

SHEPPARDS IN LOVE BOOK 2

Just Friends Forever



MARTHA KEYES

*Just Friends
Forever*

*Just Friends
Forever*

MARTHA KEYES



PARADIGM
P R E S S

*For the man I'm lucky enough to call my best friend and
husband. Let's not eat the freeze-dried eggs.*

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](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Other titles by Martha Keyes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

1

TROY

EIGHT YEARS AGO

IT'S hard to feel like the man graduating from high school has made you when your mom insists you finish your dinner before you head out to the graduation party.

"You've barely eaten a thing," she says, peering over the pitcher of water in the middle of the table to check my plate.

"I had a big lunch," I say.

My best friend, Stevie, grabs the bottle of hot sauce in front of my plate and pours a few drops on my barely touched casserole. "There."

"You trying to kill me?" I ask. "That sauce is 1.5 million Scoville units. It could burn down this house."

"Should I be offended you need that stuff to make my food palatable?" Mom says.

Stevie sets the hot sauce down and scoops up her last bite of casserole. "Troy has no idea how delicious your cooking is because he's fried his taste buds, Mrs. Sheppard. You make the best chicken parm I've ever tasted."

"Thank you, sweetie," Mom replies with an affectionate smile at her.

Stevie eats with us a few nights a week, so she has plenty of experience with Mom's cooking. As the only child of a mom who devotes equal dedication to her full-time job and her dating life, Stevie spends a lot of time at our house.

"Stevie's right," Dad says, leaning over to kiss Mom on the cheek. She turns at the last second so their lips meet.

Stevie and I catch eyes over the table, hers amused, mine almost rolling. My parents love to make people squirm with their PDA. I'm used to it by now, but inside, my heart rate kicks up a notch as I wonder whether there's any kissing in the stars for *me* tonight too.

I push my plate a little farther away. Food is out of the question right now. My nerves are going berserk.

“I can taste just fine,” I say as I stand up and grab the bag on the floor containing my swimsuit and towel. “I promise I’ll eat half the pan when I get home tonight.”

“Not likely,” Mom says. “Your sisters will be home in half an hour, and they’ll be hungry.”

“They’re at a pool party,” I say. “They probably had pizza.” I look at Stevie and raise my brows. “You ready to go?” Her blonde hair hangs over her shoulders in loose curls, contrasting against the black dress she wore for our graduation ceremony earlier today. She’s got some sort of gloss on her lips, but I don’t let my eyes linger there for too long. I might lose my nerve if I do, and I’ve been working up my courage for, well, most of my life.

Stevie has had a huge crush on my older brother for years. Austin’s around a lot less now that he’s in college, and I’m hoping her feelings for him have had time to dull—or, better yet, that they’re six feet under. Either way, graduating has made me feel like it’s time to grow up. I don’t want to be in this same place four years from now when we’re graduating from college. It’s time.

“Yep, I’m ready!” Stevie pushes her chair out and grabs her gym bag.

“You guys are in for a treat at that party,” Mom says as she pierces a piece of chicken with her fork.

I cock a brow. “And you know this how?” It doesn’t surprise me, honestly. She’s always been an involved parent, serving in the PTA and volunteering to come on field trips since I was in elementary school.

She just smiles and chews her food. “Have fun and don’t stay out too late.”

“I’ll keep him in line, Mrs. Sheppard,” Stevie says, reaching to tousle my hair.

I dodge the attempt, using my hand like a shield to protect my greatest asset.

“Did you bring a swim cap to protect that mop?” Stevie asks as she steps onto the porch.

I sweep my fingers through the brown hair sitting over my forehead. “I would never subject these tresses to that kind of barbaric treatment.”

She opens the door of the minivan and sits shotgun. “You count scissors as a tool of torture but not chlorine?”

“Shh.” I shield my hair from her words. “Not so loud. My hair has nightmares about scissors.”

We head for the city pool, where most of our fellow Sunset Heights Hawks graduates are already hanging around. There’s a table of food and drinks beside the pool and a bunch of music equipment set up for a DJ. Maybe the music will set the scene for later—a romantic song or two to help Stevie see the potential we have.

Soon, we’re swallowed up in the crowds, chatting with friends—last opportunities to see many of them as people head to different colleges, universities, and jobs. Stevie and I are both heading to the same school, thankfully. I can’t imagine doing college without her. I *can* imagine, however, walking around campus with my arm around her, meeting up between classes to hang out on the lawn.

“Welcome, everyone,” comes the voice of our class president, Jamie, over the loudspeaker, “to the night you’ve all been waiting for!”

The crowds go wild with clapping, whistles, and cheers, and my gaze flits to Stevie, standing next to four of her girlfriends a few feet away from me. Everyone loves Stevie, which makes me feel extra grateful I somehow get to be her best friend. If only I were content with just that. A rush of nerves cycles through me again. I need to know whether I have a chance with her, though, or I’ll go crazy.

“We really want you to enjoy yourselves tonight,” says Jamie, “so we’ve provided food, drinks, swimming, and music. But not just any music...”

The crowd is silent as we wait for the punchline, and my eyes scan the music equipment for any sign of who the DJ might be. We had a pretty good one for senior prom, but it's not like I'd recognize his name.

Jamie lets the suspense last a few seconds longer. "Sunset Heights Class of 2015, please welcome our very own...Austin Sheppard!"

My jaw slips open and my stomach drops as my brother runs out between the sound equipment, waving and smiling at the cheering crowd. My gaze flicks to Stevie, who's jumping up and down with the girls around her, as if it was Bruno Mars running onstage instead of my older brother.

Austin's familiar voice comes over the speaker, and I try to smile and laugh as my friends elbow me and make comments about him. Austin is a really talented guy and super good-looking, something recognized by every single girl at Sunset Heights with a beating heart. Chief among those girls is Stevie—unless I'm wrong and all the other girls have *also* written in their diaries about visions of standing backstage to cheer for Austin at sold out arenas as he plays songs written with them as inspiration.

It's been a couple years since I got that very unwelcome eyeful at Stevie's house, and I hope she's grown out of wanting those things.

Watching her sing along to Austin's songs is giving me doubts, though. Some people are slow-dancing, some are clustered around the food and drinks, and a lot are in the pool. It's starting to get dark, and I realize I don't have all the time in the world to do what I promised myself I'd do tonight. I can't very well go up to her in front of her friends and confess my feelings, though. I'm pathetic, but not *that* pathetic.

My luck seems to be in, however, when Austin takes a break and Stevie comes over to me.

"No wonder your mom was being so cryptic," she says, her cheeks pink and her mouth stretched in a huge smile. "You really didn't know?"

“I really and truly didn’t,” I say, forcing my teeth to unclench so I can fake a smile. Trust Austin to appear when I least want him around. I wouldn’t be surprised if he managed to materialize in front of me in the very moment I’m telling Stevie how I feel about her.

“Oh, he’s starting again already,” Stevie says, turning toward the stage. The music to one of his ballads starts up, and she claps. “I *love* this one!”

I sigh. “Me too.” When I said I hoped the band would provide some fitting music for my plans, I hadn’t really been imagining Austin as the provider of that music. I guess that’s my bad. I’m just not imaginative enough.

Stevie sways, bumping into me as she sings with the music. I debate whether to slip my arm around her like I want to and join the swaying. What would she do? It’s not like I’ve never had my arm around her, but it’s always been in a friendly way and never to the tune of a love song.

I blow a quiet breath through my lips as my nerves ramp up. Maybe I shouldn’t tell her tonight. Maybe the cards are stacked against me.

I steal a glance at her from the corner of my eye—at the blue of her eyes, the black of her lashes, and the pink of her lips, which are pulled into a contented smile. She’s fun, she’s kind, she loves my family, she knows everything about me and still likes me.

Well, she doesn’t know everything...

And guess what? She never *will* know if I don’t tell her. I’ve felt this way for years without saying anything. I could feasibly keep putting it off forever.

But I don’t want to. I don’t want to feel this way—wishing and wondering and hoping—if there’s any chance at all something could happen with us. I just have to do it. To go for it.

“Stevie?” I say quietly, the sound drowned out by the thudding of my heart.

“Hm?” She sways subtly to the sound of Austin’s voice.

“Can I talk to you real quick?” *Real quick?* Like I want to ask her what size shoe she wears. I wouldn’t do that, because I already know she wears a 7.5.

Her gaze turns to me, her smile faltering as she realizes this is serious. “Yeah, of course. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just...” I look around. The only people nearby are a few feet away, not close enough to hear us, but if this moment goes well, I don’t really want to share it with the whole crowd. I don’t want to share it with them if it goes badly, either, come to think of it.

“Can we go over there for a sec?” I indicate a place on the lawn in the shadow of a sprawling oak tree.

She nods, and as we walk toward the tree, she glances up at me. I smile, and it feels weird because even my lips are shaking. How do you kiss a girl when your body is shaking enough to register on the Richter scale? Also, how have I been thinking about doing this for years, and yet I still don’t know what the heck to say?

“What’s up?” she asks when we finally reach the big, gnarled trunk. The way she’s looking at me, I can tell she’s worried. Maybe she thinks I overdid it on the hot sauce and need to go home—wouldn’t be the first time. Maybe I should say that instead of what I want to say. It’s a lot less risky.

No.

I’m not going to wimp out. It’s time to be a man, to say it out loud and put it out in the open instead of letting it fester inside me.

“I like you, Stevie.”

She gives a breathy laugh. It’s half-amused, half-unsure, like she knows there’s more than one way to interpret my second-grader confession.

“I sure hope so,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. There’s a hint of wariness behind it, though. “I think most people like their best friends. It’s pretty standard.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Her smile wavers, and she tucks her hair behind her ear as Austin's voice amps up, singing the bridge.

"I mean, yeah," I say, "you're my best friend. But I like you more than that." I look at her intently, like if I look close enough, maybe I'll see some sign she's been hiding the same secret as me all these years. "Have you ever thought about giving things a try between us?"

She rubs her lips together. "Troy, I ..." She glances toward the stage, then back, looking down at the ground. There's silence for a few seconds—seconds that take years off my life—then she looks up, and her shoulders lift. "I'm sorry. I just don't feel that way about you." Her voice is quiet, barely audible as my heart plummets into my shoes.

I'm not sure why. What was I expecting? It wasn't like this was a slam dunk situation. Did I really choose to confess my feelings for her while Austin sings lyrics like *all the while, my heart being drawn to you*? Read the room, Troy.

I look away, and she grabs my hands. "You're my best friend in the whole world, Troy, and I care about you *so* much, I just ..."

I nod. She doesn't see me that way. She never has. She never will—not if she hasn't in the years we've known each other.

"I'm so sorry," she says in an unsteady voice.

I let out a big sigh, keeping my eyes on the people playing chicken in the pool. Why couldn't I have made *that* my graduation night memory instead of this?

I force myself to face Stevie again, and the pain in her eyes tugs at my hurting heart. I don't want her to feel bad. It's not like it's her fault. You can't force yourself to like someone that way, just like you can't force yourself *not* to like someone that way. I, of all people, know that.

"It's okay, Stevie," I say, forcing myself to smile at her and squeeze her hand. "It's no big deal."

She nods, her eyes searching mine, like she's trying to gauge whether I'm really okay, whether to believe me.

I have to give her a better reason to believe me, even if my heart feels like it's collapsing in on itself right now. The last thing I want is this failure of a conversation to ruin our friendship. I might not be able to have Stevie in all the ways I want her, but I don't want to give up what we *do* have. She's too important to me, too much a part of me and my life.

"I feel so bad," she says, clenching her eyes shut.

"Don't," I say. "Really."

Maybe this is for the best. Now that I have closure, maybe I'll be able to settle into our friendship in a way I haven't been able to do yet. I'll be able to accept and appreciate instead of hoping and pining.

I'm praying that's true and that, with time, this feeling inside me will go away.

I just hope I haven't scared her off.

I chuckle and look around the party. "I think I'm just feeling weird because of graduation and all that. Lots of change. It's got my head all jumbled up."

"Yeah, for sure," she says. "I get it. Change is hard. I've been thinking a lot about how different things will be. But at least we'll be going to college together." She doesn't sound too sure about whether that'll be a good thing now. She's probably worried I'll ambush her again with another confession.

I won't. I really won't. This was a definitely one-time thing.

I get the sense these next few minutes could make or break what our relationship looks like going forward. I just threw a wrench in the works, and now I have to yank it out and get the gears rolling again. Grease the wheels. I can't be weird around her. I can't sulk. I *have* to shrug off the rejection and roll right back into things for my own sake—and for hers.

"I don't know," I say, clenching my teeth as I look at her. "We'll see if College Stevie is cool enough to be best friends with College Troy. I plan on being *very* popular, just so you

know.” I swipe my hair to the side and look off into the distance, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Really?” she says, her brows shooting up and her wariness fading.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, maintaining my pose. “The popularest.”

“Uh-huh,” she says with amusement. “That’s really good to know, Troy. Very glad you warned me. So, just out of curiosity, what’ll happen to that plan if, whenever I see you on campus, I make it my mission to do *this*?” She shoots a hand to my hair and musses it for a split second, then takes off running.

I sprint after her, catching up as she slows down for the cement pad around the pool. I, however, don’t slow as I wrap my arms around her and hurl us into the water, fully clothed. We surface seconds later, both gasping for air, huge smiles on our faces. There’s a split-second where I see her watch me, like she’s trying to gauge whether this is normal fun or flirting. So, I whip around and tackle my buddy, Adam, dunking him.

He never saw it coming. But he was a necessary sacrifice—one of many others over the course of the night, because that’s how I have to spend it, convincing Stevie—and myself—that I’m okay and that things aren’t weird now.

And when I get home, I gorge myself on casserole, just like I promised Mom I would do.

2

TROY

THE PRESENT DAY

THE MIRROR I'm using to help me dress rumbles slightly, accompanied by a muffled cry and a clatter in the apartment below mine. I smile with satisfaction.

"About time," I say to no one. I've been waiting for that yelp for the last hour, and hearing it makes the sleep I sacrificed on last night's adventure immediately worth it.

I whistle the tune of "Surprise, Surprise" by Bruce Springsteen as I put on my watch, stomping footsteps on the stairs to my apartment providing a decent background beat.

A few seconds later, the door to my room swings open.

"Good morning," I say brightly, grabbing the brush and running it gently over my hair.

My brother Austin glares at me from the doorway, shirtless, in his boxers, his dark hair disheveled.

I glance at my watch and read the incoming text from the agent whose open house I'm running this afternoon in Bel Air. I'm really hoping I end up with at least one high-end client on my roster by the end of the day.

I slap the watch face to turn off the screen and look back at Austin, who's still glaring at me. "What's up?" I say.

He scoffs. "So innocent-sounding."

I raise my brows, pretending not to know what he's talking about. When he arrived with a stack of promotional posters *and* a life-size cardboard cutout of himself, there was only one viable option: stay up late one night and cover every inch of his apartment with them while he slept. I placed the cardboard cutout directly next to his bed for a special surprise when he woke up.

Rather than responding, I focus on making sure every last brown hair of mine is perfectly in place.

“That stupid thing scared me to death,” he says, stepping into the room. He’s been on tour as the opening act for James Arthur the last few months, so it’d been a while since I’d seen him when he showed up a few days ago. He looks good, as his five-hundred thousand social media followers can—and frequently do—attest to.

“Give yourself some credit, Aus. You’re pretty ugly, but you’re not *that* bad to look at.”

“Har, har.” He catches a glimpse of himself in the black-rimmed mirror and runs a hand through his hair. “I thought it was a psycho fan or something at first, like that guy they found sleeping in Taylor Swift’s apartment.”

“Nope. Not a psycho fan.” I come up behind him and brace his shoulders with my hands so we’re both staring in the mirror. I give them a squeeze. “Just your *biggest* fan.” The fact that he’s comparing himself to Taylor Swift says a lot about how he sees himself.

He shoots me an annoyed look in the mirror. “Isn’t there a law against a landlord entering tenant property without notice?”

I frown, pretending to ponder the question as I button my sleeves. I shake my head. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” It does. But I didn’t go into his side of the duplex last night as a landlord. I went on brotherly duties. He has so many fans ready to fall down and worship him, I consider it my personal commission to mess with him. Keep him grounded.

“It’s not the only thing that doesn’t ring a bell,” he mutters. “How long did it take you to do all that?”

I shrug. “Twenty minutes for the posters, maybe. The cardboard cutout was quick once I saw how deeply you were sleeping. The hardest part was not laughing.”

He shakes his head and plops down on my perfectly made bed, rubbing his eyes.

In the last couple years, especially on this last tour, Austin’s music has brought him a lot of success. He’s the exciting, cool one in our family—cool enough to have fan

merchandise. Merchandise with which he can be pranked. His manager sent it with him for the high school reunion gig he's playing in a couple weeks. I helped him shove the stuff in the closet in his half of my duplex, but my mind immediately started exploring ideas for what I could do with it.

“You realize we have to leave in”—I check my watch —“eight minutes, right? Are you even packed?”

He sighs and stands up, stretching his arms above him and yawning. “I’ll be ready.”



IT'S BEEN thirty minutes by the time he steps outside with his suitcase. I keep my mouth shut, though. I'm used to sitting around, waiting for clients to turn up for house showings, while Austin has gotten used to people functioning on his schedule. Perks of being a big deal.

Besides, if I'm serious about getting into the luxury real estate market, I'll have to get used to entitled behavior, so I just consider this good practice.

Austin hoists his suitcase into the trunk as my across-the-street neighbor steps outside and waves.

“Got that new hose attachment installed for you yesterday, Troy,” he calls over.

I glance toward the side of my house, where the hose is wound around the reel. Even from here, I can see the new red head. “Sweet. Thanks, Mr. Gates! I really appreciate that.”

“I tried it out, and it's working like a charm. I think you'll really enjoy it.”

“I plan to,” I say with another wave as he slides into his car to head to work.

“You can't install your own hose?” Austin says with amusement as we shut our doors.

“It's an attachment, Aus,” I say. “And it's not a normal one.” I saw Mr. Gates using his hose to pressure wash his

house last week and had immediate neighbor envy.

“You sure you don’t want to put your stuff in a storage unit?” I give my house a quick once-over as we pull away. It’s a good-looking place—and it was a stretch for my budget, but being a real estate agent has made me particular about where I live. From the outside, you wouldn’t know it, but it’s a stacked duplex. I live upstairs, and Austin rents the downstairs unit from me. “It’d be a lot cheaper than paying me rent every month. You’re hardly ever here, and you can always crash on my couch when you need to.”

He shakes his head as he shoots off a text. “I like having somewhere of my own when I’m in town.”

“Suit yourself,” I say. I guess I can see how life in posh hotels would get old.

Nope. I lied. I can’t see it at all. The room service alone makes my mouth water. Besides, my duplex isn’t a dump, but it’s not the Ritz Carlton, and the posters I put up while Austin was sleeping are the only decor in his apartment at this point. It would take me all of an hour to pack up his stuff and store it elsewhere.

I don’t push my offer, though. Having Austin in there is guaranteed rental income from the easiest tenant on the planet. He’s only here for a few days at a time every couple of months.

“Do you *want* me out?” he asks, as though it’s just occurred to him why I might be asking.

“Nope.”

His mouth widens into a smile as he stares at my profile. “Awwww. You’re lonely, aren’t you? Sorry, bro. My contract isn’t up until next year. But I give you permission to sleep with that cardboard cutout of me on those lonely nights.”

“What?” I say loudly as I put in my Bluetooth earpiece and point to it. “I can’t hear you over the sound of my girlfriend calling.”

He scoffs. “You don’t have a girlfriend.”

