tell me you haven’t been hooking up with the chateau guests.”

“Oh, no no no, madame,” Philippe rushes to say. “That is not what I meant. It was just the one kiss. My security guard was simply confused after seeing me on a date with Siena.” His brows waggle. “But even without that, it was clear from that date she would rather have been with you.” He gives my arm a friendly pat and looks to Madi. “If there is anything else you need, madame, don’t hesitate to ask. We want today to be perfect for you.”

The stone holding up these cloisters has held strong for hundreds of years, but I can feel them crashing down on me as Philippe walks away and Siena approaches, a box of candles in her arms.

“What’s up?” she says, looking between Madi and me with a wrinkled brow as she sets the candles on the nearest table.

“You guys kissed?” Madi asks.

Siena stops, and her gaze shifts to me, as though she’s trying to figure out if I’m responsible for this fiasco and why I would tell Madi when we had agreed to wait. All I can do is grimace and hope it communicates that Philippe is every bit as bad as I had initially thought he’d be. I’m not sure whether what he just did was intentional or unintentional, but I’d love to tackle him on this stone floor either way.

Madi’s gaze shifts between Siena and me, waiting and expectant.

“The first time was just a misunderstanding,” Siena said. “I had barely met you and had no idea Jack was your—”

“The first time? It’s happened more than once?”

Siena clamps her mouth shut, probably realizing she spoke before having all the facts.

“Can we explain?” I ask, hoping I sound calmer than I feel.

Tori rushes over, breathless, Siena’s phone in her hand. “Siena, it’s the caterers.”

Siena clamps her eyes shut, and Tori looks between the three of us in confusion. Her eyes widen. Apparently, she has some idea what she’s just walked in on.

“You know what?” Tori says. “I’ll tell them to call ba—”

“It’s okay,” Madi says calmly, swallowing and taking a step back. “I’ve got to go, anyway.” She turns around and heads for the exit.

Siena covers her face with her hands, and I’m straddling a fault line in the middle of an earthquake, unsure whether I should be comforting Siena, who undoubtedly feels like the worst possible thing has just happened on the most important day of her best friend’s life, or my sister, who I’ve hurt for the third time—on her wedding day.

“I can tell them to call back,” Tori says softly.

Siena shakes her head and puts a hand out for the phone. “You should go talk to her.”

I nod, wishing I could split myself in half right now. Not that either of the women I need to be there for want me right now.

I hurry after Madi, but she must’ve broken into a jog after leaving the cloisters because she’s nowhere in sight. I can’t be sure where she went, but I can take a guess.

I head to the front of the castle and then inside, breathing heavily, at a loss for what I’ll say to smooth things over. The truth, I guess. It’s got to be the truth.

I knock on the door to Madi and Rémy’s room and keep my hands balled into fists while I wait. They’re shaking too much for me to do anything else.

Enough time passes that I'm about to turn away and look for Madi elsewhere when the door opens.

She stares at me, her face expressionless but her eyes glistening. Rémy is standing a dozen feet behind her, and I can only guess she was in the middle of telling him what happened when I knocked.

"I know you probably don't want to see me or talk to me right now," I say.

She doesn't confirm or deny.

"I'm just... I'm so sorry, Madi. I've messed up your wedding when that's the last thing I wanted to do."

She swallows but doesn't say a word, and I think it's partially because she can't talk without bursting into tears. I'm instantly reminded of the past and how terrible it was knowing I'd ruined her closest friendships. It wasn't something I did intentionally, but to her, I'm sure it seemed like I was wreaking havoc in her life just for the fun of it. It can't have felt good to have the people she thought she could count on, the ones she thought truly cared about her, ditch her the moment I was out of the picture.

"I understand if you'd rather have Rémy's dad walk you down the aisle today."

She looks down. "I'm not sure what I want. I need some time to process things."

I want to explain more, to say something that will set everything right. But that's the problem with making dumb mistakes in your past. They follow you into the present and even shape your future.

So, I just nod and leave.

THERE'S enough chaos trying to get things arranged with the caterers and finishing up with the decorations that there's barely any time to think about the absolute disaster the wedding has suddenly become. Not on paper—on paper, things are coming together as beautifully as I had envisioned. The lack of band is a black spot on the otherwise pristine planning, but I've had to accept that it's just how it's going to be. Madi accepted the hiccup with calm; so should I.

But the emotional state of the wedding?

I can't even think about it without feeling nauseated, and yet, the schedule dictates that it's time to help Madi get ready in fifteen minutes. It'll be the bridal party and Madi's mom in the room with her. It's supposed to be a joyful experience, making her shine for the ceremony and celebrating this massive milestone in her life with the women who have loved her the most.

But it won't be, because I'm a terrible, terrible friend. Not even the most out-of-this-world reception could make up for that. I don't know what Jack said to her, but I have to talk to her myself.

If I go now, I might have enough time to tell her how sorry I am before the others arrive, so I take in a deep breath and make my way to her room. On the way, I choose the text thread with Amy Stewart with my trembling fingers and compose a message telling her about the email I got from Richard Harrison. Before I can overthink it, I press send. I want to be upfront with her about things, and if it bothers her

at all, I'll reject Richard outright. Thankfully, I know Amy enough to tell how she feels.

The more I've thought about the job, though, the more I want it. I want another opportunity to do things right, to learn from my mistakes. But I don't know if I deserve to have the things I want. Lots of people don't get what they want. Why should I be special?

Rémy opens the door, and the sympathetic expression on his face when he sees me tells me he knows. He knows, but somehow he's not shooting fiery darts at me with his eyes.

He glances at Madi over his shoulder.