I stare deep into his eyes as I answer the call and say, “Hey, beautiful.” And then I return my eyes to the road. Winning this spat isn’t worth killing both of us. Probably. Also, if he looks at me too carefully, he’ll know I’m embellishing the truth. Lyla’s not my girlfriend. We’ve only been going out three weeks, but *my girlfriend* is a lot pithier than *the girl I’ve gone out with a lot over the past couple weeks and like pretty well so far*.

“Hey, yourself,” Lyla replies, the smile she’s wearing evident in her voice. “How are you?”

Even from the corner of my eye, I can see Austin watching me to evaluate if I’m messing with him.

“Doing great,” I respond. “Hey, sorry about last night. My client insisted on inspecting every crevice of all three houses and then discussing their pros and cons in excruciatingly painful detail.”

“It’s okay. I wish you could have been there, though. Jamie always throws the best parties. You on your way to Bel Air?”

“Got to drop my brother off at the airport first, but yeah.”

There’s a pause. “Your brother. As in Austin?” The ohh-la-la in her voice is almost palpable. Austin has that effect on people, especially women. Even more so on mid-pubescent girls. Watching video clips of him singing at concerts is vomit-inducing.

I keep the smile pasted on my face. “The only brother I’ve got.”

“Troy! You should have told me. I would have come with you!”

I pause, trying to keep myself rational and my tone light. It’s normal for people to be star-struck when they don’t know firsthand how rarely Austin bathed as a teen. “Then you would have had to join me at the open house too, which, to be fair, I wouldn’t have complained about.”

“Me neither.”

Is she saying that because hanging out with Austin Sheppard in the car for half an hour would be worth that hefty sacrifice, or because she really *would* enjoy being with me at the open house? Do I even want to know the answer to that question?

“So,” she says, “is he heading out of town for a while? Or will he be back soon?”

I glance at Austin, and he raises a brow like he’s curious what’s being said. I like to tease him about all the women—or teenyboppers—he attracts now that he’s “made it,” but somehow, it’s less fun when it’s my girlfriend fixating on him. My not-girlfriend. Whatever.

He tries to steal the Bluetooth earpiece from my ear, and I pull away.

“Let me talk to her,” he mouths. He still doesn’t believe me.

I avoid his second attempt to steal my earpiece. I’m not eager to listen to him chat up Lyla for ten minutes—whatever the result of that conversation might be. She certainly wouldn’t be the first girl who preferred my older brother to me.

“I’m not sure what his plans are,” I say to her. “Hey, Lyla, let me call you back later. We’re just pulling up to the airport.”

Austin scoffs as I hang up. “Lyla, huh? And you call this *pulling up to the airport?*” He gestures to the traffic surrounding us on the freeway.

I don’t respond, pretending to focus on switching lanes. I’m not about to tell him I lied to stop Lyla from fawning over him. I love my brother. But so does everyone else, and it gets a little old sometimes.

“Hey,” Austin says after a minute. “I’m just teasing. I think it’s great you’re dating someone.”

I shoot him a funny look. “Like I haven’t ever dated anyone or something?”

“You’ve gone on dates, yeah, but you haven’t had a steady girlfriend in years.”

“Says the guy hanging backstage with different women every night.”

He chuckles. “Sheesh. No need to get feisty. I said it was great you’re with Lola, didn’t I?”

“Lyla.”

“I thought maybe you were still hung up on Stevie,” he says, ignoring my correction.

I slap a hand on his shoulder and squeeze extra hard. “Welcome to the current decade.” Stevie got married to a hotshot actor, Curtis Carr, a few years ago. We’ve kept in touch a bit since then, but it’s been months since I’ve heard from her.

Austin is just about the last person I enjoy discussing Stevie with. I blame her huge, years-long crush on him for the fact she could never see me as more than a friend.

When we pull up to the curb at LAX, Austin hops out of the car. He ducks his head back in. “Hey. Thanks for the apartment decorations. Don’t take them down. I want you to think of me every time you violate our landlord/tenant agreement. Oh, and tell your fake girlfriend Lyla I say hi.” The door shuts before I can respond.

He wheels his suitcase a few feet, then pauses in front of the bumper and pulls out his phone to answer a call.

I smash the horn, and he jumps in surprise. Showing him a toothy grin, I wave as I pull away from the curb.



TAPPING my finger on the white quartz countertop, I crane my neck to see through the nearest window. Still no cars. Only three couples have come through the house in the last two hours, and all of them already have agents, making this open

house a complete waste of my time. Apparently, today is not the day I get a client looking for a ten-million-dollar home.

I look around the immaculate kitchen with white, soft-close upper cabinets that reach to the ceiling, navy blue lowers with brushed gold hardware, and a ten-foot island. The entire house has been professionally staged and looks like it belongs inside *Elle Decor*.

I can only dream of having the sort of money to afford something like this, which is kind of the reason I'm here. At one of these open houses, I'm bound to find a home buyer who needs an agent. If they're looking at a house like this, they'll have plenty of money—and plenty of friends with plenty of money—to spend on a house that costs millions of dollars. Then, instead of trying to help buy and sell multiple small houses a month, I'll be able to help clients buy and sell a couple of mansions a year. If I play it right, I can become the go-to real estate agent for some of the who's who of LA.

One of the couples who came in today was younger than me, definitely in their early twenties. As I showed them around and let them peruse the rooms, I couldn't help but wonder what life might have been like if I'd been able to afford something like this at their age. Maybe things could have been different with Stevie. Maybe, just maybe, it might have changed the way she looked at me. She was always a dreamer when it came to the future. I feel like I'm still reaching for those heights, while she's already attained them—and *then* some.

I smack a hand on the counter and pick up my phone. These are dumb thoughts. Dumb and embarrassing. That ship sailed years ago. Sailed and shipwrecked. I'm not hung up on it, either. I genuinely want Stevie to be happy. Which she is. How could she not be? She's married to one of the biggest actors in Hollywood, living the jet-set life.

I navigate to my messages and open the thread with Lyla.

TROY

You really should have come. We probably could have watched a movie in the home theater together.

LYLA

That slow, huh?

TROY

Just about. You sure you have to work tonight?

LYLA

Yeeeeeah. But not tomorrow night *wink-face emoji*

I stare at her text for a minute. Should I feel more bummed out that she's busy tonight—and more excited to see her tomorrow? I haven't seen her in a couple days. It's not like I'm *not* excited. I'm probably just tired from my late-night escapades. Maybe tonight I *will* snuggle up with Austin's cardboard cutout. Or put on my boxing gloves and punch it to smithereens.

I open social media and check my notifications out of pure boredom. It's quick because there are none; I don't really post. I fall solidly under the category of casual lurker. I navigate back to the main page, but my thumb pauses before swiping out of the app.

A photo of Stevie and her husband Curtis stares back at me. It's a few days old, and I've already seen it, but I stare at it anyway. The tagged location is Maui, and it's a sunset shot of the two of them on a yacht.

She's got her head on his shoulder and a soft smile on her face. It simultaneously makes me feel better and worse. She and Curtis met in the lobby of an LA hotel, and when I met him a couple days later, I thought he was all wrong for her. As her best friend, I found it almost impossible to balance supporting her in what she wanted and watching out for what I

thought was her well-being. Maybe if I hadn't been rejected by her already and wouldn't have come off as the jealous best guy friend (which, to be clear, I was, 100%), I might have said something. Instead, I kept my mouth shut. Pretty sure she knew anyway.

But *I* was the one who was wrong—not just wrong for Stevie but wrong about Curtis. It's been almost four years since they got married, and they still ooze wedded bliss. If you search #couplegoals on social media, Curtis and Stevie—or Cursteph, as they've been affectionately dubbed—will show up in over fifty percent of the posts.

I'm genuinely happy for Stevie. All the attraction I struggled against for so long is gone. I just miss our friendship. She's got Curtis, but I've never found anyone to take her place in my life.

I tap on her husband's account and scroll through a few rows of pictures. It's nothing I haven't seen. A lot of travel, a lot of glitz and glam from awards ceremonies and banquets and galas.

Visually, Stevie fits right in, but I've always felt like she was too good for Hollywood. She and Curtis have been media darlings from the get-go, so, once again, I was wrong. I can't go to the grocery store without seeing their pictures plastered all over the tabloids at checkout. She looks like she was made for the red-carpet life.

Apparently, *I* was made to stand around in nice homes that don't belong to me.

I scroll up to Curtis's most recent post. It's one I haven't seen—another candid shot—and I pinch my fingers to enlarge it. Curtis is smiling in the background, pushing Stevie on a swing. She's leaning back, her legs stretched in front of her, her blonde hair pulled up in a ponytail as she laughs with her eyes shut. She looks ... happy.

The picture brings back memories of summer nights at the local elementary school playground when we would see who could get higher on the swings. We'd jump off and mark who

landed the farthest. She always lost, and the time I offered to help her, she went flying like a frisbee.

I smile. Those were great times.

I hesitate, then navigate to my text messages. It takes a lot of scrolling to find the thread with Stevie. Our text conversations since she got married are never long or deep, but I like knowing she's doing well. We were best friends for so long that even though things are different now, I'll always consider her in that light.

That's part of why I feel a check-in is long overdue.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I open the thread and start typing.

“YOU’VE GOT TO EAT, FURZY.” I offer my virtual dog some cheese, but, no dice. He just stares at it, unmoving. I let out a huge sigh. “When did you become such a picky eater?! I don’t have time for this.”

Lies. I have all the time in the world. So. Much. Time.

There’s a knock, and I hop off the leather couch and hurry to answer. An enormous grin is plastered on my face before I even open the door. “Joyce!”

“Hello, Miss Stephanie,” she says with her kind, wrinkly smile. She’s holding her usual crate of cleaning supplies, but she sets it down for our customary greeting hug. She calls herself my cleaning lady; I call her my paid friend.

“You could have taken the day off, you know,” I say, picking up her supplies and bringing them inside. “I’d still pay you.” Even through my socks, the black tile is cold. It’s also perfectly shiny. If I hid in one of the three walk-in closets, Curtis’s West Hollywood apartment could pass as uninhabited. I call it Curtis’s because he’s the one who will keep it when all is said and done—assuming all *is* ever said and done. After being on the path to divorce for almost a year, I have my doubts.

Doubts and a whole lot of restlessness.

“I work for my pay, Miss Stephanie,” Joyce says in a firm voice, taking the supply basket from me and walking it to the kitchen.

Even though the apartment doesn't need the intense cleaning she comes to provide, I'm glad she doesn't take me up on my offer of a paid vacation day. If Joyce didn't come twice a week, I'd go crazy. Apart from the three times Curtis's team has flown me out for a publicity event—got to allay any suspicion that all isn't right in paradise—she's my only in-person contact with the outside world. Her insistence on coming has every bit as much to do with making sure I don't wither away from lack of human interaction as it has to do with her amazing work ethic.

“How are the pets?” she asks as she gets to work.

I turn on my phone again, and Furzy stares back at me. I throw him a bone, and he blinks. “Difficult, as usual. Oh, shoot! I need to take Mavis to her check-up!” I swipe away from my picky virtual dog and scroll through dozens of others until I find the purple, deer-sized dragon who's due for a vet appointment.

“What did she do this time?” Joyce asks. She's a saint to even pretend she cares about my embarrassing hobby, but when you're stuck inside by yourself for months on end, you do what you've got to do. For me, that was acquiring an obscene number of fake and mystical pets to take care of on the PetUniverse app. I'm not just a virtual crazy cat lady; I'm a virtual crazy dragon, alien, and phoenix lady. “Virtual” being the key word. I'm just *virtually* crazy. In real life, I'm so normal. Promise.

“Another burn,” I respond as I load the dragon into her enormous crate and drive her to the vet. “She just doesn't have good control of her fire-breathing yet. She'll get there.” I can't believe I, a twenty-six-year-old, erstwhile respectable human who has appeared in *People*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, am saying these words. Curtis would be mortified if he knew what things had come to. And his publicity team? I shudder to think of it. He'd probably fast-track the divorce, which is suddenly making me wonder if I should tell him about it after all.

Taking care of imaginary pets isn't all I do, though. In my oodles of spare time, I've taken up a lot of hobbies. I've learned basic coding, read the entire Penguin Vintage Classics

collection (and developed a deep, abiding hatred of *Wuthering Heights*), and tried every meditation app out there. I'm pretty well-rounded for a hermit.

The doorbell rings, but neither Joyce or I acknowledge it. The concierge, Gibbs, knows to leave the food outside the door. He's discreet. It's why the people who live in this building pay him the big bucks.

After a couple minutes, Joyce leaves her cleaning cloth on the onyx countertop and heads for the door. She brings the bag of food to the table, where I take a seat and look at the receipt. It has the name Mandy on it. The food orders always do. It's my code name, or as I like to call it, my *nom de plume*. It sounds a lot better than the ugly truth: having all my orders sent to "Mandy" prevents word getting out that, aside from those three whirlwind publicity events, I haven't seen Curtis in eight months.

"Come eat, Joyce," I insist.

She shakes her head and goes back to wiping down the countertops, which are already so clean, I could use them as mirrors. I almost miss the quick sidelong glance she sends toward the bags of food.

I suppress a smile. "It's not a request, Joyce. It's an order."

She looks up at me, the stubborn glint in her eye belied by the ghost of a smile on her lips. I raise a brow, and we start the silent battle we fight two times a week.

"You're here to clean, right?" I ask.

"Yes, Miss Stephanie."

"Well, I need help cleaning up *this* mess." I start pulling the food out of the bag to demonstrate just how much there is. I might be under a gag order to prevent bad publicity from eclipsing Curtis's most recent big movie, but at least the food I get requires no gagging to get down. It comes like clockwork three times a day. It wouldn't hurt to change up where it's ordered from, but I think that's what they call a first-world problem.

"It's best cleaned up while it's still hot." I wink at Joyce.

She sighs, her smile growing wider as she leaves her things and joins me. “If you insist, Miss Stephanie.” She always gives in because, again, she’s here as much for me as for a paycheck. Thank heaven for Joyce.

This is the most normal my life gets these days: sitting over take-out and chatting about her grandkids and my pets. It’s the highlight of my week.

But Joyce has other apartments to clean—ones that might actually dirty her cloths and where the employers aren’t pathetically lonely—and I’m eventually left with my own thoughts for company. They veer toward pity, and I rein them in like Buffalo Bill.

I can’t complain about my life. How amazingly fortunate am I? Joyce spends her days cleaning other people’s messes, making barely enough to survive on, while I sit in this massive apartment overlooking West Hollywood’s palm trees, high-end apartments, and designer boutiques. And I didn’t earn any of it. I married into it, and I swore to myself I’d never take it for granted.

That’s gotten harder with time—especially not knowing how much longer I’ll be enjoying this luxury with no one but my cleaning lady and lawyer to talk to. Money sure is nice, but you can’t talk to it about your problems. I’ve tried.

My first few months alone were spent in Curtis’s Montana cabin. I only came to LA when it looked like the divorce was getting close to being final. I thought I’d only be here for a couple of weeks, but we’re coming up on four months now. Curtis has been dragging his feet, or maybe he’s been too busy with parties and promotion for the movie that released a couple of weeks ago. I know firsthand how busy his life is.

Either way, it’s getting more and more tempting to violate my NDA—a big fine would probably be worth regaining some normalcy. I never thought it would take this long to get things finalized, and my patience is wearing thin.

My phone dings, and I tap the notification telling me I’ve been tagged in a post. It takes me to social media and the latest photo posted by Curtis’s social media manager.

The picture is of me swinging toward the camera, with Curtis pushing me from behind, smiling widely. “Pure joy.” That’s the caption, and it makes the food I ate swim in my stomach. It makes me wriggle.

We *do* look happy, but I remember that night well, and it was far from it. Curtis’s social media manager posted it like it’s news, but it happened over a year ago. This is what his team has been doing for the past few months: recycling old photos to present the image of a happy marriage.

That particular night, we’d had a publicity event in Miami. I’d changed out of the gold-sequined dress I’d worn and into my sweats, heading straight for the swings on the private beach of our hotel—somewhere I could think in peace.

Curtis came out not long after, and we had one of our many serious talks. The ones where nothing got solved. But his publicity team—never far away—apparently liked the look of us fighting on the swings and asked Curtis to push me for a couple of shots—with less arguing, of course.

Curtis is an A-list actor, so he had no problem faking it, and hey, I’ve also learned a thing or two over the past few years since we met and fell in love. I could be at the top of the up-and-coming actresses list based entirely on this photo.

At least it’s a real photo instead of one of the AI-generated images of us they’ve experimented with posting. Those give me the creeps, and I’m always nervous one of our more obsessive followers will figure out the truth.

It would hurt Curtis a lot more than it would hurt me. Anxious as I am for this to all be over, I don’t want to hurt him.

A text pops up at the top of my screen, and my heart skitters.

TROY

I see your swinging skills have improved since the Great Tumble of ’18.

My mouth stretches wide, and my eyes crinkle at the memory. He must have seen Curtis's post too.

STEVIE

You mean when you catapulted me out of the swing and nearly killed me?

TROY

It was a perfectly average underdog.

I passed by the elementary school earlier today and considered taking a little commemorative swing for old times' sake, but I was running late for an open house up north. Maybe I'll stop by on my way home.

STEVIE

Up north—as in LA?

It's been a while, but I *think* Troy still lives in Irvine, not far from where we grew up. I like the thought of him passing by all our old haunts. It wouldn't feel like home without him nearby.

It's a moot point, though. It doesn't matter where Troy is. I couldn't meet up with him even if he was walking on the sidewalk at the bottom of my building. No one can know the truth about Curtis and me yet. Not even my mom knows—not that that's shocking. Curtis was never a big fan of hers, and since she's on her fourth marriage and has plenty of stepchildren to fill the void, it's been easy to keep things superficial with her on the rare occasions we *do* text.

They call it a gag order, but it's not just my ability to talk in any meaningful way about my life that's been taken away. I also can't really take solid steps to plan my future—like finding a house or deciding what I want to do with my life—when no one is supposed to know things aren't hunky-dory between Curtis and me.

Another text pops up at the top of my screen, and I immediately tap on it, just like I always do when it's from my lawyer.

JOHN BARRET

It's final. The decree just came through. Congratulations and condolences, Stephanie. I'll be filing your name change paperwork tomorrow.

I stare at his text until the words blur.

It's final.

I'm officially divorced.

I use the slow, measured breathing I've learned from my meditation apps as I try to process the news. No one ever thinks they'll end up divorced. Maybe I should have, though. My parents split when I was little, so I guess it's in my genes.

In one of my college writing classes, we had to learn to format a resume properly. I guess I hadn't really anticipated that six years later, I'd find mine saying *twenty-six years old, divorced, owner of over sixty virtual pets*. Pretty impressive, right?

It might sound reductive, but it's pathetically true. For the last four and a half years, my life has revolved around Curtis's career. The public ate up our romance right from the start, and his PR team loved what it did for his image, so my job description might as well have read: trophy wife.

I've been waiting for this moment for months, wanting it to be done and dusted, wanting the metaphorical duct tape over my mouth ripped off. But now that it is, I don't know *how* to feel—or which feeling to focus on. Relief? Humiliation? Defeat? Hope? They're all there, pushing and pulling at me like schoolchildren playing tug-of-war.

I stare at the floor-to-ceiling windows offering up a massive view of twilight falling over West Hollywood. Cars are cruising down the street and people are finishing up their shopping while I sit above, looking down on the bustle. It's surreal. And crushingly lonely.

In the hustle and bustle of marriage to an A-list actor, I neglected everyone and everything in my own life. I feel it keenly right now.

JOHN BARRET

We can talk logistics tomorrow. Curtis's team managed to keep things private until now, but the decree is public record. Best to brace yourself.