"Come in," he says, swinging the door wider to let me in. He goes over to Madi, brushes her hair behind her ear, and says something softly to her in French. He dips his head to kiss her, soft and long. She's really, *really* lucky to have him.

"I'll see you at the end of the aisle, *mon coeur*," he says, and then he leaves us alone.

The door shuts behind him, and the silence is deafening.

"Hey," Madi finally says with a valiant attempt at a smile. If I didn't know her so well, I might be convinced that everything is okay. But I've known Madison Allred for seven years. Not just known her. We've been roommates and best friends the majority of that time. I *know* her, and she's hurting.

"Hey," I say, and I can already feel the tears prickling behind my eyes because this moment is so far from how I had imagined this day going. "Madi... I..." I swallow as hard as I can to push down the rising emotion. "I'm so sorry. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was ruin your wedding day." My voice breaks on the last word, like a twelve-year-old boy's. "I never meant to jeopardize our friendship—it's one of the most important things to me in the world."

"I know," she says softly, taking a seat on the end of the bed.

I take a few steps toward her, unsure how she's feeling right now and if she's wishing me gone.

“Why didn’t you tell me? That’s what I don’t understand.”

I sit beside her and sigh. “Do you remember the party I went to the first week we met? It was a Friday night, and you had photography club, so I went alone.”

“Yeah,” she says, her tone confused by this apparently unrelated segue. Then a question forms in her eyes. “Jack was there?”

I nod. “I didn’t know he was your brother, though. I swear I didn’t, Madi.”

“I believe you.”

I sigh with relief. “Anyway, we got to talking, and he was really the only friend I made there. Then his gross roommate wanted to play spin the bottle.”

She smiles slightly. “Brad? He would.”

“He would, and he did. I actually had to kiss him.” I cringe at the memory. “After the game ended, I decided to leave, but Jack came to say bye and...”

Madi nods, not needing me to finish. Not *wanting* me to finish. Her brow furrows again. “He came over the next morning, didn’t he?” I can see the cogs turning in her head as she puts things together. “He was holding that extension of yours when I opened the door.” She meets my gaze. “He came for you, then realized I was your roommate.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t understand then why he wasn’t acknowledging we had met the night before. You introduced us. *He chews up my friends and spits them out like gum.* That’s what you said.” I pinch my eyes shut, remembering. “I was so mad at him—and even madder at myself—and so humiliated for thinking there had been something there.” I shrug. “So, I went along with it and resolved to pretend it never happened, just like he was doing. It was only as I got to know you more that I understood the reasoning behind how things happened—the history with your friends and him.”

She sighs, and it’s quiet for ten seconds. “But that wasn’t the end of it.”

“It was,” I say. “Until we came here. I knew what Jack was, though, so I didn’t plan for a repeat. I just...” I sigh. How do I explain to her what happened? How I’m feeling?

Madi grimaces sympathetically. “Look, Siena, I get it. Jack knows how to appeal to women. He’s made that very clear over the years.”

Ouch. Sucker punch. To Madi, I’m still being played for a fool by her brother. Maybe she’s right. Maybe this is how Jack does things—makes girls feel like a million bucks, like they’re different, and then... he’s done. Maybe it feels real to me, but to him, this is just par for the course. I don’t have the best track record for gauging how guys feel about me.

Madi shakes her head. “I really thought he had changed. But I guess he hasn’t. He’s not taking things seriously, even at my wedding.”

My heart is in smithereens hearing my worst fears confirmed about Jack, but I also can’t let her think worse of him than he deserves. “The band thing wasn’t his fault, Madi.”

She glances over at me.

“It was *my* fault. I got mixed up when I first booked them. I told them yesterday’s date. I don’t know what I was thinking. So royally stupid.” I rub my face with my hands.

“I’m confused. Why did Jack say it was his fault, then?”

I lift my shoulders. “To help me save face?” I had hoped it meant something about how he felt for me, but I don’t know why he did it anymore.

“Jack doesn’t do stuff like that,” Madi says.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. “Yeah, I don’t know, Madi. I don’t know why he did it.”

Madi is quiet, but I can feel her eyes on me. “I should’ve asked this before, but do you really like him?”

I swallow, and that dang burning behind the eyes hits me again. I want to lie to her because I’m embarrassed about the hopes I’ve been harboring about Jack and what exactly has been happening between us.

But I can't lie to Madi. Not now. Not ever again.

The incoming rush of tears commandeers my laugh, making me sound like a pathetic warbling bird. Probably because I *am* pathetic. "I do, stupid as it is." The spectacular waterworks begin. "I *really* like him."

Madi stands, grabs my hands, and pulls me to a stand and then into her arms. "If he doesn't feel the same way," she says with her arms around me and a catch in her voice, "then he's even stupider than I thought."

"Or maybe I'm the stupid one," I say, holding her tightly.

"No," she replies. "You're my best friend, Siena. I hope you always will be. I just..." Her voice gets weak, and I can hear her swallow. "I don't want to lose you if things don't work out with Jack."

I shake my head against hers, holding her tighter than ever. "That would never happen. You're stuck with me no matter what." I pause. "If you still want me?"

She squeezes me, giving me my answer.

There's a knock on the door, and we pull apart, wiping at our eyes and laughing at ourselves.

"You ready to get married?" I ask. "Again?"

"Only if you're here with me," she says.

I pull her into another hug, but there's a repeat knock. Blinking away the second wave of incoming tears, I hurry to open the door for the others.