I shut my eyes and sigh as my phone pings yet again. It's not John, though, and I eagerly tap Troy's text, the most welcome distraction.

TROY

It was in Bel Air. No sign of the Fresh Prince or of Hilary Banks, so it was all a big, fat waste of time.

I dash a tear as I give a watery laugh. I'd totally forgotten about Troy's love of *Fresh Prince*—and his crush on Hilary from the show—which is pretty amazing given how often we watched it. It might as well have been the soundtrack to his life. It was always playing in the background when we were at his house.

I chew on my lip. With the finalization of the divorce, I can actually go out in public on my own and speak freely—okay, not freely, but *more* freely—but the thought makes me cringe. If the decree is truly public record like my lawyer says, in twelve hours, the sidewalk in front of this building will be crawling with tabloid reporters, like ants swarming a crushed-up Club cracker.

My fingers hover over the keyboard as my heart races. Bel Air is so close. I could really use a friend right now, and Joyce won't be back until Friday. That's five interminably long days.

Tonight might be the only chance I have at normal for a while, and, as the virtual pet feeding reminder notifications on my phone can attest to, I am in dire need of normal.

I hesitate for one more second, then respond to Troy's text.

I GLANCE at my phone secured to the dashboard, not because I need directions but just in case I missed a response from Stevie. I didn't.

I should have responded sooner to her last text, but I was on the phone with the agent whose open house I ran. It'll probably be three months until I hear from Stevie again. And by hear from her, I mean until I text her again.

I pull onto the 405 to head back home. Season three of *Fresh Prince* and a bag of microwave popcorn are calling my name. Maybe I can get cardboard Austin to bend at the waist so he can sit next to me and keep me company. Or maybe Lyla will get off work early.

STEVIE

I'm in LA! Are you still around? If so, come say hi!

I swerve across three lanes of traffic to the exit toward West Hollywood. A few honks accompany my super smooth move. It may seem desperate, but anyone who's missed an exit in LA traffic knows how high the stakes are here.

I pull over once I'm off the freeway and text her back. Based on the picture Curtis posted, I assumed they were in Hawaii. She gives me her address—and oddly specific instructions about where to park (“specific” as in really far away) and what to say to the building concierge. Apparently,

I'm supposed to say I'm there for "Mandy." The lives of the rich and famous are fascinating.

As I approach her apartment building, my watch sends me a notification. "It looks like your heart rate is high. Keep an eye on it."

"Shut up." I smack the watch face with my palm, and it goes black. I haven't seen Stevie since her wedding over three years ago. Of course I'm nervous. I never felt like Curtis was my number one fan either, and part of me has always wondered if Stevie's scant text responses are a result of that.

The building concierge gives me a full body scan with his laser-sharp eyes when I say I'm there to see Mandy. I dressed to impress at my open house today, but I get the feeling my suit might as well have been purchased at a thrift shop for how obviously out of place I am here. I'm also regretting my choice to yank off my tie and undo my collar the second I got in my car. Apparently, I pass muster, though, since the concierge activates the elevator to take me up.

Even in the elevator, I feel like a peasant approaching the king's throne. It's sleek and minimalist, and it has just one option: the penthouse. The elevator opens to a small foyer with just one door. The mat in front of it is light gray. Who has a light-colored doormat? The message is clear: we don't do dirt around here.

I take in a deep breath, then knock on the door, mentally preparing myself to be greeted by Curtis. He was a big deal when I met him, and he's an even bigger deal now. His most recent movie made \$150 million opening weekend. Do I congratulate him on that? Is that uncultured or good manners?

The door opens, and I freeze. Stevie and I stare, three seconds of silence for each of the three years since we last saw each other. Our built-in facial recognition software is doing a thorough scan, noting all the differences, mapping all the similarities that a decade of being best friends ingrained in us.

She's every bit as beautiful as I remember her—and then some. She's not done up like she is in most of the photos I see of her in the checkout aisle, and that's a relief. She's wearing a

simple white shirt and lounge pants. Her hair is a lighter blonde than it used to be, and she's a little thinner, but otherwise, I might think we were back in college.

Her gaze fixes somewhere behind me for a second. "Come in," she says with a calm smile.

I glance over my shoulder until I spot it: the camera in the top corner of the foyer. I hesitate, then slip off my dress shoes since they've just walked the less-than-pristine streets and sidewalks of West Hollywood.

Stevie shuts the door behind me, and my eyes and ears search for any sign of Curtis. I'm not trying to antagonize him by showing up at his apartment. I'm just here to say hi to Stevie for a few minutes. But I don't hear anything. Maybe he's in the shower. Or the spa. Whatever method obscenely rich people use to clean the grime of the working world from their highly insured bodies.

"You're here," Stevie says, looking me over again in a way that's foreign. Am I as different as she is? Or as much the same?

I smile and put out my hands, putting myself on display. "I'm here."

She stares at me longer, chewing softly on her lip until I'm about to ask her why she's acting so weird. Suddenly, she hurries over, throwing her arms around me and hugging me.

I blink, stunned as the scent of her hair—the pink Pureology shampoo she's always sworn by—fills my senses. We're in a new place, and it's been years since we've seen each other, but that smell takes me back to everything familiar. I wrap my arms around her and return the embrace, only half-conscious of the fact that Curtis might appear any second.

"You have no idea how good it is to see you," she whispers into my shoulder.

My throat feels strangely thick, and I clear away the emotional clutter there. I knew I had missed friendship with Stevie, but the weight of it presses on me in a new way now, like I'm just realizing how deprived I've been. "Is that why

you're burying your face in my shoulder? If you missed seeing me, I'd assume you'd want to actually *see* me."

She laughs and pulls away, and her eyes are glistening even though she's smiling.

"Sorry, I'm a mess," she says, pushing her loose messy bun back onto the top of her head. "Come on in." She gestures for me to follow her, and we walk down the hallway toward the kitchen.

The apartment matches the building front—minimalistic, sharp blacks and whites, with little pops of color here and there. Everything is in such pristine condition that I'm afraid of touching anything and leaving my dingy fingerprints.

She leads the way to a white leather couch and sits on one side. I sit on the opposite side to leave plenty of space for her husband. Gone are the days when we sat on the loveseat in my college apartment because I couldn't afford an actual couch. There are miles of soft leather between us now.

"Is Curtis around?" I ask.

She shoots a glance at me as she curls her legs beneath her. "Um, no. He's not." She fiddles with her wedding ring—the ring that made headlines when he proposed. It's a massive sapphire encircled with a hundred and thirty-six tiny diamonds.

"Oh." I think back on the way she looked at the camera in the penthouse foyer, and suddenly I'm worried this was a bad idea and *she's* worried what he'll think. The last thing I want is to cause problems for her. "I thought you were in Maui."

She shakes her head and laughs softly, looking down. "I wish."

I don't respond because I'm not sure how to read her right now. I'm rusty, but not so rusty I don't recognize something's ... off.

"We're divorced, Troy."

My jaw drops like the ball on Times Square, and she looks up at me, still fiddling with her ring.

“As of about half an hour ago.” She clenches her teeth and smiles pathetically. “Surprise.”

I close my mouth and stare at her, trying to understand if this is some twisted joke she’s playing on me. It wouldn’t be the first time one of us messed with the other.

“News will break in the morning,” she says.

“But ... but ...” I don’t even know what to say. My head feels as clear as when I woke up from getting my wisdom teeth out. Technically, I have no memory of that, but since Austin was kind enough to record a video of my mom driving me home, I know I spent at least eight minutes confessing my love for Stevie while I was hopped up on drugs.

I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, my brain trying to catch up with what she’s saying. “So, you filed for divorce?”

She shakes her head. “He did. Eight months ago. But today it was finalized.”

“But the pictures and the news stories,” I say, still in denial.

“A mixture of old shots and AI.” She says it so coolly, like it’s no big deal that the last eight months of her life in the public record are a sham.

“And nobody caught on? I thought divorce filings were public record.”

She smiles, and the wryness hits me right in the chest. “They are. But someone has to know to look for it, and Curtis’s PR team has made sure the public suspected nothing.”

“Yeah, they did,” I say softly.

She chuckles. “They’re good at their jobs, and the stakes were high for Curtis. I couldn’t even talk about any of it until today. Until thirty minutes ago. They didn’t want the publicity to overshadow Curtis’s movie.”

I search her face. She’s dead serious. She’s been in the middle of a divorce for *eight months*, and she hasn’t been able

to talk about it. I don't even know what to say. Or feel. Or, more importantly, how *she* must be feeling.

“So you've just been, what? Here?”

“For the last few months, yeah. You're pretty much the first human I've interacted with in person in that long besides my cleaning lady.” She laughs. “You probably put that together from my wide-eyed wonder, though.”

It definitely sheds new light on the way she looked at me and hugged me when I arrived.

“Anyway, before that, I was at a cabin in Montana, and before that, I was still with Curtis. But not *with* him, with him.” She turns her head away and looks out the window. “Just following him around to keep the media happy. We were already separated for all intents and purposes.” She looks back at me and lifts her shoulders. “That's the glamorous life I've been living.”

I scrub my scruffy chin with a hand, feeling sick inside. “Stevie ...”

She smiles ironically, tracing her finger on the leather arm of the couch. “Aren't you so happy you came to say hi?”

I don't even respond because my brain is too busy trying to figure out how she is. How she *really* is. She's always been almost impossibly optimistic, but I can see the fault line right down the center of her idealism.

But what do I do about it? Stay right here? Go hug her? Four years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated. Heck, I held her through more than a few breakups in the past. But this? This is different. *We're* different.

“How are you holding up?” It's a pathetic question, but it's the best I can do right now while I figure out what she wants and needs from me.

“I'm doing ... good.” She holds my gaze, and her smile weakens, her chin trembling slightly.

Hesitation goes out the spotless, floor-to-ceiling windows. I'm on my feet and by her side in two seconds flat, arms

wrapped around her in three.

She doesn't resist. She just hugs me again like she did in the doorway.

"I'm so sorry, Stevie." And I really am. I didn't want her to marry Curtis, but once she did, all I've wanted for her is happiness and the best out of life. I really thought that's what she had.

We don't talk for the next few minutes. I don't know if she's crying or just *being*. She's always been a quiet crier.

"I really am fine," she finally says into my shoulder. "You've just caught me when I'm still processing the news." She pulls back and lets out a shaky laugh. "Bet you're wishing you never sent that text."

"Best text I ever sent."

She cocks a brow. "Better than the one you accidentally sent to Blake Frederickson senior year?"

I cringe and facepalm. "You had to bring that up, didn't you?"

She's smiling for real now, pink nose and cheeks, lashes clumped together. "It's only one of my favorite stories ever. How many times have I wished for a video of his reaction to you asking him on a date to see *Les Mis*."

I grimace. "I *swear* I sent it to Blakely, not Blake."

"Oh, but you didn't, Troy." She's full-on grinning in sadistic delight now.

"I know. Believe me. I was the one who had to sit through the longest *Les Mis* production in history with him."

"I can't believe he said yes."

I shake my head at myself. "I double-check my text recipients to this day because of that fiasco."

We both laugh until our smiles fade and it goes quiet.

She meets my eye and squares her shoulders, wiping her eyes. "I'm better now. Nothing a good old-fashioned hug from

Troy Sheppard won't cure."

I take a second before responding. "Stevie, you don't have to pretend. Not with me. You know that, right?"

Her smile wavers.

"I know we haven't talked as much in the last few years," I continue, "but I still think of you as my best friend. You can be real with me."

She offers something between a smile and a grimace. "Really real?"

"The realest," I say.

She stands up and walks over to the window, putting her hand on the glass like I don't dare do. "Tomorrow, that sidewalk will be crawling with reporters and tabloids, waiting for me to step outside or look through the window or"—she raises her shoulders, searching for the word—"I don't know, *blink*."

"Can you just avoid doing any of that for a while until the story blows over?" I go stand next to her and look out over the amazing views. "With some top-notch eye drops, blinking might not actually be necessary."

She laughs and shakes her head. "You know how they say society's appetite for gossip is insatiable but its memory is short? It's a lie. The second half, at least. There are dozens of social media accounts devoted *just* to Curtis's and my relationship. It's a miracle they haven't sniffed anything out yet." She lets out a big breath. "It's not going to blow over. The surprise will make it that much bigger news." She looks at me. "I don't know if I can do it, Troy."

I turn toward her and lean my shoulder against the glass, trusting the expert craftsmanship to keep the window in place and me inside this beautiful, outrageously expensive glass box of an apartment. "Then don't."

She chuckles politely at my joke.

"I mean it," I say. "Get away. Tonight. Before the story breaks."

“I have nowhere to go the tabloids don’t know about.”

I watch her profile as she stares through the window, my brain working. “You’ve got your old best buddy Troy.”

Her brow wrinkles skeptically, and she meets my gaze.

I shrug. “Come stay with me.”

I FURROW MY BROW, and Troy pushes it up with his thumb, smoothing it out like Play-Doh.

“Half of my duplex is empty right now,” he says. “It’s Austin’s, but he’s never in town. It’s not in the same realm as this”—he gestures around the apartment—“but it’s in a quiet neighborhood.” He lifts his shoulders. “It’s all yours if you want it.”

Quiet neighborhood. My ears perk up at the words. Escaping somewhere new, somewhere not associated with Curtis or this public life I’ve been living for the past few years? It sounds like a dream come true.

Troy watches me, waiting for my response. I can hardly believe he’s actually here. It almost feels like the past few years never happened. We’re just chatting against our lockers after class in the hallways of Sunset Heights High.

But a lot has happened since then, including the night I pretend not to remember, when Troy told me he wanted to be more than friends. I love Troy, but I didn’t feel that way then, and I definitely don’t feel that way now. Friendship is what I need. Simple, reliable friendship. I can’t do complications or pressure or even a whiff of either of those things.

“I don’t know,” I say, rubbing my lips together. “It’s *really* nice of you, Troy, but ... maybe it’s not the best idea.”

“Yeah, of course.” He smiles. “Whatever’s best for you, obviously. Just throwing one option out there.” His phone

starts ringing, and he glances at his watch, then at me. “Can you give me a second?”

“Of course,” I say, my mind floating to a quiet, grassy neighborhood with white fences and forty-year-old trees. Am I being overly cautious throwing that option away because of something that happened years ago? It would sure be nice to be with someone I know. I’ve felt more normal in the last ten minutes than I have in ages. I haven’t even thought about my virtual pets.

Troy takes the phone from his pocket and walks down the hallway before answering it. The surfaces of this apartment carry noise like Carnegie Hall, so it sounds like he’s three feet away rather than twenty when he answers, “Hey, beautiful.”

My brows go up and my curiosity spikes. I’m not trying to listen, but short of putting my hands over my ears and yelling “La la la la!” there’s not a way to avoid it.

“No,” he says. “I stopped by to see a friend, but I’ll be heading home soon.”

Pause.

“Yeah! If you end up getting off early, come over.”

Another pause, then he laughs. “Right. Just like last time.” More laughter. “Whatever you say, Lyla. Okay, talk to you soon. Bye.” He steps back into the hallway where I can see him and heads my way. “Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” I say. “Hot date with your girlfriend?”

He chuckles and slips his phone into his pocket. “Nah, she’s working tonight.”

I’m feeling a little dumb now. How big has my head gotten to assume Troy’s been secretly pining after me all this time? He has a girlfriend. Lyla, to be precise.

I let out a little breath of relief. It makes things so much easier.

Troy showed up here like the amazing friend he’s always been. One night—a night he apologized for and makes fun of

himself over—doesn't change that. And I could really use a friend right now.

“About your duplex,” I say. “Are you really sure you'd be okay with that?”

His brows pull together. “Okay with it? You're kidding, right? I'll have my best friend living downstairs. It's like every kid's dream come true. It'll be just like old times. In fact ...” He raises his brows, an eager, knowing glint in his eyes like he's going to ...

“Oh my gosh,” I say. “You're about to do the—”

He breaks into the Carlton dance, flailing his arms from side to side, his hips and feet shuffling after. With every step, he gets closer to me, smiling his goofy smile, until I have to step back to avoid being bulldozed by the Carlton.

I laugh as I step back, feeling lighter than I have in a long time. Old times are exactly what I need right now.

“Okay, okay,” I say in surrender. “You've convinced me!”

Normal people neighborhood, here I come.



“THIS IS IT.” Troy pulls the car into the driveway of a small yellow house with landscaped bushes, mowed grass, and white shutters. The street lamps are lit and the porch lights are on, making it look especially cozy in the dark.

I stare, my eyes taking in the view hungrily. It's so deliciously and perfectly ordinary. I love it.

Troy takes off his seatbelt, reaches for the door handle, and pauses, his eyes on me. “If you don't take off those sunglasses, my neighbors are going to stare. Here in Nobodyville, we don't wear shades after dark.”

I pull the beanie from my head and the sunglasses from my nose. “Sorry! Habit.” I quickly shove the beanie over his head, and he pulls it off instantly, smoothing his hair over.

I laugh as he tosses the beanie in my lap and uses both hands to fix his hair. “You haven’t changed a bit,” I say as I get out of the car. It’s not true. He *has* changed a little. His brown hair is as perfectly arranged as ever—it was always his pride and joy—but his jaw has squared out more, and I swear he’s gotten broader. I felt it when I hugged him. Troy is very much a man now.

He grabs my suitcases from the trunk and evades my attempts to take one.

“I’ve got it,” he says.

The truth is, I’m used to having this sort of thing done for me. But not anymore. Things will be different now, and given that I just spent months on end by myself, I am more than okay with that.

I glance at Troy, hefting my suitcases on the sidewalk, and my heart warms. How did I survive so long without real friends?

Troy leads the way through the front door, where we’re presented with two more doors.

“This one leads to my place”—he points to the one on the left—“and this one leads to yours.” He points to the one on the right and goes to unlock it.

He turns to me. “Brace yourself.”

I cock a brow, not understanding. Rather than explaining, he makes his way down the half-staircase, a suitcase in either hand. I follow, and at the bottom, we both stop, looking around.

“Um, wow,” I say.

“Yeeeeeah.”

Everywhere I look, there are posters of Austin—photos from styled shoots, candid shots from concerts, one of him with Ed Sheeran. In the kitchen, a life-size cardboard Austin Sheppard stands behind the counter, a real apron draped over his shoulders. It looks like my teenage dream got here before us. This is probably what my room would have looked like in

high school if I hadn't been worried Austin might see it. It's definitely what the inside of my brain looked like.

Now, though, it just makes me chuckle.

Troy shakes his head and heads over to the cardboard cutout, flicking the apron. "Austin must've done that before he left this morning."

"Austin put all of this up?" I ask. "I mean, he always knew he was cute, but this is a whole new level of ego." Kind of reminds me of Curtis, actually.

Troy chuckles. "I wouldn't put it past him, but I actually put it all up last night to mess with him. Now he wants to keep it up to mess with *me*." He pulls off the apron and tosses it on the kitchen counter, then lets out a breath and puts out his hands. "Welcome home, Stevie."

I look around. It's sparsely decorated—apart from the posters of Austin, of course. The kitchen is small, with a fraction of the counter space I'm used to. Not that I've made use of it in a while, but still. The only furniture is a loveseat and an enormous beanbag in front of the TV.

"It's perfect," I say.

Troy hands me a small keychain. "I'm going to grab the sheets from his bed to wash them." A teasing glint appears in his eye. "Unless, of course, you'd rather I not."

I punch him in the arm. "I'm not helpless, Troy. I can wash them myself."

"But *will* you?" He hurries away before I can punch him again, and I follow him to the bedroom. He's always loved to tease me about Austin. The time he caught sight of my diary page probably didn't help my cause. My teenage angst phase hit hard ... and long.

A few minutes later, I've shoved the sheets into the washer. It's an older, top-loading model. I reach for the detergent, but my hand pauses in front of the containers on the shelf. It's been a while since I've done my own laundry, and there are three containers to choose from.

I look up at Troy, who's leaning his shoulder against the doorway and watching me with a hint of a smile.

"It's a new machine!" I defend, grabbing the laundry detergent and pulling off the cap.

Troy steps into the small room and takes the bottle from me. I grab it right back. Or I would, except I'm not quite as strong as him. The post-college years have been kind to him.

I fold my arms across my chest and raise a brow. "Are you about to mansplain doing the laundry? Not very feministy of you."

"Feministy? I don't think that's a word. Also, I'd think most women would celebrate a man doing the laundry. But mostly, I'm hoping to stop you from putting bleach all over Austin's gray sheets."

I look at the container, and sure enough, it's bleach. "I thought I grabbed the detergent."

"Uh-huh." He shoots me a teasing glance as he switches out the bottles.

With the press of a few buttons and very minimal pointers from Troy, the cycle gets going. He leaves to send a few emails while I unpack my suitcases, hanging my clothes among the ones Austin has.

It's strange, being here with Troy. It's almost made me forget the asteroid that hit my world a few hours ago. I'm divorced. That's not a word I ever in my wildest nightmares thought would apply to me, yet here I am, newly single.

No, not single. That word doesn't fit. I'm nowhere near being ready to mingle. I don't know if I ever will be. It's not that I'm missing Curtis, either. Sure, I wanted to make things work, but he was always too busy for counseling—too worried how it would affect his image if people found out.

The saying is *go the extra mile*, but when it comes to my marriage, I went a full marathon trying to make things work—even after I stopped wanting them to. I just didn't want to fail. Mom seemed to give up so easily on her marriages, and I didn't want to be like that.

In the end, though, I lost my will to keep trying when our priorities only seemed to be growing wider apart. I wanted to start a family; Curtis didn't. I wanted more time to ourselves; he loved the spotlight. It was like the public's warped view of our relationship mattered more to him than our *actual* relationship.

I hang up the last shirt and look around. The closet looks similar to the one I had in one of my college apartments. I touch a hand to the cold metal bar holding my hangers, just to make sure it's all real and the last four years weren't a dream.

They definitely weren't. I have about a zillion Google results to prove it. Part of me wishes they *were*, though, and that I could get a do-over.

My phone dings, and I brace myself when I see Mom's name on the text.

MOM

Our cruise ship is about to enter international waters, but I saw the news and had to text you. How could you not have told me?

STEVIE

I'm really sorry, Mom. Legally, I couldn't tell anyone.

Also, Mom is not the first person I'd go to for relationship advice.

Mom: Hm. Well, congratulations, baby girl. Divorce can be the best thing to happen to a woman!

She would certainly know. She's done it three times.

STEVIE

Thanks, Mom. Have a great cruise!

MOM

I'll call you when I'm back. Mwah.

I tend to my most needy virtual pets and jump when the dryer buzzer signals the end of the cycle. I get the sheets out and smile as the armful of scented warmth heats me through. Contrary to my attempts to seem very capable in the laundry room, I haven't washed my sheets or made my own bed in an embarrassingly long time. Curtis's schedule kept us crazy busy, and then when we separated, he insisted on having hired help for that stuff.

Troy helps me put the sheets back on the bed—I had forgotten fitted sheets are the spawn of Satan—and I'm starting to feel the toll of the day once we finish around ten. Life trauma is exhausting, even if it's the kind you've been expecting for months.

Troy brings a couple extra pillows from his apartment, and I watch him set them on the bed with unexpected precision.

"Nice placement," I say, half-impressed, half-amused.

"When you show homes for a living, you learn a thing or two." He karate chops both pillows in the middle, then steps back to critique his work like I'm not about to pull those pillows off the bed and climb under the covers.

He looks around the room. "I think that should be everything. Towels are in the bathroom, which I gave a quick cleaning." His eyes land on a poster, and he grimaces. "I promised Austin I wouldn't take this stuff down, but if they'll give you nightmares, consider them gone."

I wave dismissively at the nearest one. "They're fine."

"Fine?" He cocks a teasing brow.

I shoot him an unamused look. "Fine as in I don't want to change anything about Austin's apartment when I'm an uninvited guest here."

He nods, then gets distracted by a scratch on the nightstand, rubbing it with his finger. I'm still not sure what to think of all this. Troy has an entire life—a job, a house, a girlfriend—that I know hardly anything about, and yet he's dropped everything to clean his brother's bathroom and make

a bed for me to sleep in like I haven't been a crappy friend to him since marrying Curtis.

“Hey, Troy?”

He turns toward me, brows raised.

“Thank you. For everything.”

“Eh.” He brushes off my gratitude.

“No, really. I don't deserve any of your charity, but I'm thankful for it.” Just imagining myself alone in that West Hollywood apartment right now makes my eyes sting. I guess I got used to being alone, but I hadn't realized just how lonely I was—even before Curtis and I separated—until Troy came over.

He feels like home.

His expression sobers, and he steps toward me. “I'll always be here for you, Stevie. And don't talk nonsense. You deserve every good thing life has to offer, even if it feels like all life is giving you right now is dried up lemons.” He lowers his head to hold my gaze. “You can stay here as long as you want, okay?”

I nod, swallowing hard.

“You going to be all right? Or do you want some company?”

“I'm all right,” I say, but even I don't believe me. Sleep was sounding great just a few minutes ago, but right now, I really don't want to be alone. Not again. I feel like, if I go to sleep in that bed, I'm going to wake up again in West Hollywood with no one to talk to.

He looks at me for a few seconds. “I'll grab the popcorn.”

Watching reruns of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* under a throw, holding a bowl of ranch-seasoned popcorn is probably the best possible scenario for the night of my divorce being finalized. Hearing Troy laugh and watching him do the Carlton dance when he gets up to get us water is like eating home cooking after months of takeout. It's being wrapped up in a warm blanket of the past.

I don't have a ton of confidence in the future, but the familiarity of the past might just get me through the present.

Lyla calls midway through the third episode, when both Troy and I are nodding off. He tells her in a groggy voice that he'll see her tomorrow.

I can't remember the last time I went to sleep without doing my skincare routine, or brushing my teeth for that matter, but tonight I go the extra mile and fall asleep with greasy, ranch-seasoned fingers.

ARE YOU STILL WATCHING? the tv screen reads through my bleary eyes.

Blinking, I look around, trying to make sense of where I am. The first thing I catch sight of is the cardboard Austin. Right. I'm in his apartment.

My heart stutters as I catch sight of Stevie. She's curled up under a blanket, leaning over with her head on the throw pillow against the armrest. Her peaceful face makes it hard to believe she's been going through such a rocky time for the past year. Or more? I don't even know when the problems started in her marriage. Or what the problems were.

All I know is she's here and I think she needs me. Or someone.

I didn't miss the way she hesitated when I offered for her to come to Austin's apartment. It was like traveling back in time to that stupid night after graduation when I told her I wanted to be more than friends. What insanity took over me is still the great mystery of my life. How I could possibly think she would respond positively to that sort of confession when I knew she was in love with Austin will puzzle behavioral scientists for generations to come.

Lyla's call may as well have been specifically timed to reassure Stevie—which it clearly did. Now Stevie can relax, and we can settle back into the friendship we used to have.

I grab the remote and press the power button, taking care not to make noise as I get up. Half of me wants to carry her to

her bed—the angle of her neck and body look like they might require a chiropractor visit tomorrow—but something tells me Lyla’s timely call might be overshadowed by Stevie waking up to me cradling her in my arms as I carry her to her bed.

Even though I’ve long since accepted Stevie and I aren’t right for each other, I’ll need to tread carefully not to revive that stupid specter of the past. It took three months after my confession for things to get back to being mostly normal between us.

It shouldn’t be too hard, honestly. I *don’t* feel anything more than friendship for her. A kind but unmistakable rejection, eight years, and her marriage to someone else successfully cured me of that. I’m not going to be weird around her because that’ll definitely set off alarms in her head and make her wonder what’s up.

I pause by the door, feeling eyes on me.

Cardboard eyes.

I glare at stationary Austin. I think about texting him to let him know Stevie is staying here, but I don’t really want to deal with his taunting, and the fewer people who know about her being here, the better. Austin’s a chill guy anyway. He won’t care.

I consider putting all of the Austin promo paraphernalia away—he was only half-serious when he told me to keep everything up—but it might be better to leave things how they are. Stevie’s temporary living situation being a shrine to Austin should keep things more in perspective for me in case there’s any stubborn feelings hidden deep down somewhere.



EIGHT, nine, ten.

I blow out a gasping breath and set down the dumbbells on the rack under my backyard awning. Grabbing the towel on the bench, I wipe the sweat from my forehead while my heart rate and breathing regulate.

The sun is just coming up over my backdoor neighbor's house, ready to warm the Southern California air and burn off the marine layer. I woke up extra early this morning and checked the news first thing.

Stevie's divorce is all over, well, everything. Even publications that don't usually offer celebrity gossip have stories about it. I wish Stevie could just hibernate through it, and so far, there hasn't been any sign of life in her apartment.

I hurry to shower off the effects of my workout, then slip on some jeans and a polo. I asked another agent to take my only showings today. I want to be available to Stevie if she needs company. There are plenty of *Fresh Prince* episodes to get through.

I've just finished scrambling eggs when there's a knock on my apartment door. I trip over my own feet as I hurry to answer it.

Stevie looks back at me, hair still askew from sleep. Her phone is in her hand, and a quick glance at the screen tells me she's already aware of the feeding frenzy that has descended on her divorce.

"Good morning," I say. "How are you?"

Her nose scrunches up. "Weird."

"Tell me something I *don't* know." I wink as I open the door wider for her to come in.

Smiling reluctantly, she steps inside and lifts her phone over her shoulder for me to see as she shuffles her feet up the stairs. "I think I liked the gag order better." The screen shifts, displaying an incoming call, which she rejects immediately. I hadn't even considered the fact that it's not just news articles and social media comments she'll be dealing with. *No one* has known about this, which means all her friends are going to be wondering whether she's okay.

"Yeeeah," I say, following her up. "I don't blame you. But if you were still gagged, you couldn't have the delicious eggs I scrambled."

Her nose wrinkles. “When you say *delicious*, do you mean like the cake you made for my birthday one time?”

“It *was* delicious!” I defend, serving up two plates of eggs and toast. “It just wasn’t going to win any presentation awards.”

She sits down at the table. “You added three tablespoons of salt instead of one teaspoon.”

I set her plate in front of her. “You told me three tablespoons make a teaspoon!”

“No, Troy. I really didn’t. I told you three *teaspoons* make a tablespoon.”

I point my finger at her. “That’s what you *thought* you said. Besides, what do you have against salt? Salt is the salt of life.”

She shakes her head, making her messy bun flop to the side just as her phone dings again. Her brows knit in concentration, then contract even further. “Oh. My. Gosh.”

I take a seat. “What?”

She lets out a huge sigh and picks up her fork with her free hand, reading from her phone. “*Curtis Carr divorces wife for falling in love with their pet monkey!*”

I snort, spraying scrambled eggs all over my shirt and the table.

Stevie stares at me, and I cover my mouth with a hand. I wiggle my nose up and down. “I think I have eggs in my sinuses. You have a pet monkey?”

She takes a bite of her eggs and shoots me an impressed look. “These are really good, Troy. Perfect amount of salt. And no, no pet monkey. At least, not a real one.”

“Um, what?”

She hesitates for a second. “I have a virtual pet monkey.” Her head tilts from side to side. “Technically, it’s a gibbon.”

My brows go up.

“Hey, don’t judge. I had a *lot* of free time to fill for the past year.”

I put my hands up. “No judging here. I just want to see it. That’s all. A gibbon is way better than a monkey.” I almost say, *I wouldn’t have blamed you for leaving Curtis for a gibbon*, but I don’t because I have a filter.

Stevie navigates to an app, and I come to stand behind her, watching her scroll through dozens of animals.

“Are those all yours?” It comes off sounding more judgmental than I meant it to. I’m just in awe, I guess. Stevie isn’t the type of person to be glued to her phone, and the fact she’s been spending a lot of time on a virtual pet app says a lot. When she told me she hadn’t been able to talk about the divorce, I didn’t really think about what that would mean for her. How would it be to not be allowed to even mention the most all-consuming thing happening in your life—to anyone?

It makes me feel sick inside—and angry at Curtis. No wonder I hadn’t heard from her in months.

“They might be ...” she says.

“How many are there?”

“Does it sound less pathetic if I say three-score and three?” she asks, clenching her teeth together like she’s waiting for me to pin a scarlet N on her chest for “Nerd.”

“No, Stevie,” I say with a chuckle. “It really doesn’t. You’ve kept 63 virtual pets alive?”

She rears back in mock offense. “My pets aren’t just alive, Troy. They are thriving. Okay, here he is.” She displays an adorable gibbon, swinging from rope vines in a virtual zoo cage.

“What’s his name?” I ask.

“Swinger.”

My brows shoot up. “*Swinger?* As in—”

“Not that kind of swinger,” she says firmly. “Swinger as in he *swings* from branch to branch.”

I nod, trying not to bust up laughing.

“*You* try naming sixty-three animals. It’s not as easy as you think.”

“Clearly,” I mumble as she jabs me in the ribs. “Well, Swinger is very cute, but I’ve got to say, I’m disappointed he isn’t real. What’s the point of being famous if you can’t have a real pet monkey?”

“I’m not famous,” she says, turning off the phone. “Curtis is famous. Without him, I’m just a nobody who went to Sunset Heights High.”

“Hey, Sunset Heights Hawks are winners. Every last one of us. Also, you *are* famous, but I take your point. In fact, I get it better than you might think.” My relevance to people nowadays is generally centered around my relationship to Austin.

Her gaze flicks to mine, and our eyes hold for a second until her phone vibrates again. She looks down at it, her eyes scanning the message. Pink starts creeping into her cheeks.

“What is it?” I ask.

She turns off the screen. “Just more news stories.” She stirs her eggs around with her fork. “You know, for months I’ve had this on my chest, unable to talk to anyone about it. Now suddenly the whole world knows, and within a couple of hours, everyone is so certain about their theories.”

I don’t say anything because, when it comes to Stevie’s divorce, I’m just as much in the dark as the general public. I don’t want to push her to talk if she’s not ready, but I also want to be here for her in the ways she needs, and that’s hard to do if I don’t know whether she’s relieved or devastated.

“What *did* happen?” I ask gently.

Her hand slows pushing her eggs around.

“Sorry,” I hurry to say, “it’s none of my business.”

“No, it’s not that.” She sets down her fork and meets my gaze. She smiles and shrugs, but there’s a sheen in her eyes.

“He just didn’t want to fight for us. Didn’t want a family or anything but to keep chasing his career.”

My heart twinges, and I reach for her hand as my opinion of Curtis plummets even farther.

“Can’t blame him,” she says with a half-smile, tapping my hand absently with her thumb. “Apparently, I don’t even know the difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon.”

I chuckle and squeeze her hand. “It’s a thousand percent his loss, Stevie.”

Her phone vibrates three times in a row, and she lets her head fall back, sighing deeply.

I grab her phone and put it in my pocket. “I think that’s enough good vibrations for today. Let’s go catch a movie or something.”

“I wish I could, but now that everything is finalized, I have a million and one things to do.”

“Such as ...?”

“Go to the bank, for one. I’ve also got to get groceries at some point.”

“Wow, you really hate my cooking, don’t you?” Her phone vibrates in my pocket.

“No, the eggs are *so* good,” she says sincerely. “I just don’t have much of an appetite right now.”

From the looks of her thin frame, it seems like it’s not the first time she hasn’t had an appetite.

I push my chair out and stand up. “Let’s go, then. Make a dent in that to-do list.”

“What, now?” She pushes her messy bun back on top of her head. “Don’t you have work today?”

I walk over to her chair, grab her hand, and pull her up, ignoring the way her phone is going off constantly in my pocket. “Nope. I cleared out the day to hang out with my old best friend.”

“*Hang out* meaning go to the bank and grocery store?”

I wrinkle my brow. “Is there another meaning?” I put my hands on her shoulders. “Stevie, I haven’t seen you in years. If you asked me to clean out port-a-potties with you today, I’d do it. But also, please don’t ask me to clean out port-a-potties with you today.”

“I can’t make any promises, but if you really don’t mind coming on my errands, I’d love the company. Just let me get half-decent first.”

I zip my lips rather than telling her that she looks more than decent as is. A thought occurs to me. “Wait.”

She pauses in her path toward the door.

“Can you just ... go out in public? Are you worried about being recognized?”

She tips her head from side to side. “Yes and no. No one knows where I am yet, so people won’t really be expecting to see me, which is more than half the battle. If I wear a hat and plain clothes, I should be fine.”

“I can moonlight as your security detail.” I look down at my outfit. “I’ll need to change into a black suit and wear some sunglasses, though.”

She bites her lip. “I’m thinking that might draw a bit of attention.”

“Hm. Okay, scratch the suit and glasses. You don’t happen to have one of those ear mics, do you?”

She stares at me, cocking one brow.

“No? You know what? It’s fine. I can make do without for today.”

She laughs, and it’s a pleasant zing to the heart to hear that sound after so much time without it.

On our way to the bank, Stevie asks to check her phone for messages from her lawyer. Sure enough, she’s got a few of them asking her to call him as soon as possible. She spends the drive talking to him about accounts and pre-nups and

properties. I can only hear one side of the conversation, but it's a reminder to me how different our lives have become. Yeah, I work with clients who have properties—as in more than one—but as for me? I can only dream of affording that someday. Even then, they wouldn't be up to the standard Stevie's used to.

There's mention of a few of the properties—the West Hollywood apartment, which I've seen, the Montana cabin, the Miami beach house, and the lake house in Como. It sounds like Curtis is keeping all of them. Shocker.

The two of them met by chance in the lobby of the hotel Stevie's mom was staying at one weekend. Curtis didn't waste any time getting her number and giving her a taste of the Hollywood lifestyle. He really went above and beyond, making her feel like a million bucks—by spending about that much.

Stevie finally hangs up just as I pull into a parking space at the bank. I turn off the car but don't pull out the keys. I just sit and let Stevie process the call. It doesn't sound like any of it was news to her, but it's still a lot for one person to handle.

She looks over at me and offers a grimacing smile. “Do you have space on your roster for one more client?”

It takes me a second to register what she's saying. “Are we talking about my security detail roster or real estate roster?”

Her mouth twitches. “Both. But real estate.”

I pretend to think for a minute. “I could *probably* squeeze you in. I just have a really high-maintenance security client right now, making me go to banks and grocery stores and just ... running me ragged.”

“Right, right,” she says with a faux-sympathetic expression. “That sounds really tough.”

I sniffle and dash away a fake tear. “In this business, people only see me for my incredible strength,” I say in a strangled voice, folding my arms across my chest and making my biceps dance. “It's like they think I don't have feelings or needs.”

She rubs my arm, but she's losing her fight against laughter.

I break into a smile and unfold my arms. "I can't wait to set up a hotsheet for you."

"A hot what now?"

"Hotsheet. It alerts you whenever a home listing comes up that matches your criteria."

"Ah, okay. Gotcha."

I look toward the grocery store. It's medium-range as far as size goes, but it doesn't look too busy right now. I'm not sure if that's in our favor or not. I've been joking about the security detail thing, but I'm genuinely concerned about Stevie being recognized. She made it sound like it's really unlikely, but in my opinion, Stevie stands out in any crowd.