THE SUN IS SHINING its brightest on the guests assembled in the chairs on the chateau lawn. The same flowers from the reception centerpieces line the aisle and cover the archway at the head of everything. Behind it, Chateau Vidal rises like the impressive fortress-slash-hotel-slash-aristocratic home it is. Completing the ambiance is the calm, classical music coming from two modest speakers hidden behind the flowers adorning the arch.

“This is the song, right?” Troy leans over to me to show me his phone, pointing to the song at the bottom of a playlist called *Ceremony*.

“Yeah,” I say with a burst of nerves. That’s the song Madi will walk down the aisle to, and I still have no idea if I’ll be the one escorting her. I assume not, or she would have said something or sent a message to me by now. The ceremony is starting in a few minutes.

I haven’t seen any sign of Siena, either. That’s probably normal. She’s been helping Madi get ready, along with a few of the other women. But I can’t help feeling nervous despite that.

What if they’ve been talking and decide together that I’m a worthless sack of scum? Losing my relationship with Madi *and* losing whatever Siena and I have is a distinct possibility, and it makes me sick to think about.

“You good?” I ask Troy, who nods. “I’ll be right back.”

I head toward the side of the chateau where there's shade and privacy. I clasp my hand shut when I realize it's shaking.

I'm such an idiot. I want to be a good brother to Madi. I want to show Siena I'm serious about her.

Instead, I've screwed everything up.

"Hey."

I whirl around toward the voice, and my jaw goes slack.

Madi's hair is curled and pulled back at the nape of her neck, bouquet in hand. Her dress is white and sleek with a deep neckline, sleeves to her wrists, and a straight skirt that clings to her legs. A sheer veil drops from the crown of her head to her waist.

"Wow," I say. "You look gorgeous."

"You're not so bad yourself."

I give a small chuckle, glancing at my navy suit and pastel pink tie. When I look back up, she's staring at me like she's trying to figure something out.

"I know what you did, Jack."

I take in a deep breath and nod. Siena told her the whole story, I'm sure. Which is good. I guess I'd rather have my sister hate me knowing the truth than love me believing a lie. "Not that you feel you can trust me right now, but I really didn't do it to hurt you. In fact, I really tried *not* to do it."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Though, while we're on the subject, can I just say, if you didn't go around kissing so many girls at parties, this wouldn't be a problem."

I look away. "It wasn't like that."

"You mean you didn't kiss multiple girls before kissing Siena that night?"

I scoff. "Yeah, thanks to Brad and his weird freshman girl fetish. But Siena played spin the bottle, too. Did she tell you she kissed Brad?"

Madi wrinkles her nose in disgust. “While trying not to gag, yes, she did.”

I can’t help a laugh. That night was so long ago, but it’s ingrained in my memory—everything from the smell of Dr Pepper to the way the light of the blue fridge caught on Siena’s smile. “Yeah, she wasn’t a fan of his.”

“But she’s a fan of you.” She holds my gaze, and my heart races. What I wouldn’t give to know exactly what Siena said about me to Madi. “You took the blame for the problem with the band, even though it wasn’t your fault.”

It’s half-statement, half-question, and I stare at the freshly cut grass. “She’s worked so hard on this wedding, Madi. Harder than even *you* know.”

“I believe you. And it means a lot to me that you would do that for her. She’s had a rough summer, and I’m only now realizing just how much pressure she’s put on herself with my wedding.” She shakes her head like she’s upset with herself. “But my question is why *you* did it.”

I meet her gaze, and we stare at each other as the seconds tick by, the ceremony music playing in the background.

“I’m in love with her, Madi.” I swallow because those words are a new taste in my mouth. I hadn’t even *thought* that phrase about Siena; it just came out. But it feels true. “I know she’s your best friend, and I know it feels like we’ve been down this road before, and it didn’t turn out well, but...”

Siena’s head pops around the side of the building, and she sighs with relief. “There you are.” She glances at me, then quickly to Madi again, like she’s scared to meet my eye. “Everything is ready.”

It’s Madi’s wedding day, and she looks like a million bucks, but Siena...

The blush-colored, one-shoulder dress she’s wearing is beaded across the top while the same sleek material from Madi’s dress hugs her waist, hips, and legs, ending in a pair of heels. I’ve never seen her look so beautiful, and that’s saying something.

“Okay,” Madi says. “Thank you, Siena. Be right there.”

Siena smiles and, without even glancing at me, she walks away, partially visible as she heads toward the ceremony. Her dress hugs her hips with each step.

Madi clears her throat. “Will you stop checking out my best friend and walk me down the aisle already?”

My cheeks heat, and I take her hand, pulling it through my bent arm, still not sure how she feels about what’s happened today. But she made a joke, which gives me some hope. “I’ll do my best, but no promises.”

She rolls her eyes, and I take a moment to admire her. Technically, she’s married already, but this ceremony and everything that follows will make it feel more real. “I wish Dad could be here.”

“Me too,” she says, squeezing my arm.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a crappy stand-in for him.”

Her brows draw together. “I never expected that of you, Jack.”

“But other people did.” I blow out a breath. “I’m never going to be even half the man Dad was, Mads.”

She grimaces, searching my face. “I think you’ve idealized him, Jack. Dad was amazing, and I miss him every day, even after all these years. But he was still human.”

I chew my lip. “You know Mom’s photo album?”

She nods.

“I’ve looked at that thing a hundred times, memorizing every picture of him. But there’s one photo in particular that’s ingrained in my brain. I’m on Dad’s shoulders, you’re hanging onto his legs, and Mom’s watching from a few feet away.”

“I know the photo.”

Of course she does. Photos are Madi’s life. I narrow my eyes, picturing the image in my mind, faded colors and all. “We’re all looking at him like—”

“He’s the sun, and we’re revolving around him?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“It’s a great photo,” she says with a hint of nostalgia. She chuckles. “Do you remember what happened after?”