IF I'M CALCULATING RIGHT, it's been close to three years since I went grocery shopping for myself. When we step inside, I ignore the impulse to pull my baseball cap lower. Acting suspicious is the surest way to draw attention, and much as I tried to give Troy the feeling that this is no big deal, I'm pretty nervous. Curtis took his image very seriously, so being out in public has always put me on edge. What if I do something wrong and mess everything up?

We're not married anymore, but I don't feel entirely free of that burden of responsibility. We're still tied to each other in people's minds, even if it's been a long time since our hearts were knit like they once were.

I push away those thoughts and grab a cart, guiding it past the coffee and bakery displays.

Troy puts a finger to his ear. "Monkey Lover is on the move. Over and out."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, stopping in front of the vegetables. "Are you my security detail, or a black ops agent sent to assassinate me?"

"If I told you I'd have to kill you." He narrows his eyes at his own comment, like even *he* is struggling to understand what it means.

I grab a produce sack and step forward, but Troy puts out a hand to stop me. "Wait."

I step back with an amused roll of the eyes. "You've always had something against broccoli."

“It smells like a rotten egg and a wet dish rag had a baby,” he says with unnecessary violence. He straightens his shoulders and continues more calmly. “Anyone, and I mean *anyone*, could be hiding amongst these broccoli stalks, ma’am. I’ve seen it a hundred times. It’s stalking 101.”

“Did you just make a pun about broccoli stalks?”

He grins, then touches his finger to his ear again, his gaze shifting somewhere to my right. “I’ve got eyes at twelve o’clock.”

“Don’t you mean you’ve got eyes *on* your twelve o’clock?”

“No, I mean the guy at my twelve o’clock keeps staring over here. This isn’t my first rodeo, Stevia.”

I smile because I haven’t been called that name in years. Also because this *is* Troy’s first rodeo ... as security detail. I’m just grateful I get to witness it. He was always good at making me laugh, and boy, does it feel good after the year I’ve had.

He’s not wrong about the guy at his twelve o’clock, though. He keeps glancing over here and squinting, making my heart rate jump. I know I can’t avoid the public forever, but I’d love a little bit more time before I have to face things.

The starrer puts a can of beans back on the shelf and starts making his way toward us.

“Abort! Abort!” Troy whisper-shouts, guiding me past the vegetables with a hand on my back.

“Hey!”

We’re done for. The guy is actually calling out to us. We can either ignore him and risk him getting louder, drawing the attention of everyone in the store, or we can turn and try to do damage control. Offer him a signed poster from Curtis or something as long as he goes quietly.

I paste a smile on my face—Curtis was religious about smiling at fans—and turn around.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing?” Troy asks, following my lead.

I come face to face with the guy—a redhead with thick-rimmed glasses, a flannel shirt, and a beanie. I brace myself for questions about my eating habits and carbon footprint. Curtis isn’t the most environmentally conscious of humans, so this could get ugly real quick.

“You’re Austin Sheppard’s brother, aren’t you?” he says.

Troy and I are both silent for far longer than is socially acceptable.

“Um, yeah,” Troy says, his security guy bravado suddenly MIA.

“Bro!” He puts out his hand for a high-fiv—nope. It’s a complicated handshake that Troy stumbles his way through. “His new song is so dope.”

“It ... truly is,” Troy says in a way that makes me cover my mouth to keep my composure.

I know how it feels to have the most bizarre interactions with fans, but it’s refreshing not to be the one having to handle it.

A shopper squeezes past our little Austin Sheppard fan club meeting. Our president and founding member taps the unsuspecting woman on the shoulder. “Austin Sheppard in our midst, ma’am.”

Her weirded-out expression is replaced by curiosity as her gaze shifts to Troy. As she takes him in, there’s a mixture of recognition and confusion in her eyes, like she sees the resemblance but senses that something’s not quite right. “THE Austin Sheppard?”

Troy grimaces. “Uh, no. I’m just his brother.”

“Oh.” The disappointment is palpable, like she planned this meeting with Austin for months and got short-changed instead of being stopped by a weird stranger while picking up the ingredients to what looks like a very bean-dense chili recipe. “Well, nice to meet you.”

“Good to meet—aaand she’s gone.” Troy turns back to our hipster friend. “I’ll be sure to pass your ... enthusiasm on to my brother.”

The guy’s eyes go wide. “Brooooo. For real?”

By the time we escape, he’s given us his name, phone number, and social media handles to pass along to Austin.

“Does that happen a lot?” I ask.

“Not as often as Austin would like. More than I would.”

We make our way through the bulk foods without any issues except Troy’s phone ringing.

“It’s Lyla,” he explains before picking up. “Hey, beautiful.”

I shovel some orzo into a bag, prickling with curiosity about his girlfriend. What’s she like? Beautiful, apparently.

Troy’s gaze shifts to me. “I would, but I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Sorry,” I mouth to him. Here I came, tumbling into Troy’s life and throwing everything out of whack. I want to try to keep things as normal as possible for him.

“Just at Whole Foods.” There’s a pause. “Yeah, I’ll call you once I get home.”

He hangs up and slips his phone into his pocket. “She got off early today.”

“Oh, that’s great! Let’s hurry and finish, then.”

“There’s no rush,” he says as we leave the bulk foods, but as we head to the dairy section, our luck runs out.

A girl with frizzy, wavy brown hair and a generous sprinkling of freckles approaches us. I’m holding my breath to see whether it’s Troy or me she recognizes. She’s definitely noticed me, where the first guy didn’t even seem to realize I existed.

“Troy, right?” Her eyes shift to me. “And Stephanie?”

Troy and I glance at each other, unsure what to think. The likelihood of someone knowing us both—and not using our last names—is pretty slim.

I nod and scan the girl's face. There's a vague spark of familiarity about her, but I've seen so many faces in my life, figuring out why I recognize her is a futile pursuit. She's got to be somewhere near our age—mid-twenties, definitely.

"I figured you wouldn't recognize me," she says with an understanding smile. It's totally guileless and sweet, which relaxes me a little. "Sunset Heights. Class of '15."

"Wait a sec," Troy says, narrowing his eyes as he stares at her. "Margot Jensen?"

Her eyes widen in surprise. "I go by Maggie now, but yeah."

My jaw slips open. I see it.

Margot Jensen was one of the most teased students at our school—middle *and* high school. The combination of freckles, frizzy hair, braces, and a prominent nose and lips were enough to make her an easy target.

I feel nauseated just thinking about it. I wish I had done more to befriend her then, but, like most kids, I was worried about being tainted by association. She's really grown into herself, though. The freckles are still there—they've multiplied, actually. The frizz has gone down a lot, and her lips and nose don't stand out at all anymore.

"Are you still playing guitar?" she asks Troy.

He chuckles. "I can't believe you remember that. Um, no, not really. That's kind of Austin's domain."

My head whips around. Troy stopped playing? He always loved guitar—and he was good at it too. I'm not sure if he's avoiding my eye or just focused on the conversation with Margot—Maggie, I mean.

"Well, you both look great," she says. "And it's fun to see you're still in touch. I know you're trying to get shopping done, but I just wanted to say hi."

“I’m so glad you did,” I say genuinely. Maggie seems the sort of kind, down-to-earth person everyone could use more of in their lives. “It’s really good to see you after all these years.”

“You too,” she says with a smile.

“Hey, Maggie,” I say when she turns away to her cart again.

“Yeah?”

I hesitate. This feels weird. But for some reason I can’t explain—sheer desperation and loneliness, maybe?—I’m doing it anyway. I can’t rely on Troy for all of my needs, and Maggie is a perfect embodiment of the type of people I want to seek out in my new life: completely normal. “We should get together for lunch sometime.”

The pause before her response makes me wonder if she still inhabits the same sort of space she did in our early school years—a lonely one with few invitations. Maybe we can be lonely together.

“I’d love that,” she says.

We exchange numbers, and I watch her walk off, feeling hopeful I’ve made a new friend—and one who doesn’t care that I was married to and am now divorced from a Hollywood star.

“Well,” Troy says, watching Maggie turn a corner. “That was unexpected.”

“Totally. A blast from the past.” I glance up at him and smile mischievously. “So far, both of the people we’ve been stopped by know *you*. Maybe I need to be *your* security detail.”

“It’s a lot harder than I make it look,” he says, readjusting his fake earpiece. Maggie emerges on the next aisle, and she smiles at us before reaching for a pack of granola bars.

“Do you think she’ll tell anyone about you?” The worry in Troy’s eyes stirs emotion in my chest. Under all the silliness, he’s genuinely concerned for me. Maybe it’s because of how much time I spent alone while Curtis lived his best life and

shot movies, but it's a big deal to feel like I matter so much to him. Especially given how terrible of a friend I've been to him.

"She won't," I say confidently. I don't know how I know, but I do.

We continue our shopping spree in the refrigerated section, and I enjoy seeing how many of Troy's staple foods haven't changed—the same burritos and jalapeños filled with cream cheese he lived on in college.

"How's your family, by the way?" I ask. The Sheppards have got to be one of the best families around. They're fun and loyal and functional. In high school, Troy's parents managed to walk that incredibly fine line between relatable and authoritative. They always made me feel welcome, just like Troy has.

"Crazy as ever," he says. "Austin is out serenading the world of hipsters, apparently. I had started to think his fan base was all girls under the age of fifteen. Anyway, Siena's married now. To Jack Allred, actually. Not sure if you'd heard that."

"I did! Such a fun surprise."

He grabs a massive container of cottage cheese. "Yeah, I wasn't on board at first, but turns out, he's all right."

That's a pretty high compliment from Troy. "And Tori?"

"She's the same old same. None of them live too far, so maybe you'll see them."

"I'd love that," I say genuinely as I catch someone walking purposefully toward us, her eyes shifting between Troy and me.

"Incoming at your 6 o'clock." Apparently, I've embraced his political drama TV series lingo.

Troy turns, and recognition lights up his gaze. "Lyla." He glances at me, and apology is written on his face.

"It's okay," I reassure him in a soft voice. There's no way I'm going to make things awkward with him and his girlfriend, and hey, I'm bursting with curiosity to meet her.

Troy has called her *beautiful* both times I've heard him on the phone with her, and she's definitely that. She's about 5'8 with long, straight brown hair that could cover her chest if she was a mermaid and ran out of seashells.

"I was in the area and thought I'd surprise you," Lyla says as Troy wraps her in a hug.

Troy gives amazing hugs, and part of me wants to switch her places. Deprivation of human contact for months will do that to you.

Over Troy's shoulder, her eyes flit to me. "I didn't know you were ... with someone," Lyla says as they pull apart. Her voice isn't accusatory. Just confused.

Oh my gosh. Does she think ...? Is she under the impression ...?

I stick out my hand. "Hey, I'm Stephanie. Troy's old friend from high school." Technically, we were friends well before that, but I don't think Lyla cares about technicalities when, from what I can tell, she thinks she just caught her boyfriend with another woman.

I know how it feels to wonder. Every movie Curtis has been in has depicted a romance, meaning he spent a lot of time with female costars. I must be immature and insecure because it was always really hard for me.

Lyla takes my outstretched hand, a hesitant smile on her face, like she's still not sure what she's stepped into. The handshaking stops, and her eyes fix on me. Slowly, her jaw drops. "Stephanie. As in Stephanie Carr." It's not a question, but she looks to Troy for confirmation.

He gives an awkward toothy smile. "Lyla, meet Stevie. Stevie, Lyla."

Lyla's eyes light up with the type of giddy energy that always puts me on edge. When people realize who I am—or who I was married to—they get this look in their eyes, like I'm ... suddenly interesting.

"You didn't tell me you went to high school with Stephanie Carr!" Lyla threads her arm through Troy's. It's silly

for her to be mad at Troy—even pretend-mad—for not telling her about me. And yet, part of me wants to ask him, “Yeah, why *didn't* you tell her?”

It’s dumb. So dumb. He’s been living his life for the last few years, just like I’ve been living mine. I have no one to blame for my absence except myself. And Curtis. He wasn’t a huge fan of me keeping in touch with people from back home. “They don’t know what to keep private,” he’d say.

“Totally next on my list of things to tell you,” Troy says to Lyla.

“Right,” she replies with a smile. “It’s good to see you. Three days is too long.”

“It is,” Troy confirms, smiling right back down at her.

She goes up on her tiptoes, and they kiss. It elicits a visceral reaction in my chest.

What is going on with me? I’m a starved dog with a bone. Troy is that bone, and I’m ready to bite anyone who dares come near. It’s certifiably insane. I need to branch out and make some more friends ASAP.

Lyla turns back to me. She’s got a nice smile, and even though she’s excited, it’s not over-the-top. “I can’t believe you’re actually here.” She shakes her head in wonder as she looks at me. “You are every bit as stunning as in your photos—and I’ve seen a million pictures of you.”

I can feel my cheeks heating up. You’d think I’d be used to this sort of thing by now. I remind myself that, at one point in my life, I would have been doe-eyed too if I’d met someone famous. I’m sure I would have been nervous and said cringe-worthy things. That sort of excitement wears off quite a bit once you realize how the sausage is made, as it were. “Thanks, Lyla. That’s really kind of you.”

“My favorite is that blue off-the-shoulder dress you wore in Paris.” Her eyes widen. “Stunning.”

All I can do is smile because I never wore that dress. It’s one of the AI images Curtis’s team generated a couple of

months ago to keep the fire of public opinion burning brightly in our favor.

“I didn’t know you were such a celebrity enthusiast,” Troy says to Lyla.

She lifts her shoulders as if to say *guilty*. “Not as big as Tina,” she says. “She could tell you every designer Stephanie’s worn in the past two years, I bet.”

“Wow,” Troy says. We catch eyes, and I can tell he recognizes I’m uncomfortable. I got pretty good at public appearances over the course of my marriage, but now that I’m divorced, it feels ... weird. I never deserved fame, and now, more than ever, I feel like an imposter.

Lyla whispers something in Troy’s ear, and his mouth slowly widens into a smile as they share a glance.

That tug in my chest happens again. It shouldn’t be this hard to watch people in love.

“Oh, shoot,” I say, reaching into the cart. “I think the ice cream is starting to melt.” It’s not. It’s fine. It’s been in the cart for three minutes.

“Oh, what kind of ice cream?” Lyla peeks in. “Mint brownie? Yum!”

Dang. I should’ve said the spinach was wilting. But it’s too late. There’s only one thing I can do. My tongue resists, but I force it to my will like a Jedi. “You should come over and have some.”

Because what’s better than getting a divorce and being a third wheel the next day?

I THINK I'm dating a tabloid junkie.

That's what I'm gathering as we walk out to the parking lot. Lyla's questions for Stevie make it crystal clear she follows her life prettily heavily. I shouldn't be surprised. Stevie and Curtis have been a lot like Brangelina. I'm just bracing myself for the moment Lyla brings up the divorce. But so far, so good.

On the one hand, it's nice to see her be so kind to Stevie. There was a second there in the store when I thought I saw a very different emotion in her eyes. But she's all smiles and chattiness as we approach my car. In fact, I'm not sure she even remembers me back here with the cart. I really *could* be security, given the safe distance I'm walking behind them.

Stevie stops just in front of the hood of my car, and Lyla follows suit. Stevie's got her characteristic warm smile as she listens to Lyla talking animatedly.

Why do I feel so weird seeing them together like this? It's got to be because it's a very unexpected collision of past and present—the girl I used to love, and the girl I ... like? That word seems so lame, but I haven't known Lyla long enough to use any other one. In fact, as I look at her, it's hard to imagine feeling more attached to her than I feel to Stevie.

Whatever you want to call it, the sight of them together is doing weird things to my brain and heart.

"Is that okay?" Lyla looks at me, waiting for an answer.

“What?” I have no idea what she asked, but my guilty conscience is desperate to give the impression I was listening and not comparing her to my best friend. “Yeah, yeah. Definitely.”

She clasps her hands together in excitement. “My car is just over there”—she points, then turns back to me. “We’ll be just behind you.” She comes over, goes up on her tiptoes and kisses me on the cheek, and my eyes dart to Stevie. Apparently, I just gave the okay for them to drive together.

I clench my teeth to convey that I didn’t mean to put her in a weird position. Stevie just chuckles like she knows my mind was elsewhere. As long as she doesn’t know where it was ...

“I’ll follow *you*,” I say. If I’m fully embracing this security gig, it only makes sense. Is it insane of me to be suddenly wishing I’d done a background check on Lyla? Just to make sure she hasn’t made a habit of kidnapping celebrities?

Yup. Completely insane. But I’ve learned a lot about Lyla today, which isn’t surprising given the fact that we’ve only known each other three weeks. For example, I’ve always driven when we’re together, so I don’t even know what sort of driver Lyla is.

Lyla shrugs. “Okay.”

As I load the groceries into the back of my car, I watch the two of them walk to Lyla’s Ford Focus, waiting for some crazy stalker to jump out from between cars. But they make the twenty-foot trek without mishap, and once they’re in their seats, I let out a breath, shut the trunk, and get into my car.

My concerns about Lyla as a driver turn out to be somewhat justified. She doesn’t fully stop at red lights before turning right, and she uses her blinker as sparingly as Matthew McConaughey uses deodorant.

If nothing else, I hope Stevie meeting Lyla has reassured her that she has nothing to worry about from me. I love her in the most platonic way possible.

When they get out of the car, I fix my gaze on Stevie. Is she overwhelmed? Did she enjoy herself? The way she lets out

a long breath makes me think it's the former. I'm smacking myself for putting her in this situation. Or for letting Stevie invite Lyla over for ice cream, but what could I do?

I'm a terrible person for even thinking these kinds of things about the girl I'm dating. It's nothing against Lyla, though. She just doesn't really understand the situation she's stepped into. How could she? To the untrained eye, Stevie doesn't appear to be struggling under the weight of a divorce.

We head inside and up to my apartment, and after putting away the perishable groceries, I pull out the ice cream scoop.

Lyla pats the couch, and Stevie smiles and takes the seat next to her.

"So, where will you live now?" Lyla asks.

My jaw tightens. Does this mean they talked about the divorce in the car? I'm officially the worst security guard in history. If only I'd had my earpiece.

"Um, I'm not sure yet," Stevie says. Her voice is light, but I can hear the anxious undertone in it. "Troy's been nice enough to let me stay here for now *and* to help me hopefully find a place of my own." She smiles at me gratefully, and I give an awkward thumbs up with the hand holding the ice cream scooper.

"Oh," Lyla says. "You're staying *here*?"

Stevie and I catch eyes, and both of us start talking at the same time in a stumbling jumble of words. We stop talking at the same time too.

Stevie laughs nervously. "Not *here*, here. In the other apartment."

"Oh," Lyla says, offering a smile that looks slightly forced. I don't know the subtleties of her expressions well enough yet to be sure, though.

"Magic Shell?" I hurry to offer, eager for a subject change.

"You have Magic Shell?" Stevie says.

I scoff. “*Do I have Magic Shell?* What kind of question is that? It’s at the top of my weekly grocery list.”

“I haven’t had it since ... well, since last time I saw you, probably.”

“I’ll take that as a yes for you, then,” I say, squeezing a generous amount all over Stevie’s bowl. I glance at Lyla, who’s wearing that same, not-quite-right smile. Yikes. Definitely forced.

“What about you?” I ask Lyla.

“Sure,” she says. “I haven’t had it since I was a kid.”

I shake my head as I squeeze the bottle, making sure to spread the shell evenly over the scoops of ice cream. “You’ve both been deprived.” I wink at her, and she smiles more readily.

I wipe my hands on the towel hanging over the oven handle, then stick spoons in the bowls. Throwing the towel over my forearm like a butler, I bring the bowls to the couch. “Two heaping bowls of ice cream, my ladies,” I say, handing them over and bowing. “Complete with the decadent modern wonder, Magic Shell.”