I shake my head. If I had any sketching skills, I could reproduce that photo right now, but I don’t remember anything else about the day.

“He bought us cotton candy and a slushy drink. You spilled the slushy all over his head, and he yelled at you, so you started crying. Then my hands got so sticky from the cotton candy that I freaked out. Anyway, he made us all go home.” She bumps me with her shoulder. “Thanks a lot.”

I smile, vaguely remembering the day now that she’s mentioned it.

“He was just a dad doing his best, Jack. Besides, who cares about other people and what they expected? They don’t matter. All *I’ve* ever wanted was an older brother.”

I let out a breath, and with it, the guilt and the expectations I’ve been carrying with me—apparently unnecessarily—for so many years. Maybe I *have* idealized Dad. Those photos I’ve stared at so many times are just a handful of moments. Good moments. No one’s reaching for the camera when things are a mess, after all.

Knowing Dad wasn’t perfect doesn’t make me admire him any less. It just helps me give myself a little more grace.

“I think I can manage the brother thing.” I kiss her on the cheek. “You ready?”

She plants a kiss on mine. “I’m ready.”

MADI IS an absolute and utter vision in her dress, and anyone would know it just from watching Rémy's face as she walks down the aisle toward him. I can't take credit, despite helping with her hair and makeup. Half of it is the look of pure joy on her face as she draws closer to her husband.

This. This was the goal of everything I and others have done for this wedding—to see Madi walking along puffy clouds of joy toward her heaven on earth. Somehow, even with the mistakes I made—one of them monumental—it happened.

I should have known I didn't have the power to ruin her wedding. It was never about the centerpieces or the favors or the music. It certainly wasn't about Jack or me. It's always been about celebrating her and Rémy's love.

My eyes stray to Jack because they have no self-control whatsoever, and my heart skips and gallops and stops all at once. With a navy suit that fits him like a glove, his hair brushed forward tidily, and a smile on his face, he's more handsome than any man deserves to be.

I fiddle with my dress, wishing I knew what conversation I stumbled upon around the corner a few minutes ago. Even though Madi didn't say it outright, I'm sure she asked him how he really feels about me. Not knowing his response is killing me softly.

I'm happy, though, too, because the way Madi and Jack look at each other as they reach their parting place at the end

of the aisle tells me things are okay between them. And that's a huge deal.

When Jack lifts Madi's veil and kisses her on the cheek, I feel a third wave of pricking tears threatening. I'm a giant bottle of emotion today, folks. A walking, talking hormone cocktail.

Rémy takes Madi's hand while Jack moves to stand in his place next to Jean-Paul and Vincent, clasping his hands in front of him as the officiant begins the ceremony.

I try to keep my focus on Madi and Rémy while he talks, but given how many times I've cried today, my hormones have taken control of my eyes, so they wander to Jack.

His gaze shifts to me. I'm used to him smiling in a moment like this, but he doesn't this time. The way he looks at me has my blood running hot and my cheeks burning up.

The ceremony lasts twenty-five minutes, and with a showy kiss from Madi and Rémy, the guests clap and make their way for cocktail hour while the wedding party takes photos around the castle grounds.

The conspiratorial smile Jack sends me when the photographer tells us to line up in front of the ruins almost undoes me. I have no doubt at all my cheeks will be cherry red in those photos. Lovely.

But that smile gives me hope that maybe something can happen between us.

Once the photographer excuses the wedding party and family members, I stick around to help with Madi's dress and veil, only half-wishing I could go with Jack to ask him for a translation of the looks he's been giving me.

By the time we finish photos, the reception is getting underway, and I rush to the cloisters, praying everything is as I left it late this morning. I'm relieved to see the caterers, dressed in all black, bustling around in preparation for dinner.

My brother Troy is on the stage with the sound equipment, and I scan the cloisters for any sign of Jack, but I can't see

him, which is saying something. I think I could spot him in a sold-out football stadium.

I walk over to Troy, who's somehow bobbing his head of perfectly coiffed brown hair up and down to a string quartet.

"Where's Jack?" I ask with as much nonchalance as possible.

He smiles at me in a way that says he doesn't buy my casualness for a second. "You tell *me*."

I wait until he stops looking at me like he's the cleverest boy in the world.

"I'm not sure where he went," Troy finally says, bobbing his head again. "He just said he'd be back in half an hour."

I sigh. It's not looking like I'll have the opportunity to talk with him about things today. That's probably for the best. It's Madi's day, after all. You can't *really* die from suspense, right?

The guests filter in from cocktail hour, taking their seats at the round tables. After the heat of the summer day outside, the cool cloisters are welcome.

The head caterer approaches, and I leave Troy to his classical jam session so I can iron out a couple of last-minute details with the food.

"*Whaaat?*"

I glance over at Troy's exclamation and follow his gaze to the doorway, my eyes widening at the sight of someone walking in, guitar case in hand.

It takes me a second to register and really believe my eyes. Austin catches sight of me and smiles. His time on tour has changed him. He's always been handsome, with his dark hair and blue eyes, but now he looks... more put together or something? Like someone taught him how to dress and do his hair.

I run over and hug him because I haven't seen him in months, and he bears hugs me the way only brothers can do.

“What are you doing here?” I say. “I thought you couldn’t come.”

“I couldn’t,” he says, setting down his guitar awkwardly before hugging me back. “Jack made it happen.”

I pull away. “What?”