“Thank you,” Lyla says, holding my gaze with a warm look in her eyes. It’s so warm I’m tempted to see what Stevie makes of it. But I don’t, because why would that even matter? I head back to the kitchen to scoop a bowl for myself.

“So, you’ve been friends since high school,” Lyla says. “Did you meet in a class?”

“Yeah, Stevie,” I say significantly. “Tell her how we met.”

Stevie covers her mouthful of ice cream with a hand, but I can see by the crease next to her eyes that she’s smiling.

“Hey, it’s more embarrassing for *you* than for me,” she says once she’s swallowed. She turns her body toward Lyla. “It was actually in junior high. First week of school, and we had science class together. We were making Oobleck that day.”

“Oobleck?” Lyla asks.

“Corn starch and water,” I say, shutting the ice cream container and putting it back in the freezer. The memory of that day is still vivid for me, even a decade and a half later. “It makes a weird paste that’s somehow both solid and runny.”

“Non-Newtonian fluid, Troy,” Stevie says in a censoring voice.

“My bad. I was slightly distracted that day, as you may remember.” I take my ice cream and sit in the spot on Lyla’s right rather than in the one between her and Stevie.

Stevie shakes her head and turns back to Lyla. “We got assigned as partners. You should have seen him back then, Lyla. He had this mop of hair that was very *Baby-era* Justin Bieber.” She swoops her hand from the top of her head and pretends to plaster it down across her forehead.

Lyla looks at me, her eyes lit up with humor. “Really?”

“Hey”—I point my spoon at Stevie—“I did that hairstyle *before* Bieber.”

“He always says that.” Stevie gives a playful eye roll. “I almost told Justin that when I met him, you know.”

“Good!” I say. “Tell him he’s lucky I haven’t sued him.”

“You can’t trademark a hairstyle, Troy.”

“You’ve met Justin Bieber?” Lyla asks.

Stevie rubs her lips together like she’s regretting what she said. “Just once. Anyway, back to science class. We make the Oobleck, and I’m stirring it up. It gets firm when you put pressure on it, but I hadn’t gotten the hang of it yet. So, I stirred too forcefully and flicked some into Troy’s hair.”

“Oh, no,” Lyla says with wide eyes. “Not the hair.”

“*Some?*” I say incredulously. “It was a massive glob. The size of a football.”

“It was *not* that much,” Stevie says. “But, as you can imagine, he almost lost his mind. I still remember the look on his face.” She meets my eyes, her own full of amused

nostalgia. “It took a second for it to register. Then he felt his hair and booked it out of the classroom.”

“I had to do damage control,” I defend.

“I felt terrible, of course,” Stevie continues, “so I ran after him and found him at the drinking fountain, splashing water desperately onto his hair.”

“What was I supposed to do? The bathroom was blocked off for cleaning.”

“So,” Stevie says, “I spent the next ten minutes helping him get Oobleck out of his hair.” The edge of her mouth creeps up into a half-smile as she looks at me, and my heart rushes—just a little vestige of a bygone era. “I thought he was a crazy person until I got to know him better and realized his hair was his most prized possession.”

“Still true,” Lyla says. “And what did you think of *her*?”

I study Stevie for a second. So much about her is the same as it was the day I met her. She’s taller, her face is slimmer, and she’s got more confidence. But those blue eyes haven’t changed a bit.

I thought she was the nicest, most beautiful person on the planet. “I thought she was trying to sabotage my first real shot at popularity.”

“Oh, come on,” Stevie says. “You did just fine in that department.”

“No thanks to your Oobleck attack.”

Shaking her head, she uses her spoon to crack the Magic Shell and take another bite. “It’s a miracle we became best friends after a beginning like that. You can see he still hasn’t forgiven me. But enough about that. How did *you* two meet?”

I tense slightly. Stevie thinks Lyla is my official, bona fide girlfriend. I’m almost certain that’s why she agreed to come stay here in the first place, and I’m not eager to clarify the situation just now. It would complicate things between Stevie and me *and* Lyla and me.

Lyla looks up at me and smiles. “We matched on a dating app.”

“A twenty-first century classic,” I say, trying not to listen to the voice in my head saying how lame our meeting sounds. It’s even lamer if you know the whole story, which no one does. For the last few years, I’ve gone through cycles of dating a lot, then not dating at all. I happened to be entering a new date-a-lot phase. Lyla was one of four girls I matched with that day. She was the first one who had an opening in her schedule.

She snuggles into me, and I try to lean into it even though it feels ... weird. It should be normal to be close with the girl I’m dating in front of my best friend, especially since Stevie’s smiling at us.

“Well, I’m so glad you did,” she says. “And so happy to be able to meet you, Lyla.”

“Likewise, and I can tell Troy is completely thrilled to be hanging out with you again.” Her hand flies to my knee as she straightens. “Hey! This is perfect.” She turns toward Stevie. “You have lots of Hollywood connections, right?”

Stevie opens her mouth but doesn’t respond.

“Troy’s hoping to make it big in the real estate industry. Maybe you could connect him with some big clients.” She turns to me. “Can you imagine if you helped Justin Bieber buy a house? The commission on that place ...”

Every organ is squirming inside me right now.

Stevie looks at me, the smile she’s wearing barely hanging on. She looks almost ... betrayed. And a little tired.

I laugh awkwardly and pat Lyla’s hand on my leg. “I could never take on a client who stole his signature look from me. Speaking of housing issues, Stevie, I realized I forgot to show you a little trick with the dryer, and I think your wash load is done by now, right?”

She meets my gaze intently. She knows what I’m doing. “Um, yeah. It should be.”

I smile at Lyla and push myself up from the couch. “We’ll be right back.”

“Great.” She sets her empty bowl down on the floor. “I’ll just polish off your ice cream while you’re gone.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I say, a teasing glint in my narrowed eyes.

She smiles mischievously as I walk backwards toward the stairs, Stevie beside me. I point two fingers to my eyes, then to Lyla to let her know I’m watching.

It’s quiet as Stevie and I head down the stairs to the landing and then down the other half-set of stairs in Austin’s apartment. I know Lyla means well and is just trying to help me, but I can’t help feeling some slight frustration. I’d never want Stevie to feel like I’m using her.

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I stop and wait for her.

She smiles, but I see through it in an instant. Or at least partially through it. I’m not totally sure what she’s feeling except that it’s not a positive emotion. I’m out of practice reading her.

“So, what’s this infamous dryer trick?” she asks in an attempt at a teasing voice. “Closing the door to start the cycle?”

I chuckle in spite of myself. “Look at you, already aware of all the tricks of the trade.”

“I’m a quick re-learner,” she says. As our gazes meet, her smile fades slightly.

“Hey, are you doing okay?”

“Yeah,” she says unconvincingly. “Just ... I don’t know. Feeling a little strange, I guess.”

“I thought so.” I sigh. “Listen, Stevie. What Lyla said about the real estate thing? I’m not looking to do things that way.”

She nods. “*Is* that your goal?”

“Breaking into the luxury real estate market? Yeah. Squeezing clients out of my friends? Not even close. I would never use you like that.”

She shuts her eyes. “I know. It’s just ... these last few years have made me skeptical of everything and everyone. I learned the hard way—more than once—that not everyone’s motives are pure.”

I nod, immediately hating anyone who could befriend Stevie for anything besides how amazing she is. How could you possibly need anything more from someone like her?

“I hate that I’ve become cynical,” she says.

I hate it too. Stevie’s always been such a glass-half-full person. Not that I think she’s truly cynical. She’s just wary, which makes a lot of sense. Everyone glorifies fame, but there have got to be some significant trade-offs.

“I don’t even want commission on whatever you buy, okay? I just want to help you find the best possible house for you.”

“You think I’d let you do that?” she says. “What kind of a friend would *I* be? I want to support you in your career.” She smiles slightly. “Besides, if I let you sell me a house for free, I’d wake up to my name on a list of the stingiest celebrities.”

I raise my brows. “That’s rich coming from the person who refused to share her deep fried twinkie with me at the fair.”

“That again?! Troy, you specifically said you didn’t want one when I asked if—” She stops when she sees my grin.

I love getting a rise out of Stevie with mis-told memories.

“You’re the worst, Troy Sheppard.” She looks at me, and her expression softens. “And also the best. Thank you. For all you’re doing for me.”

I pull her into a hug like I’ve done a hundred times. She’s a perfect fit. A perfect, platonic fit. “Hey, you got me through the faux hawk days *and* my Chris Brown phase.”

Her shoulders shake with a laugh. “Oof. Yeah, that was rough. Guess we’re even.”

We pull apart, and her eyes shine as we smile at each other.

“I’m sorry if Lyla’s been a little ... much. She’s just excited to meet you. She doesn’t usually talk this much. I think she’s nervous.”

“She’s great, Troy. I’m glad I’ve been able to spend some time with her.” She nudges me with her elbow. “Things couldn’t move forward without my official stamp of approval.”

I wrinkle my brow, pretending to have an epiphany. “So *that’s* why none of my other relationships have worked out. It all makes sense now.”

If you ask my sisters, Siena and Tori, the reason none of my other relationships worked out *is* Stevie. According to them, I never got over her enough to give anyone else a real chance. They’re wrong. Stevie got married. You couldn’t possibly ask for better closure than that. It’s locking the door and throwing away the key.

She’s not married anymore, says Tori’s sing-song voice in my head.

I clench my jaw. I can’t think like that—for so many reasons.

“I should get back to Lyla,” I say.

“Yeah.” Stevie punches me halfheartedly in the arm. “Go get ’em, tiger.”

STEVIE'S PHONE has been buzzing all day. Whenever it does, she meets my eye, and I give her a stern but teasing look. The only time she's answered so far is for her lawyer. When she gets off the phone with him, she looks ... tired. She's holding it together really well, but I'm sure it's not as easy as she makes it look.

She may think she's become cynical, but she's wrong. She's still got that kind light in her eyes—the one I know will see her through this.

Lyla's been a chatterbox. I'm equal parts impressed and exhausted by it. This is the most time we've spent together in one go, and I'm thinking this wasn't the right day to do it.

Stevie's getting a glazed look in her eyes. She probably needs a nap. Or some time by herself.

I shoot her a text.

TROY

Need some alone time? A nap, maybe?

Her phone buzzes, and she shoots a passing glance at it like she's done three-dozen times in the past couple hours. She does a double-take, and her eyes flit to me.

STEVIE

Is that your way of asking me to give you two some alone time? *wink emoji*

It's really not.

STEVIE

In that case, I could really use a nap *sleep emoji*

I'm the one who suggested it, but somehow I'm disappointed. I should want alone time with Lyla, but it's Stevie I want to be with. That's normal after spending years apart, though.

I glance at Lyla and smile when I find her looking at me. It has nothing to do with her. It would be silly to expect our three weeks of dinner-and-a-movie dates to measure up to a friendship decades in the making.

"Want to go grab some dinner?" I ask Lyla.

"Sure," she says. "I can drive. Just need to clean out my back seat."

I clamp my mouth shut and glance at Stevie. I can't really be the one to say she's not coming without betraying that we were texting.

"Oh, that's so nice of you," she says to Lyla, "but I think I'll stick around here. Catch up on my laundry. Give you two some time without a third wheel." She winks.

Suddenly, I'm feeling extra hesitant about leaving Stevie alone. Will she be glued to her phone, reading all the stupid headlines about her love affair with a monkey?

"I'm sure I'll be seeing you again soon." Stevie gives Lyla a hug.

"It was really great to meet you." Lyla pulls back and grabs my hand, threading her fingers through mine. The gesture shoots nervous energy up my arm. Why does this feel so weird? We've held hands a couple times before. For some reason, it feels like a bigger deal than kissing.

"Have a good time," Stevie says as we walk toward the stairs. "And remember who you are."

“Thanks, Mom,” I say in a nasal voice, throwing a smile over my shoulder.

Lyla and I discuss where we should get food and settle on a sandwich and salad place about ten minutes away. She was really running the conversation at my place, but in the car, she turns on music just loud enough to make talking difficult. Maybe she needs some time to recharge. Or maybe she’s feeling a little weird like I am.

“Want to do take out and eat at the park across the street?” she asks as we wait in line.

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

We get our food and head to the park, finding an open bench and settling in with our to-go containers. It’s quiet as we start eating, and I get the distinct sense that not everything is hunky-dory.

“Are you okay?” I ask, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Yeah,” she says in a completely unconvincing tone. It’s quiet for a few seconds, then her fork pauses in her salad, and she looks up at me. “Is there something between you and Stevie?”

My heart rockets into my ribcage. “What? No. She just got divorced, Lyla.”

“Exactly.”

I shake my head and stab a few leaves of salad. “We’ve known each other a really long time. That’s it.”

She nods, but I don’t think she believes me. It irritates me. Not with her. With myself. Am I giving those kinds of vibes? Because I don’t want to be. In fact, just the thought is humiliating.

“Were you with her last night when I called?” Lyla asks, focusing on her food again.

“Yeah. She didn’t have anywhere to go before the press got wind of the divorce, so I offered Austin’s apartment.”

She nods, still not looking at me. “And I assume she was the friend you visited after your open house?”

“Yeah, she was.” Her questions are making it seem like I intentionally misled her, even though that’s not at all what I was trying to do.

She looks at me, hurt in her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I set down my fork and shift toward her. “I couldn’t, Lyla. The whole point of having Stevie come stay was to keep her whereabouts a secret so that she was out of the limelight when her divorce became public knowledge.”

She nods, pushing her salad around with her fork. “You guys seem really close.”

“We are. Or at least we were.”

“Did you ever date?”

“No,” I say, glad to be able to reassure her on that topic, at least.

“Why not?”

I shrug and load up a big bite of salad. “She was always into Austin.”

“But you were into *her*?”

I pause before responding. I wish I could lie and say I wasn’t, but I’m not going to do that. “I was at one time. But that was a long time ago.” I meet her gaze. I won’t allow myself to feel that for Stevie. It’s the first commandment of my life: Thou shalt not love Stevie like that again. I promised myself I’d never put myself out for rejection by her a second time.

Besides, her divorce changes nothing. She was never into me like that.

Lyla lets out a big breath and offers a feeble smile. “Sorry for grilling you. It’s just ... she’s really amazing, you know?”

I do know, but I don’t think she wants confirmation of that right now. Not really. “So are you. Thanks for being so

understanding about the situation. It's best if no one knows about her being around yet, okay? She needs some time to figure her life out."

Lyla nods quickly. "Of course."

She drops me off half an hour later, and even though we act normal, things feel off. It's been a strange day. Things will feel better tomorrow.



WHEN STEVIE ASKS how things went with Lyla, I give her the answer she wants and expects: "It was great!"

The last thing I'm about to do is make her worry anything is wrong between Lyla and me—or that she has anything to do with it. She's already dealing with so much. Paperwork and alimony and public opinion and requests for interviews.

The amount she has to deal with only seems to be growing.

"You doing okay?" I ask as she submits yet another form to request an account separate from Curtis. We're sitting at my table, while I make adjustments to one of my client's sheets.

Stevie's only been here three days, but we've already established a routine of sorts: she wakes up after I've already worked out and showered. She showers, then comes up to my apartment in sweats, a t-shirt, and wet, wavy hair, her laptop in hand. I get the feeling she doesn't want to be alone. Maybe it's because she's already spent so much time by herself in the last year, or maybe her thoughts veer toward Curtis when she is.

Stevie lets out a big sigh and cracks her neck. "It's just so many nitty-gritty details, you know? Accounts and passwords and insurance and assets and debts. I guess I was kind of thinking once I got the divorce decree, it'd all be done." She grimaces at her naivety. "If marriage is weaving your life together with someone else's, divorce is picking out the threads one by one. I just want it to be done."

I want it to be done too, for her sake. “You’ve been at it for three hours now. Let’s take a break and do something fun. Look at today’s hotsheet, for instance. Now that we have your pre-qualification letter, we can actually schedule showings.”

The divorce settlement gives her a large budget to work with—bigger than the clients I’m used to, at least—which makes it pretty fun to see the options. These luxury homes don’t let just anybody schedule showings. They don’t want starry-eyed middle classers like me coming to “ooh” and “ahh” at the homes. They want proof of ability to buy, which Stevie thankfully has.

Things have felt a bit off with Lyla since the other day, but I’m not overanalyzing it. We’ve been keeping in touch via text, and we have plans to get together Wednesday for a proper date. I’m thinking I’ll invite Siena or Tori over to keep Stevie company. Neither of them knows she’s staying here yet, but they’d be thrilled to see her. Everyone in my family loves Stevie because ... it’s Stevie. She’s impossible not to love. Platonically.

After looking through the newest listings, I convince Stevie to let me set up a showing. Right now, she’s all tangled up in the past, and I think giving her a vision of the future—one she can actually touch and feel rather than just stare at on a computer screen—might be exactly what she needs.

I change into my usual button-up and slacks and meet Stevie in the foyer between our apartments. She’s already there in jeans and a white V-neck under a black blazer. Her hair hangs in loose curls—my favorite. It’s fine to have a favorite hairstyle for your friend, right? That’s normal.

She’s staring out the window that looks on the front yard. She doesn’t even turn on my arrival. Her finger is gently lifting up a blind. She’s intent on something ... or someone.

I go up right beside her and push the blinds up with a finger. “You checkin’ out Mr. Gates? He’s the neighborhood silver fox.”

Stevie steps back and lets the blinds go, meeting my eyes with a stricken look.

I'm such an idiot. What kind of jerk jokes about that with someone who's just divorced?

"Shoot, I'm sorry, Stevie. That was dumb. I wasn't thinking when I said it."

"They found me."

"What? Who?" I open the blinds again, but Stevie grabs my hand and pulls me back.

"There's a paparazzo out there. In the black car across the street." I meet her gaze. It's intent. Fearful, even. She drops my hand and clenches her eyes shut. "It was dumb of me to come here."

Why does hearing that hurt me? "No, it wasn't. It was the best option."

"You don't understand, Troy. They're relentless. There are no limits for them, no level they won't stoop to in order to get their shot. I'm so sorry. I really didn't think they'd find me so soon, but I should have known better."

She's genuinely put out, and I feel the same thing I always feel when she's down—the need to lighten her load.

I scoff. "What? You think they're here for *you*?" I wave a dismissive hand. "They pretty much camp out here 24/7. You'll get used to 'em."

Stevie smiles slightly, just as I'd hoped she would. "I should've known you'd have a bevy of paparazzi following your every move."

"You really should have. Though, it's more of a horde than a bevy."

Her smile grows.

"So," I say, reaching for the doorknob, "shall we head to this showing?"

She stops me with a hand on my arm, and I search her face. "What?"

"I don't think I'm ready yet."

“For the showing? Or for the paps?” Thanks to my venture down the dark hole of celebrity interviews, I know that’s what the cool kids call paparazzi. Cool kids meaning the people who are considered interesting enough to have their cup of morning coffee documented on the front pages of newspapers and magazines.

“The latter. I don’t want to give them confirmation I’m here. Maybe if I stay inside, they’ll go away?” She doesn’t sound at all convinced.

I don’t respond right away. It’s not missing the showing that’s bothering me. It just doesn’t seem right for Stevie to live her life—or *not* live her life—based on some annoying, overeager photographers. They have way too much power if they can keep her locked inside.

“I know it seems dumb,” she says, “but I’ve had a few scary run-ins with some of these guys. Car chases, drones hovering over houses, that kind of thing. One of them actually grabbed me one time.”

My jaw clenches instinctively. If I’d been there, I’d have punched the guy out. “Are they allowed to do that?”