“He talked my manager into letting me come—I don’t even know if I want to know how—and he paid for my ticket because, shocker”—he sighs heavily—“I haven’t been paid yet.” He glances at Troy and nods his greeting. “I better go set up.” He gives me another hug, picks up his guitar, and hops onto the stage like he’s done it a million times. Which he probably has by now.

Jack appears in the doorway, arms full of equipment for Austin. Never has a beast of burden looked so beautiful. I can only imagine how much it cost to fly Austin and that stuff here on such short notice, and Jack footed that bill. Not to mention whatever he did to convince Austin’s manager to let him come. I narrow my eyes, suddenly wondering if his manager is a woman. That would make more sense.

The point is, Jack has come through in every way possible on this wedding, and it’s all I can do to keep my feet where they are.

He sets down his burden, makes a comment to Austin, and both of them laugh as Troy tries to tackle Austin.

I take in a breath to rein in my heart. A woman shouldn’t be allowed to see the guy she’s falling in love with joke around with her brothers.

The guy she’s falling in love with. My mind said it so casually. But as I inspect the phrase and observe Jack, it rings true. So frighteningly true.

A hand waves in front of my face, and I blink at Tori.

“Do you plan to check out Jack the whole evening,” she asks, “or do you want to come eat the dinner you worked so hard to make perfect?”

“I’m not checking him out,” I say with annoyance, walking with her toward the head table. “Just making sure the music is taken care of.”

“Uh-huh.”

We sit down—me next to Madi’s mom, Denise, and Tori next to me—and Denise leans over, wrapping her arm around my shoulders and pulling me in. She kisses me on the temple. “Thank you for making this day perfect for my girl. I wish I could have done more.”

I shake my head. “You were essential, Denise.” Once I was in France, she was the one to handle the things that came up back at home and to bring the things I forgot. The woman single-handedly raised Jack and Madi since they were small children, and it hasn’t been easy for her to make ends meet.

Jack’s voice comes over the mic, welcoming everyone to the celebration and announcing Austin’s contributions to the music. The interpreter Vidal arranged for repeats the same in French.

Madi’s jaw drops at Austin’s name, and she looks over at me.

I smile and mouth, “That was all Jack.”

She looks at Rémy, who pulls her closer and kisses her.

Austin plays instrumental songs while dinner gets underway—not his usual stuff, but music fitting for a reception—and Jack takes his place next to Rémy’s dad at the table. So close and yet so far.

The food is delicious. Probably. My stomach is too unsettled to really savor it. I’m half-tempted to lean across Denise and ask Madi outright what Jack said to her about me. But despite the coup my hormones have staged today, I still have most of my sense intact, so I refrain and remind myself to enjoy this day that’s been so long in the works.

When dessert is brought out, the time comes for speeches. I make it through mine with minimal crying. Okay, maybe not *minimal*, but I wasn’t hysterical, and Madi was crying, too, so it was only polite of me to play along.

After me, Jack pulls off a best man speech for a guy he's only known a year and a half, and he does it with the expected amount of pizzazz and laughs but a surprisingly tender toast to finish off.

When the meal is finished, Austin takes the microphone, embracing the role of musician and MC. He holds up the paper I gave to Troy and Jack with the schedule of events and reads from it.

“The bride’s brother, Mr. Jack Allred, will now have the pleasure of leading her onto the dance floor.”

Jack stands up, smoothing his tie, then turns to Madi and offers her his hand, a nervous smile on his face. This has been a big day for him, and knowing that beneath all that cocky confidence, there’s some uncertainty in himself only makes me love him more.

The two of them dance across the floor in front of the head table, whispering in each other’s ears and laughing as Austin serenades them. Denise is watching with a misty look and a soft smile on her face. I’m sure she’s overjoyed today for so many reasons. I am too, mostly.

Even if things don’t work out with Jack, at least he and Madi are closer now. That’s enough to satisfy me. Right? It might have to be—at least in the long run.

My phone lights up with a text, and my heart stops at the sight of Amy’s name. I take in a deep breath and pick up the phone.

SENATOR STEWART

DO IT. Take the job. You will be fantastic, Siena, just like you were on my campaign. Richard is a great candidate, and he deserves a great campaign manager.

I stare at the words, rereading them over and over and breathing through another bout of heart contractions.

SIENA

Thank you, Amy. Thank you for believing in me.

I stare at her contact name for a few seconds, then tap it and change her name to Amy Stewart.

The song draws to a close, and Rémy stands up. He makes his way around the table and cuts into the dance. Jack kisses Madi on the cheek and surrenders his spot, taking a few steps back so he's standing on the edge of the dance floor, watching.

The song switches to Austin's original song, *In the Stars*, and we all watch Madi and Rémy enter their cocoon of wedded bliss, snuggling up to dance, whispering, laughing, kissing. It's oddly calming to watch, even as it fills me with an achy envy.

When Austin's soft voice draws out the last note of the song, Madi and Rémy give the audience what they want—a final kiss to seal their first dance as husband and wife.

We all clap, with a wolf whistle added in, originating very unsurprisingly from Jack's general vicinity.

"Anyone who wants to is welcome to come to the dance floor and join in," Austin says.

Rémy leans toward Madi and whispers in her ear, and Madi nods, looking up at him like he's her whole world. Letting go of his hand, Madi heads toward Jack and takes his hand.

He looks at her quizzically. She pulls him along behind her toward the head table, then looks at me and motions with her free hand. I check to my right to see if she's talking to her mom. Madi laughs and motions again for me to come over, more insistent this time.

She really *is* talking to me.

HEART IN OVERDRIVE, I stand slowly, ignoring Tori's eyes on me. It's a scriptural canon-worthy miracle I don't fall on my face during that eternal walk around the table to Madi and Jack. Refusing to let myself look at them until I've made it safely, I focus on navigating the chair and table legs.

Madi grabs my hand, and I finally look up. Jack's eyes are on me, as are most people's in the room, based on how hot my skin is. Madi takes our hands and puts mine in Jack's.

"Consider this my blessing," Madi says with a small smile.

My lung capacity is obliterated as Jack holds my gaze. He brushes his thumb along my hand, which is apparently connected to my knees. They turn to Jell-O that's been left out on the counter for hours.

"But no more secrets, okay?" Madi says with exaggerated severity.

"You sure you really want no secrets at all?" Jack cocks a provocative brow.

Madi narrows her eyes, no doubt imagining all the things he could feasibly tell her that she wouldn't want to know. "*Within reason.* Now go dance before I change my mind." She shoos us toward the dance floor, and Jack threads his fingers through mine as we head to an open spot, like I didn't just spend two weeks trying to avoid touching him at all costs.

Worst two weeks ever.

Except they weren't. They were hard, but they were also... fun. And that's thanks to him. But they can't compare to holding his hand out in the open, in front of all the wedding guests.

He stops and faces me, then slides his free hand around my waist and raises our clasped hands together.

I don't even know what to say, which is good because I couldn't talk if I wanted to. Maybe Jack's feeling the same, since he pulls me toward him and rests his temple against mine, swaying to the sound of Austin's voice.

"This feels even better than I had imagined," he says in my ear, his hand pressing against my waist more firmly.

The words send a trickle of chills down my neck and back. His breaking the silence releases some of my pent-up nerves, and I smile into his hair. "You been fantasizing about me all day, Just Jack?"

He gives a breathy chuckle that tickles my neck. "I've been fantasizing about you for seven years, Sheppard."

My cocky attitude collapses, and all I can do is take refuge in the hollow of his neck, hoping the lack of oxygen there starves the flames in my cheeks.

Jack's cheek leans into my burrowing head, and I can feel the smile in the firmness of his cheek and in his tone. "Am I off my rocker here, or have I managed the impossible and deprived Siena Sheppard of words?"

"Off your rocker, definitely," I say, my comment a grinning, muffled jumble.

"Hey."

I recognize Troy's voice immediately. He's dancing with a girl I don't know, but he chucks his chin in Jack's direction. "Is this guy giving you trouble, sis?"

Jack shakes his head, while I nod vigorously. He pulls back to look at me with laughing betrayal in his eyes, and our hands drop.

“Just say the word,” Troy says, “and I’ll run him through.” But he’s smiling at Jack.

“Let’s hold off on that for now,” I say, threading my fingers through Jack’s again.

Troy looks down at our hands and lifts a brow. “I’ll just be over there if you need me.”

“Duly noted.” Jack salutes him as he dances off. He chuckles, and his eyes pause on mine for a minute. Then he pulls my hand and leads me off the dance floor.

“Hey, I liked that song,” I say, not ready for our dance cuddling to be over.

He just smiles over his shoulder as he leads me around the head table, which is empty of people now. We pass by the last seat, and he keeps going, pulling us away from the music and down the hall of empty cloisters.

When we’re even with one of the partially crumbling pillars midway down the line of them, he stops and turns to me.

I can’t tell if we’re about to have a DTR or what, but the way he’s looking at me and the way he rubs his lips together make me think he has other ideas right now.

If they’re the sort of ideas I’m thinking of, I’m willing to hear him out.

“You remember what I told you about the next time I kissed you?”

My heart races as I meet his gaze. I *do* remember.

“I just need to know if you’re ready for me to make good on that promise.”

I swallow. I *am* ready. I want to be kissed for keeps. I want to be a big deal to Jack, and I’m having a harder and harder time convincing myself not to believe him when he says I am. So, I do the only thing I can do: nod.

He lets out a breath like he’s relieved, then lifts his hand to my face, letting the backs of his fingers trail down my cheek.

His eyes search mine. “I *really* like you, Siena.” He lets out a breath. “I’m falling in love with you. Every day I fall a little farther.” He smiles slightly. “How far you planning on taking me, Sheppard?”

“As far as you’ll let me.”

He steps closer. “Are you on this ride with me, then?”

“I might have a slight preference”—I pinch the air between my thumb and forefinger—“for you above other guys.” I press my fingers even closer together so they’re nearly touching.

He looks at it for a second, the corner of his mouth pulling up at the side. “I can work with that.”

He slips his thumb and forefinger between mine, spreads them apart, then threads my fingers with his. Cradling my head with his other hand, he searches my face until his gaze finds its target. He closes his eyes and comes for my lips.

We’re kissing in secret again, but this time it’s different. It’s not driven by the forbidden, pushing on the boundaries all around us. It’s soft and slow and private. I can feel Jack’s sincerity in the way he holds me, in the time he takes to convince me this is a big deal, that he’s not just out to have fun.

The fun is just a big, fat bonus.

Finally, we break apart, but Jack’s eyes are still closed.

He stands like that for a second, rubbing his lips together like he’s still savoring the kiss. “Holy cheese snips, Sheppard.”

I laugh, and he puts his hands on my waist with that devilish smile.

The song echoing down the stone hall starts to slow and fade, and I narrow my eyes. “Hey, what did you do to get Austin’s manager to let him come?”

He smirks. “Oh, you know, a little of this. A little of that.”

I cock a brow. “It was a woman, wasn’t it?”

He shakes his head, far too proud of himself. “I did things by the book.”

“Meaning?”

“I Googled him to figure out what leverage I could use. Turns out his website is really awful, so I offered to help him with the design, *pro bono*.”