“Not legally, no. But Curtis would never press charges. He’s terrified of antagonizing the media.”

I hold my tongue, but I have ... feelings about this. Stevie has become genuinely scared of these creeps because Curtis let them walk all over her.

Regardless of whose fault it is, though, Stevie’s fear is real and valid, and I don’t want to push her to do something that makes her uncomfortable.

“Okay,” I say lightly. “No showings today. We’ll just order in. Hunker down. Turn off all the lights. Light some candles. Bust out my emergency preparedness kit. There are some freeze-dried eggs I’ve had my eye on.”

“Freeze-dried eggs?” She looks like she’s ready to gag.

I rub my stomach and open the door to my apartment, even though I actually considered throwing them out when I saw

them in the pack. “Add some hot sauce, and you’ll be licking your lips, Stevia.”

“You and your hot sauce,” she says, heading up the stairs in front of me.

“It was love at first burn,” I say, texting the agent to let her know we won’t be coming after all.

WE ORDER from our old standby: Sawadee Palace. Troy gets his usual *pad kee mao*, and I get Massaman curry. As we wait for delivery, I can't help going to the window and peeking through the slits in the blinds. Maybe I'm being too paranoid and the car I saw was a fixture of the neighborhood. When I look, it's still there, parked across the street and one house away. Someone is still in the front seat, their head turned in this direction.

"Whatcha doin'?" Troy asks from his place at the table, a little tilt to his mouth. He's got his laptop out, catching up on emails.

I shut the blinds and head back to the table. "Just seeing if the food is here."

"Uh-huh." He smiles knowingly. "You realize the app tells me when they're almost here, right?"

I slump down in the chair. "Okay, I'm being totally paranoid. I'm not crazy, though, right? That car doesn't belong to any of your neighbors?"

He shakes his head, some of his amusement dissipating.

"I just don't understand how they could have found out."

"Who knows you're here?"

"That's the thing. No one."

"Not even Curtis?"

I shake my head. “All of our communication for the last few months has been through our lawyers, and I haven’t even told mine where I am. Just that I’m in the LA area. Besides, Curtis wouldn’t really care.”

There’s a short silence as I rub distractedly at a small dent in the table. I look up to find Troy’s gaze on me, a little frown pulling at his forehead. I probably seem pretty pathetic, but it’s true. Curtis told his staff to see that I was provided for during our separation, which I appreciate, but he’s not really a details guy.

“What about the concierge?” Troy asks. “He saw me—”

I shake my head. “Gibbs would never. He gets paid very well by a lot of influential people for his discretion, besides having a heart of gold. The only people who know I’m staying here are you and me.”

Troy’s eyes jump to mine, and I know with a hundred percent certainty we’re having the same thought.

Lyla knows.

Our gazes hold for a few seconds until Troy breaks his away. “Yeah, it’s crazy. I don’t get it.”

I’m really doing my best to like Lyla for Troy’s sake because I know how it feels when none of your friends like the guy you’re dating—or marrying. Of course, as it turns out, they were kind of right, but Troy’s not like I used to be—the type to jump into anything. If he cares about Lyla, I’m going to support him in that.

If she’s telling stories to the media, it would make that a lot harder, though.

The doorbell rings, making us both jump.

Troy gets up. “That’ll be the food.”

“Wait.” I stand up too, stopping him with a hand on his arm. “Did the app say they’re here?”

He doesn’t say anything right away, searching my face. He shows me the notification on his lock screen.

I let out a breath and drop my hand. “I’m acting like a lunatic. I know.” I grimace and turn away. “Living in isolation has turned me into a complete weirdo.”

He grabs the hand I dropped. “Hey.”

I swallow and meet his gaze. His blue eyes are intent and piercing, and they send a zing through me.

“You’re not a weirdo.”

I smile pathetically. “I have a virtual pet dragon named Mavis, Troy. I’m well into weirdo territory.”

“And I own a hair straightener. So what?”

“Not even in the same realm of weirdness.”

“I own a canister of freeze-dried eggs.”

I tip my head from side to side. “Getting closer.” The fact that Troy has an emergency food supply at all is a bit weird. So responsible of him.

He tightens his grip on my hand. “Seriously, though, Stevie. You’re someone who needs a break from the media and the public’s obsession. That’s about the most normal thing I can think of.”

I meet his gaze, a feeling of validation filling my chest. Curtis never seemed to need a break from it. He had no problem being constantly *on* for the media and fans. “People would sacrifice their firstborn to live the life I’ve led, Troy.”

“Maybe. And then the media would find out what they’d done, and they’d feel the full weight of public outrage against them.”

I laugh weakly.

“Hey.” He tightens his hold again, and I squeeze back, grateful for the calm I feel at the warmth and pressure of his touch—a little reassurance I’m not alone. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, okay?”

The steadiness in his eyes and the firmness in his jaw makes my heart race. I believe him. Absolutely I do.

His mouth quirks up at the side. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten ...” He slowly takes a knee. “I’m a yellow belt in karate.” He drops the other knee, performing his official bow.

“You mean the belt just above the very bottom? The one you almost automatically promote to? Yeah, I think you mentioned it a time or seven hundred. And maybe you’ve forgotten, but I’m *also* a yellow belt. We did those classes together.”

He doesn’t lose his rigidity as he rises, right knee first, then left knee. “Yeah, but you missed a couple classes.”

“All the more impressive I still promoted. Should we get our food before it gets cold?”

“I got this.” Troy heads for the stairs, his hands positioned in karate Back Stance as he heads for the door like he’s preparing to fight off Mafia bosses instead of grab a bag of food.

I can’t help the way my muscles tighten when he opens the door, but there are no blinding flashes or clicking sounds. I let out a breath and relax my shoulders, smiling as Troy holds up the bag of food.

Every bit as important to me as Troy’s yellow belt in karate is his complete steadiness. I’ve been a terrible friend to him the last few years. In fact, I’ve been a terrible friend to *everyone*. Troy’s dependability and his assurances he’ll keep me safe are something I’ve done nothing to deserve but am entirely depending on right now.

IT'S ODDLY difficult to sleep when there's a strange car parked outside your house. It's not like this is my first run-in with paparazzi, but it feels different this time. Curtis might have complained about the constant presence of the media in our lives, but the better I got to know him, the more I realized how disappointed he would have been if they *had* backed off.

Just like everything about dating and marrying Curtis, it was exciting for me in the beginning. The media really seemed to like me—which I've since realized was pure luck, given how capricious they can be—and all the attention was flattering.

After a while, though, it started to wear on me. That's what happens when you can't sneeze without people speculating whether you're part of the Illuminati.

I throw off my covers, figuring I may as well be productive and do a load of wash. It's earlier than I usually wake up. When you live alone for so long, there's not much reason to wake up early. I pause in the doorway of my room with an armful of laundry. The light filtering through the side gaps in the curtains is glowy and warm.

I look down at what I'm holding—a pile of dirty clothes. It's not glamorous, and it's a far cry from the life I lived for a few years, in which I went to sleep late, woke up to a breakfast prepared by Curtis's personal chef, and clean clothes magically appeared in my closet. But I kind of love this normal life stuff.

I load my clothes into the washer and pour in the detergent, wishing Troy could see how adept I am at these basic life skills.

A clanking sound catches my attention just as I'm about to start the load. It happens again, and I press the button before moving over to the small window in the laundry room.

I push the curtain to the side and still at the sight of Troy. He's got a dumbbell in each hand and is pumping them, a look of concentration on his face as he blows out a breath each time he pulls them toward his chest. Maybe it's the angle, but his biceps are ... substantial. And they're not the only thing he works out based on his shirtless physique.

I've seen Troy without a shirt on a lot of times in my life—anytime we went swimming, whenever he and the guys played shirts and skins in soccer or football, and the time he was taking weightlifting his junior year and took off his shirt at a barbecue to impress Emily Johnson.

But that was then and this is now. This man is, well, a man. He's obviously been taking very good care of himself. Maybe I sneered prematurely at his freeze-dried eggs. Apparently, he also wakes up with the sun to work out, and the sunrise looks good on him.

Really good.

I blink and draw back slightly. Am I checking out Troy? No.

Nope, nope, nope.

Noticing he's a very well-formed human specimen isn't checking him out, is it? It's a completely objective scientific observation. It may walk like a duck and talk like a duck, but it can't be a duck. I refuse to acknowledge the duck. People don't check out their best friends, and I *just* got divorced. Yes, the marriage was over long before it became official, but still.

I don't want to follow in Mom's footsteps, and I'm already on that path. I always thought I'd be different, that I'd do everything right and make sure my marriage lasted, but so far, the apple isn't falling far from the tree.

Troy racks the dumbbells, and I squint to see the numbers on the sides, but the window isn't clean enough to allow me such an indulgence. A scientific curiosity, I mean.

He drags a hand through his hair, and the familiarity of the gesture makes me smile. His body may look more Tarzan-like than it used to, but he's still the same old Troy. He's my best friend, and I need him in that capacity—and only that capacity.

He has a girlfriend now anyway. It's her job to check him out, not mine, and based on the way she holds onto his arm when she's with him, she's well aware of the similarities he and Tarzan share.

I shut the curtain before Troy can start on his triceps. A woman can only watch a man workout so many -ceps before she goes into -ceptic shock.

Wow. I shouldn't make jokes before 7 a.m.

I leave my laundry to do its thing while I tend to my increasingly neglected pets and get cleaned up. As I'm putting on my makeup, not thinking about Troy, I hear a new sound. I strain my ears to identify it and realize it's muffled voices outside.

I make my way to the window in the living room that looks toward the front lawn. Troy's been working with a landscaper this week, so it's probably them discussing plans. My coming to check has nothing to do with Troy or any hope I might catch sight of him again. I'm just being a good tenant. I should have one of those *neighborhood watch* stickers on the window.

I pull back the curtain and find myself looking at a man in the driveway. He's a dozen feet away with a long, black lens pointed toward my window.

I jump back and stare at the closed curtain, my heart thumping like I just got jabbed in the chest with a shot of adrenaline. My breath comes in quick, shallow gulps. Did I imagine it? Maybe last night's dreams have crept into my waking hours.

I use my trembling finger to move the curtain the tiniest bit possible—just a sliver of a view.

What I see sends me stumbling backward. I scramble to turn around.

“Troy! Troy!” I hurry up my stairs, through my door, pull open his front door, and then charge up his stairs, calling his name the whole time even though I know he’s out back with his earbuds in.

I sprint toward the door to the backyard and fling it open, running headlong into Troy at the top of the stairs.

“Stevie,” he says, stabilizing me with hands on my arms. His eyes are wide and alert, staring straight into mine. “What’s wrong?”

I only ran up two half-flights of stairs, but I’m breathing like I ran a marathon. “There was a man,” I gasp, “taking pictures. Through the window.”

“*What?!*” It’s not a question. It’s an implicit threat.

I nod, feeling the burn of tears begin behind my eyes. It’s not the first time my privacy has been violated, but that only makes it worse. “There are a bunch more paparazzi on your sidewalk too.” I barely choke out the words. I know I sound dramatic—it’s just people and cameras, but it’s making me feel like I’ll never be rid of the past—that my life will never be mine again.

Troy pulls me into his arms. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

I swallow and hold onto him, my hands on his bare back, my cheek against his collar bone. I believe him. He may joke about being my hired security, but in many ways, he’s functioning in that capacity. It’s one thing to have paparazzi following you around when you have a security team; it’s another thing entirely to face the furor of the media on your own.

He keeps me close, his grip steady and firm. Against my head, I can feel his jaw working. Finally, he pulls back and looks me in the eye, nostrils flared. “Stay inside, okay? I’ll handle this.”

“Troy, wait,” I say as he brushes past me toward the stairs to the front of the house. My anxiety kicks up a notch. Ever since the first time Curtis and I had a run-in with the paparazzi, he and his team always told me to leave them be, to let them do their jobs. Antagonizing them would only lead to problems—big problems, even. “We want them on our side,” Curtis would always say.

I follow Troy down the stairs, but he’s already out the door by the time I reach the foyer. He pulls it shut, but it doesn’t close all the way. I don’t follow him out—my presence will only lead to furious camera clicks—but maybe I should try harder to stop him. Based on the look in his eye, I expect him to stride up to the paparazzo I saw and sock him in the face.

I clench my eyes shut at the thought. Assault charges against Troy are the last thing I want.

I hurry over to the windows to watch the dumpster fire ignite. I pull up on one of the blind slats and frown. Not only is Troy not approaching the paparazzi, he’s smiling and waving at them.

“Morning,” he says like he’s greeting a neighbor taking out the garbage.

What’s he doing? Lyla’s words about his career goals pop into my head, and a twinge of doubt pinches my gut. Is he using this as an opportunity for media exposure?

He heads for the side of the house and disappears from my view. I’m so confused. There was murder in his eyes when he went out that door, and the next second, he was greeting them like Queen Elizabeth. It’s like he intended to do a red carpet walk around the house.

The paparazzi lined up on the sidewalk seem just as confused, their cameras hovering just under their eyes, their brows pursed.

Troy reappears suddenly, and my eyes narrow, trying to get a view of what he’s got in his hands. My eyes widen. He holds the end of a hose toward the line of paparazzi and starts spraying.

THERE'S a second of shock before the paparazzi scatter, turning around to hide their expensive cameras and lenses from the fury of this incredibly powerful pressure washer attachment. I need to send homemade brownies to Mr. Gates for installing it.

It's chaos as the paparazzi trip over each other to take refuge from my sweeping spray. Within thirty seconds, engines are revving, and cars are speeding away from my house.

I don't know who the guy was who dared get closer than the sidewalk, but my only regret is not spraying this water directly into his nostrils from point blank range. I've never seen Stevie as terrified or frantic as she was inside.

Once my mission is complete, I wind the hose back onto the bib and wipe off my hands on my basketball shorts before heading inside.

Stevie is in the foyer like she's been watching through the window.

I shut the door behind me and let out a sigh. "Well, safe to say the new attachment works. It would've been really embarrassing if the water had only shot a few feet."

Stevie smiles, but it's weak and forced.

I shed my humor immediately and walk over to her. "Are you okay?"

She nods, her arms folded across her body in a way that makes her look extra vulnerable and anxious. I rub my hands along her upper arms. “Did you get a look at the guy who came onto the property? We can sue him for trespassing, right?”

She shakes her head. “His face was hidden behind the camera.”

I frown, chafing her arms like she’s cold rather than troubled. When I invited her to stay here, I didn’t realize I would be putting her in danger. “I need to get one of those video doorbells. I’ll order one today, okay?”

“It’s not that. I mean, it is. It creeped me out to see that guy right there. But ...”

“But what?” I try to make her meet my gaze.

She hesitates. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

It’s my turn to hesitate. I search her face, trying to decide if she means it in an aww-shucks-you-shouldn’t-have way or in a that-was-a-bad-idea way. I’m thinking it’s the second option.

I drop my hands from her arms.

“I know you were just trying to help,” she says, “but think about the optics. They get word that I’m staying here. You go out there like”—she fumbles over her words—“like *that*.” She gestures vaguely in my direction, her eyes fixed on my body.

I look down at my bare chest. In my fired-up state, I didn’t think about what I was wearing—or not wearing. I frown at my body. I’ve been going hard on the weights for the past year, and I flattered myself I was looking pretty decent. Apparently not. “Dang. I mean, I’m no Chris Hemsworth, but I didn’t think the optics were *that* bad.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You look incredible.” Her eyes flit down to my abs. “Like, I don’t even know wh—” She shuts her mouth and brings her gaze to mine. “The point I was making is how it will look if they know I’m staying here, and you come outside without a shirt first thing in the morning. You know?” The way her brows are raised tells me she’s hoping I’ll put two and two together.

And I do. She's worried the media will assume there's something between us. That's why she was so quiet and anxious when I came back inside after fire-hosing them all. It's not that she was still shaken up by a stalker paparazzo trying to get pictures of her through the window. It's because she doesn't want them to think we're together. To Stevie, that conclusion would be the equivalent of claiming two plus two equals five. It's all wrong.

"Gotcha," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "I hadn't thought about it that way. It was stupid of me."

"No, you were just trying to protect me, which I really appreciate." She lets out a gigantic sigh and lets her head fall back. "I'm overreacting, and I know it. I just don't want to make them mad. They all have their favorite and least favorite celebrities, and they've got a lot of power over how the public perceives people."

"So, if I make them mad and also give them reason to think you and I are ..." I don't finish.

"Especially right after my divorce ..."

I feel like an idiot. Here I thought I was being some sort of hero and oh-so-clever with my water-blasting when all I was doing was adding to Stevie's burden. Is she worried Curtis will be hurt to think she's dating someone already? "Shoot, I'm really sorry, Stevie. I wasn't thinking."

She smiles sympathetically. "And I'm *over*thinking, so I guess we balance each other out. It's not a big deal, and I'm really grateful to you for being so ready to go to bat for me, Troy. You really are the *best* best friend."

Those words should be a huge compliment, but part of me hates them.

Her mouth pulls up at one side. "I wish *I'd* had a camera to capture them all scrambling once they realized what you were doing." Her smile grows. "Did you see that guy trip over the other guy and fall into his arms?"

I chuckle. "See it? I orchestrated it."

“Totally on purpose, I’m sure. And you standing there in your power stance like you were holding a bazooka.”

“That hose has some serious power. I’d say you should try it, but I’m not sure you could handle the recoil.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“It is. But first, breakfast.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Freeze-dried eggs?”

“Nah. We’ll save those for a special occasion.” I wink, and we head into my apartment. “Oh, how do you feel about hanging out with Tori and Siena tonight? I’m going out with Lyla, and I thought you might enjoy—”

“Babysitters?” She smiles and shuts the door behind us. “I’m totally joking. I’d love to see them.”

We cross the living room toward the kitchen. “And they’d love to see you. I wanted to check with you first, though, since I know my family can be ... a lot.” I grab the eggs out of the fridge and the sourdough from the bread cupboard.

“Are you kidding?” She comes up next to me and opens the egg carton. “Your family is the best.”

“They are. But after all the time you’ve spent alone, it might be a little overwhelming.”

“Do you know how long it’s been since I had a girls’ night?” She starts cracking an egg. She does it gently—too gently, barely making a dent in the shell.

I try to stop a smile. “Been a while?”

She elbows me. “Hey.” There’s a pause as she hesitates with the egg by the edge of the counter. She glances over at me, looking sheepish. “Yes, actually. Curtis had a chef, and once I moved out, he made sure I had meals provided. But cooking is like riding a bike, right?” She cracks the egg harder this time. Too hard. Half the white slips onto the counter.

“Um, yeah. But did you ever learn how to ride a bike?”

She wipes an eggy finger on my chest, and I hop backward. “Ew!”

She shrugs and cracks the next egg, this time more successfully. “Should’ve worn a shirt.”

Right. I’m still not wearing a shirt. “Be right back.” I make my way out of the kitchen and toward my room.

“How many more?” she calls after me.

“Five. Just try not to get any shells in our breakfast, okay?”

I grab a shirt from my closet and hurry to pull it on. I don’t want to miss making breakfast with Stevie. I’d gladly eat scrambled eggs full of shell fragments for that experience.



TORI AND SIENA are more than happy to drop their Wednesday night plans to spend time with Stevie. Our text conversation is ... exactly how I expected it to be.

SIENA

Stevie’s with YOU?

SIENA

You realize the entire Western world is looking for her, right? There are all sorts of theories about where she’s hiding out.

TORI

Well, you sure didn’t waste time, bro *wink emoji*

TROY

You know what? Forget I asked.

SIENA

No, wait! Ignore Tori.

I definitely want to see Stevie, and Jack can watch his basketball game in peace tonight. Win/win.