I shake my head, pulling him toward me and showing him just how much I appreciate him. He accepts my gratitude willingly, drawing us behind the stone pillar again.

When we pull apart a few minutes later, the song is shifting from a slow dance to a more defined beat. They’re using the sound system, but it’s Austin’s voice that starts singing.

Jack squeezes my waist, his eyes lighting up.

“You want to go dance to Usher, don’t you?”

He makes puppy dog eyes and nods.

I sigh like it’s a sore trial to join Jack on the dance floor. “Come on, then.”

He grins and jogs toward the dance floor, leading me by the hand. All but a few old people are boogying on there.

“Looks like you’re not the only Usher fan,” I say over the music.

“Of course I’m not.” He pulls us into the space next to Madi and Rémy and spins me around. “I’ll make you into one, too, by the end of this song. Show me what you’ve got, Sheppard.”

I smile and do as I’m told because guess what?

Right now, I’ve got it all.

EPILOGUE

STANDING on the grass in the front yard of Jack's new house, the November breeze sends a trickle of chills across my skin. I watch as Jack hefts a couple of boxes from the moving truck out of his way and lifts another. He glances up as he gets to the bottom of the ramp.

"Hey, no more slacking!" he says as he approaches with a big cardboard box in his arms.

I laugh and walk toward him. "Is a girl not allowed to admire the views?"

His eyebrows rise, and a grin spreads his mouth wide. "Is that what you were doing? Well, in that case..." He shifts the box to his right hand and raises it up and down like he's at the gym.

I fold my arms across my chest and knit my brows. "Your form could use some work." Lies. He is perfection.

"Is that right?" He wraps his free hand around my waist and pulls me ruthlessly toward him. "How's this form?"

It's impossible not to grin like a fool when Jack's around, so I don't even try to resist. "Still lacking," I say, our faces two inches apart.

He tosses the box on the grass, and my mouth drops open. Don't get me wrong, it's sexy, but it's also reckless. Those are his belongings.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and brushes his lips against mine. "Don't worry, they're just clothes," he

whispers. “How’s my form now?”

“Much better,” I eke out before he kisses me.

“All right, all right, you two.”

We break apart and turn our heads toward Troy, who’s coming out of the house, Tori right behind him. “I agreed to help Jack move into his new place, not be forced into voyeurism.”

Troy is being purposely difficult. He loves to give Jack a hard time, but the fact that he found this place and acted as Jack’s real estate agent speaks clearly enough about how he truly feels.

Jack kisses me again for good measure, then picks up the box of clothes. “Jealousy’s not a good color on you.”

“Which is why I never wear it.” Troy jogs up the ramp. “Especially not when a guy is kissing my sister.”

“Speaking of which,” I say as I follow him and Tori into the truck, “how’s Steph?”

“What do you mean, *speaking of which*?” He stacks two boxes on top of each other.

Tori and I share a look. Steph and Troy were best friends in high school, but we always suspected he wanted more. We were right, but Steph didn’t feel the same way. They stayed good friends, but she got married a couple of years ago. Troy acted like it was nothing, but I don’t buy it.

“Just wondering how she’s doing these days,” I say, picking a toiletry organizer to carry inside. “She was in Bali last I saw.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I think that’s right. I haven’t heard from her in a while, so don’t really know.” His words are nonchalant, but there’s a clipped tone to them that tells me he’s not up for discussing it more.

Which makes sense. Steph is happily married, traveling the world with her videographer husband. But we’ll find a winner for Troy.

I set down the toiletry organizer in the bathroom, then pull my phone from the back pocket of my jeans.

“Anything?” Jack watches me from the doorway.

“Nope,” I say, sticking my phone in my pocket again.

He steps into the room and shuts the door behind him. “To spare Troy.”

“Right,” I say.

He looks at me intently. “You doing okay?”

“I am,” I say truthfully. “I’m at peace with things, however the chips fall.” Yesterday was election day, and Jack and I were awake until 2:00 a.m. waiting for results. The race has been too close to call, so now it’s a waiting game. Last time we waited for results, I was a wreck, refreshing my phone every two minutes to watch the numbers. “I did my best, and it’s out of my control now.”

Jack nods. “You were amazing. I’ve got a good feeling about it.”

“Yeah? Well, even if we lose, something will work out. It’d be a definite bump in the road, but hey, sometimes the plan needs a good little shake-up.” Of course I’m nervous. The election results will have a big impact on my future. But I’m feeling much more okay with that this time around.

“The woman speaks truth.” Jack sets his hands on my hips. “Did I shake up your plan?”

“More like tossed a grenade into it.”

“Go big or go home, I always say.”

“And now you *are* home,” I respond, wrapping my arms around his neck. “A five-minute drive from me.”

His eyes are intent on me, then he presses his lips to mine, taking my breath and my sanity, just like he does every time.

There’s a knock on the door. “There are five boxes left,” Troy says through the door. “Can you guys wait like ten minutes?”

We both smile, and Jack opens the door to Troy shaking his head, a vacuum-sealed bag of towels in his arms. But he's got a twinkle in his eye that tells me he doesn't really hate this so much.

I definitely don't hate it. Driving half an hour to see each other got old very quickly when Jack and I got home from France. And since SoCal can turn half an hour into two hours faster than you can say I-5, I was ecstatic when Jack surprised me with the acceptance letter he received on a home offer he'd put in. But it wasn't just that we'd both be spending less time in gridlock traffic. It was that he took such a huge step to be closer to me at all. Jack shows me I'm a big deal to him all the time. Somehow, he's fireworks *and* an LED bulb.

We finish the last of the boxes, then hug Tori and Troy goodbye. As they're pulling away, my phone vibrates, and I fumble to get it out of my pocket.

Jack smiles at my lack of chill.

The screen says Richard's name, and Jack puts a hand on my arm. He waits until I meet his gaze. "Let the chips fall."

I nod, take a deep breath, and swipe to answer.

Richard doesn't even wait for me to say hi. "Patterson just called to concede."

I let out a huge, shaky breath, laughing with relief.

Jack's eyes are on me, and I nod at him, eliciting a massive grin as he grabs my hand and squeezes it.

"He'll be giving his official concession speech at 6:30," Richard says. "I'll plan to give my victory speech at 7:15, if you can contact the media to let them know."

"Of course. I'll do that right now."

"Great." There's a short silence. "We did it, Siena."

"We did it," I say to Richard, my eyes prickling as I meet Jack's gaze, his pride reflecting back. The best part about it, though, is that it would be there even if the outcome had been different.

“Let me know when you’ve got confirmation for the speech,” Richard says.

“Will do.” I smile widely. “Congratulations, Senator Harrison.”

Jack pulls me into a bear hug the second I hang up, and somehow, we end up on the grass, staring at the sky and basking in the relief of the night.

“I’ve got to make a couple of calls,” I say, reluctant to leave this little cocoon. “Is it okay if I use your office?”

“You do what you’ve got to do. I’m going to hang out here until you’re done.” He sighs and clasps his fingers behind his head. “It’s exhausting carrying boxes and couches in a sexy way for four hours.” He flexes his biceps again and again until I slap him on the chest and get up.

He smacks me on the butt, and I scamper away with my phone in hand to escape any further retaliation. It takes ten minutes for me to make my calls, and I walk outside afterward to Jack standing next to a small cardboard box.

“I thought we were done,” I say. “We’ve got an hour before we have to leave for the victory speech, and I have to take a quick shower.”

“Almost done. This is the last one.”

I let out a sigh, since my arms are tired from carrying things all day. At least this one is small. “I’ll grab it.”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” he says, putting out his arm to keep me from picking it up. “This one needs to be handled with extra care.”

My brow wrinkles. He’s smiling, but he looks more nervous than usual. I reach down and pull up one of the lid flaps.

The first thing my eye catches on is a can of Dr Pepper. I reach for the can, only to stop when I notice the bulging top. My gaze flicks to Jack, who’s watching me, his expression unreadable.

I check what else is in the box, pausing on the carton of chocolate-covered strawberries, then stopping on a tall, orange box. I pick it up and read the front. It says Cheese Nips, but there are a bunch of holes in the box and an *s* added in front of the word Nips with permanent marker.

“Holy cheese snips,” I say as the punchline hits. “How did you find these? They were discontinued a few years ago.”

“It’s the age of the internet, babe. You can find anything. But I wouldn’t eat them. They expired years ago.”

I shake my head and laugh. “You’re such a dork.” And I am so ridiculously in love with that dork.

He grabs the Dr Pepper in one hand and the strawberries in the other, setting them gently on the grass. “I think you missed something.”

My eyes scan the empty box. There’s nothing there, though—until something glints in the corner. My heart stops.

Jack lowers himself to a knee and picks it up—a gold ring with a small, oval diamond in the middle. He twists and turns it between his fingers for a second.

My heart is bouncing between my stomach and throat as he reaches for the Dr Pepper can, lays it on the ground, and slowly turns the top until it faces my feet.

I cover my shaky smile with a hand as he looks up at me with the most nervous one I’ve ever seen.

“Since the first night I met you, I knew there was something special about you, Siena. I played Brad’s dumb game because I wanted that bottle to land on me when you spun it. It didn’t, so I came after you and rigged the game for the outcome I wanted.”

I remember the craziness of that night and how I walked home on clouds, unable to keep from dreaming of the possibilities. Even then, though, I didn’t dream of this.

“But games were never what I really wanted with you,” he says. “I want the real deal. The *honey, I’m home*, the sleepless nights with kids, the white picket fence.” He glances at the

fence that surrounds his new house and shrugs. “Chain link works, too. The point is, I want all of it. I want it with *you*.”

I swallow, but I couldn’t keep from smiling right now to save my life.

It seems to give him a little more confidence. “So... what do you say?” His smirk comes back. “You think you can handle *this*”—he makes his pecs do a little dance under his shirt—“forever?”

I pull him up by the hand. “I’ll give it my best shot. Now, give me that ring, will ya?”

He takes my left hand and slips it onto my fourth finger, then takes my face between his palms.

“Wait,” I say before he can kiss me.

He draws back a bit, frowning slightly like maybe I’m rethinking this whole engagement.

I reach and pick up the can of Dr Pepper with care. “This calls for a celebration. Will you do the honors, Just Jack?”

He laughs and takes the can. “I’d love to.” He gives it a good shake, then lifts the tab. Dr Pepper goes spraying everywhere as he holds it above us, and Jack and I take refuge in the only place that makes sense: a kiss that lasts until we’re absolutely certain we’re safe from more soda.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Whitney Award-winning Martha Keyes was born, raised, and educated in Utah—a home she loves dearly but also dearly loves to escape to travel the world. She received a BA in French Studies and a Master of Public Health, both from Brigham Young University.

Her route to becoming an author was full of twists and turns, but she's finally settled into something she loves. Research, daydreaming, and snacking have become full-time jobs, and she couldn't be happier about it. When she isn't writing, she is honing her photography skills, looking for travel deals, and spending time with her family. She lives with her husband and twin boys in Utah.