TORI

You know I'm just teasing. I'd love to see her, too.

Almost as much as YOU love to see her.

TROY

By all means, get this all out of your system before you come because I will pressure-wash you to Mars if you say anything to her about me or anyone else—four days after she got divorced.

SIENA

Should I pick up some graham crackers on my way?

Sorry. Couldn't help myself.

TORI

GIF of buttered toast

I sigh. Their references to the infamous wisdom tooth video stopped being funny about eight years ago.

TROY

Did I mention the reason I'm asking you to keep her company is because I'll be on a date? Just thought that was worth repeating.

By the way, if you park in the driveway, you should be able to avoid the paparazzi lined up on the sidewalk.

Apparently, the pressure washer wasn't a big enough deterrent. Paparazzi have returned over the course of the day. This time, they've got equipment to protect their cameras, the sly dogs.

I put on a black button down and some dark gray jeans, spritz some cologne, then put the final touches on my hair, which is always the last part of getting ready. The icing on the cake, if you will.

Siena and Tori should be here any minute, but I want to make sure Stevie's okay with everything first, so I head to her door, knock, and wait for the sound of her footsteps.

"Hey," she says after opening the door. She's wearing leggings and an oversized sweatshirt, looking ready for a comfy night at home. I'm a little jealous.

Her gaze flits to my hair, and she smiles mischievously, reaching for it. I swat her hand away. "No touchie."

She doesn't bat an eye. It's the reaction I always have when anyone tries to mess with my mop—and Stevie has always loved to try.

"I wanted to run a couple things by you before I leave," I say.

"Yeah, of course. Come in."

I follow her down the stairs, and my eyes flit to cardboard Austin, hanging out by the kitchen. She hasn't moved him or shoved him in a closet yet. He's got the central spot in the apartment. Maybe that's how she likes it.

"So," I say as she takes a drink from a cup on the counter and comes back to stand by me near the door. "I just checked, and we've got a half-dozen paps outside. I ordered a video doorbell that should arrive tomorrow. It'll let us keep tabs and yell obscene things at them whenever we feel like it."

"Whenever we feel like it? That could be a full-time job."

I straighten my imaginary tie. "I might be overqualified, but I've got real passion."

Her mouth breaks into a smile. I kind of wish I could stay here and hang out on the couch, eating spicy popcorn in my sweats. It's the lazy, antisocial part of me that resists anything requiring effort.

I can't even imagine the sort of texts I'd get from my sisters if I canceled my date, though. Besides, I need to talk to Lyla.

"I told Siena and Tori to park in the driveway and come in the back door," I say. "Keep all the blinds and curtains closed, and don't answer the door to anyone. Siena and Tori are a force to be reckoned with, but if you're at all nervous, call the cops. I called them earlier to tell them about the paparazzi hanging out here, so—" I stop at the look on her face. "I'm being weird, huh?"

"Yeah," she says with a smile. "Weird but sweet. We'll be fine. Just go have fun. But not *too* much fun." She wags her eyebrows.

I take in a deep breath. I'm not sure how much fun it'll be tonight. At some point, I have to ask Lyla the question I don't want to ask. I'm just not sure whether to get it over with at the beginning or to keep it until the end.

"Troy?" Stevie says, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Mmhmm?"

She pauses. "I just want to say sorry."

I lift a brow. "For ...?"

She looks down, fiddling with the hem of her sweatshirt. "For not being a better friend these past few years." She shakes her head and meets my gaze. "I convinced myself I was too busy, but really, I just didn't have my priorities straight. And then when things started to go downhill with Curtis"—she lifts her shoulders—"I was too embarrassed to admit it. And then I wasn't *allowed* to admit it."

I nod.

"I've been a terrible friend to you, and you were there for *me* at the drop of a hat last week. You never stopped checking on me, even though I was awful at responding."

I break my gaze away, not sure if my loyalty is impressive or pathetic.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you and I’m sorry and that ... I missed you. I missed our friendship.”

I take a moment before responding because I’ve got an emergency case of emotional clogging in my throat. “Me too.”

She smiles sadly and wraps her arms around me. I pull her closer and let my head rest against her hair, shutting my eyes. I never admitted it to anyone, but it stung when she all but disappeared from my life. I blamed Curtis, but deep down, it just ... hurt.

“I promise to start being the sort of friend to you that you’ve been to me,” she says into my shoulder.

The sort of friend I’ve been to her. I wonder if she knows what sort of friend that really is. I wonder if *I* know what sort of friend that is—or if it’s really friendship I want.

The door opens at the top of the stairs, and Stevie and I pull apart.

Tori and Siena stare down at us, brows raised.

BASED ON THEIR EXPRESSIONS, Troy and I hugging it out wasn't what Siena and Tori expected to find when they arrived. Are they shocked by my behavior? Maybe I *shouldn't* be hugging Troy. I have no idea what's acceptable for a divorcée, and the way I've been looking at Troy today makes things even more confusing.

Him going on a date is exactly what's needed right now.

"STEPHANIE!" Siena comes down the stairs so quickly, it's a miracle she doesn't trip and fall on her face.

Before I know it, her arms are around me, and before she's let me go, Tori's hugging me too.

The amount of hugging I've experienced in the last two minutes is the most physical affection I've had in ... well, let's just say it's been a while. The Sheppards give the best hugs, and I've been deprived for the past four years.

The general excitement from the Sheppard sisters takes a minute to dissipate. In fact, it's a full three minutes before they even acknowledge Troy.

"Oh, hey," Siena says once she's turned toward him. She looks him up and down. "Are you going on a date or attending a funeral?"

"You don't wear jeans to a funeral, Siena," Tori says. "I think he looks very chic. Doesn't he look great?" She nudges me.

My heart knocks against my chest as Troy looks at me, waiting for me to respond. How *does* a just-divorced woman compliment the best friend she's recently started checking out right before he leaves on a date? No one ever went over the rules with me on this.

Lyla. He's going out with Lyla. He's trying to look his best for her, and you just promised to be a good friend to him. A good friend would make sure he dresses to impress.

"He does," I say in what I hope is a completely natural, objective voice. I can do this. I can be the best friend cheering Troy on for his date. My brow furrows as my eye catches his collar.

"What?" Troy brings a self-conscious hand to his chest and smooths the shirt, which is already hugging him in all the right places.

"Nothing, it's just ..." He really does look great. It just feels a bit formal. "Can I?"

He nods, his look unsure and questioning.

I step toward him and reach a hand to the collar of his shirt to do my best friend-ly duties. My fingers fiddle with the top button, which could win an award for tightest buttonhole in history. My fingers graze his throat over and over during the tussle, and my eyes flit to his for a split-second.

He's looking at me too, and my lungs seize up. The button finally slips out, and I step back, dropping my gaze. "There. Much better."

It's oddly quiet, and I glance at his sisters, who are both watching us with wide eyes. My cheeks warm. There I go again, breaking the rules. I should have just let things be, but I have to admit, he looks better now: dressed up, but with a hint of recklessness. The dark pants and shirt go perfectly with his dark hair and brows, making his blue eyes stand out.

"Thanks," Troy says, fiddling with his collar. "I should get going." He takes his keys out of his pocket and smiles at us. "Have a great time, ladies."

"You too," I say with a little wave.

I hesitate to turn toward Siena and Tori, worried the first thing they'll want to discuss is the interrupted hug or the collar button. But me staring at the door Troy just left through is only going to make things worse.

I've misjudged them, though. They don't bring it up at all. They're just as eager as I am to relax and have a good old-fashioned girls' night. Tori's brought all the fixings for gel manicures, and Siena is armed with chocolate, chips, and soda.

We turn on a chick flick, but within twenty minutes, it's become background noise to our conversation. The Sheppards have always been the most fun family I know, and my cheeks are aching after an hour with Tori and Siena. I can't remember the last time I had a night like this. It's good for my soul.

I ask them about what's happened in their lives since I last saw them, which is a lot, given the fact Siena is a married woman now. Hearing the story of how she and Jack fell in love—with perfectly timed interjections from Tori—makes me so happy for her. It also fills me with envy.

She has what I thought I would have with Curtis.

Once I'm up to speed on their lives, I realize it's my turn. I'm up next for an update, and they're waiting for it.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Siena says.

I send her a grateful smile. It's not even that I don't want to talk about it. The problem is not knowing what to say. For months, I had to keep everything to myself. I was desperate for someone to talk to. But now that I have the opportunity, I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing.

I don't want to talk badly about Curtis—I promised myself I wouldn't be that sort of ex-wife—and I don't want to seem ungrateful for what I've had because of our relationship. I don't want to seem hung up on him, but I also don't want to seem like I'm moving on too quickly.

Walking the path of divorce is a hard, thorny path for anyone, but for someone in the public eye whose actions are

hashed out over podcasts and social media and talk shows? It's a minefield.

"But you *can* talk to us, of course," Tori adds. "Obviously, whatever you say here, stays here."

"Thank you," I say with real feeling. "I'm just not exactly sure *what* to say."

They both nod.

"Well, most importantly," Tori says, "are you ... okay?"

I think about the last year of my life, about the relief of finally being away from the lifestyle I had come to hate and all the pretending and performing that went along with it. But that relief slowly morphed into loneliness—a loneliness I fought by collecting imaginary pets. Sure, I could talk to other people on the phone, but I quickly learned that the gag order made communication stressful, awkward, and entirely unfulfilling. It left me feeling even emptier than before.

That all changed last week. Replying to Troy's text and inviting him to come over was the best decision I've made in a long time.

"I'm okay now," I say with a smile. "Troy has been really amazing and helpful. Obviously, there's a lot of stuff to figure out and decisions I have to make, and I have no idea what I'm doing, but I hope sometime in the not-too-distant future, I'll figure that out. Maybe I'll have an epiphany or something. I'm just trying to look ahead now."

"Good choice," Siena says. "I'm sure it can't be easy going through a divorce, but there are great things ahead of you, Stevie."

Tori turns off the gel light and inspects her nails. "Give yourself time. It's all really fresh, I'm sure."

I chuckle. "For me, it feels like old news. It's been in the works for a long time."

"Really?" Tori says. "Like, how long?"

"Since we filed for divorce? Almost nine months. Since we started discussing divorce for the first time? Almost two

years.”

Silence.

“Wow,” Siena says.

“Yeah,” I say. “So, being able to talk about it is what’s fresh, but for everyone else, it’s *all* brand new. I’m trying to remember to give people time to catch up.”

They both shake their heads. “It’s your life, Steph,” Tori says. “You’re not obligated to give anyone anything.”

“I second that,” Siena says. “Heck, if you wanted to ditch us right now and go on a hot date, we’d be cheering you on! Jack has some friends.”

I laugh. “I appreciate that. I can’t even think about dating right now, but still, it means a lot for you to say that.” It’s nice to hear them vocalize their support, even though I know I’d be raked over the coals in the media for moving on so quickly.

The idea that I shouldn’t be worried about that, that I should do what *I* want, regardless of the public’s perception, is kind of a novel idea. Being conscious of the optics of everything and trying to control the narrative were concepts drilled into me for so long, I kind of forgot there was another way to live.

“Just do us a favor and keep an open mind,” Tori says. “Do things at your pace, not anyone else’s, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

Siena raises a brow, squaring me with a serious look. “Promise?”

I hesitate for a split-second. It’s hard to imagine not taking everyone else into account when I make decisions, but deep down, I know they’re right.

“Promise,” I say.

Siena puts out her pinky, the nail a brand new, glossy pink. Tori follows suit with her teal-colored one. They smile and wait until I hook my pinky awkwardly around theirs.

“Here’s to making life what we want it to be,” Siena says, tugging down on our pinkies like we’re in a girls’ night version of a football huddle.

I laugh along with them, but my mind is racing. What *do* I want my life to be? It hasn’t turned out at all like I had planned so far, but the Sheppards are right. I have an entire future ahead of me. What should it look like?

I’d been running under the assumption that dating, if I ever jumped back into it again, was way off on the horizon. So far off it might be a mirage. But, if I’ve been checking out the guy who’s been my best friend since I was thirteen, maybe I’m not as far from it as I thought I was.

“DID YOU LIKE YOUR ALFREDO?” I ask. Muffled voices and forks and knives clanking on plates enhance the stiffness of our conversation.

“Yeah, it was really good,” Lyla answers as she sets her fork down.

“Check, please,” I say as the waiter passes.

He nods and disappears.

“What time is the movie?” Lyla asks.

“8:40.”

Lyla taps her phone to check the time. “Oh, good. Plenty of time.”

“Yeah.” So. Much. Time.

It’s my fault the vibe is weird tonight. I know it is. I’m preoccupied with the question I haven’t asked yet, and I can’t help thinking about the crazy things the paparazzi camped outside my house might take it into their heads to do while I’m gone.

The waiter returns with the check, and I hand my credit card to him rather than letting him set it down so we have to wait for him to come get it again.

He gives me a funny look, and I smile at him, hoping to offset my overeagerness. It’s not that I don’t enjoy spending time with Lyla. She’s great. I should’ve cleared the air before

dinner instead of waiting, but I was nervous I'd put a damper on the whole night. This doesn't seem much better, though.

She keeps shooting glances at me like she's trying to figure out why I'm being different. I'm trying to give her the benefit of the doubt and not assume she spilled the beans about Stevie to the media, but I honestly can't think who else would have done it. I considered Maggie, but we never told her Stevie was staying with me, and it would be strange for her to assume it. Besides, she doesn't seem the type to do something like that.

The fact that I think Lyla *is* the type is what's been bugging me for the past two days.

"Is everything okay?" Lyla asks as we get to the car.

"Yeah," I say in the best nonchalant voice I can muster as I open her door. My attempt falls flat as a pancake, and she glances at me as she sits down. I try for a smile and shut her door, well aware the time has come.

When I sit down in the driver seat, I don't put the keys in the ignition. Instead, I stare at the steering wheel for a few seconds, trying to figure out how to ask what needs to be asked without making it sound accusatory.

"You're killing me, Troy," Lyla says in a nervous voice. "Just say it."

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head at myself for stressing her out.

"You're breaking up with me," she says, half-statement, half-question.

My gaze flies to hers. "What? No."

"I mean, I know we're not *together* together, so it's not technically breaking up, but—"

"That's not what this is," I say, fiddling with the key ring.

"Then, what is it?"

I let out a big breath and face her. "Did you tell anyone about Stevie?"

She stares at me, and the fear I've just accused an innocent person builds.

“A bunch of paparazzi have been camped outside of my house since yesterday,” I explain, “and since Stevie and I didn't tell anybody, I ...” I'm not quite sure how to finish. *I immediately thought you were guilty?* I press my lips together, determined not to make this more awkward than it already is. “I just can't figure out how the press found out.”

Her head shakes from side to side, her eyes wide and innocent. “I would never leak anything to the press, Troy.”

I hurry to nod, feeling awful for making baseless accusations, then grab her hand. “Yeah, of course.” I look down and stroke my thumb along her knuckles. “Sorry. I feel dumb for even asking.”

She doesn't respond. She's got to be furious with me, and she has every reason to be.

“I only told Tina.”

My gaze jumps to hers, my thumb stilling on her hand.

The innocence in her eyes has shifted to something more anxious. She grips my hand more tightly. “I told her not to tell anyone, though.”

I take time before responding. “Tina? The one you said knows everything about Stevie and follows her obsessively?”

“She would never have forgiven me if she knew I'd met Stephanie Carr and hadn't told her.” Her tone pleads for understanding.

I look away. I'm not sure how to react right now. I know what I *feel*, but I'm trying to be measured in my response. “Do you know what Stevie woke up to, Lyla?”

She swallows but says nothing.

“A man in my driveway, trying to take pictures of her through her window.”

She bites her lip. “Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry, Troy. I never meant for it to get out or anything.”

“The whole reason she came to stay with me was to get away from the media, and now ...” I stop. What’s done is done. There’s no use rehashing it, but I can’t get the image of Stevie’s tear-filled eyes out of my head.

“I said I was sorry,” she says.

“And I appreciate that, but sorry doesn’t fix things. It doesn’t take away the horde of photographers sitting in front of my house with massive camera lenses directed at my windows.” I look her in the eye and blow a breath through rounded lips. “I trusted you, Lyla.”

“Did you, though?” She holds my gaze. “You *didn’t* tell me about Stevie, Troy. The only reason I knew you had another woman staying at your house was because I showed up to surprise you at the grocery store. That’s not trust.”

I clench and unclench my jaw. She’s not wrong. “Maybe not, but can you blame me for not telling you given what’s happened? I gave my word to her, Lyla. Would you rather I make myself a liar?”

“No, I just ...” She takes a second before continuing. “I’ve barely seen you this week, but you’ve been with her all day, every day.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that. I’ve been trying to help her and be there for her. It might seem weird to you or like I’m being a jerk, but this isn’t just some random girl I started hanging out with. She’s my best friend, and she’s going through a lot right now.”

“I know she is, and she deserves to have someone be there for her. It says a lot about you that you’re being that person.” She searches my face. “Is it possible to admire you for that while also having a hard time with it?”

I take a breath before responding, “Yeah. I think it is.”

She lifts her shoulders. “I can’t compete with Stephanie Carr, Troy. And I don’t want to try to.”

I stifle a frustrated eye roll. “That’s the thing, though. There’s no competition going on.”

“Maybe not, but to me, it feels like there is.” She looks at her hands in her lap. “If I’m wrong, I’ll be happy, and maybe then we can pick up where we left off—if you can forgive me, I guess. But I don’t think I’m wrong.” She looks up at me.

She thinks I’m still in love with Stevie. Why does no one believe me?

“I’d rather end things before I get more invested, Troy, because my gut is telling me I’m only going to get hurt in the end.”

I shake my head, chewing my cheek in frustration. I’m not going to beg Lyla to stick around, partly because we haven’t spent enough time together for me to know whether I really want to keep dating her, and partly because I’m still frustrated she told her friend about Stevie.

But I know what it’s like to feel like you’re competing with an impossible standard—I’ve been set up against Austin my whole life—and I hate that I’ve made Lyla feel like that. Just as much as I hate that she thinks I’m secretly in love with Stevie.

“I understand.” I blow out a breath and grimace.

It goes quiet as we both process what’s happening.

I grimace as I meet her eye. “So that’s that, huh?”

She mirrors my expression. “I guess so.”



I DRIVE HOME IN SILENCE—SOMETHING I never do. It’s not like I’d pictured Lyla and me getting married or anything. I was just seeing where things went. I’m not sure how to feel about things ending tonight, though.

How am I going to tell Stevie? She’ll ask about my date, and she’ll want to know why I’m home so early. And my sisters? They won’t rest until I spill the beans. Telling them the truth means revealing Stevie is the reason Lyla and I won’t be going out again, and I’m not about to do that. It’ll make Stevie

feel terrible *and* make things weird between us. Inevitably, she'll start worrying I'm still in love with her.

What *do* I say, though?

I take a sudden left, and my tires squeal like I'm on *The Fast and the Furious*. I may as well grab a few things at the store before heading home. It'll give me some time to decide how to handle the conversation with Stevie and my sisters.

I take my time roaming the aisles, my interest in nutrition facts suddenly insatiable. Who knew Italian sausage had so much selenium? Also, what is selenium? There are only so many aisles, though, and when I pull up to the house, I'm still not sure what I should say. I'm supposed to be seeing a movie right now.

There are a few camera-clicks and flashes as I get out of the car. I don't pay them any attention because my mind is elsewhere. I'm tempted to slip quietly inside my apartment to avoid conversation altogether.

From the foyer, I can hear the TV downstairs, and I gently open the door to Austin's apartment.

A man's voice says something about poetry being the food of love, and my mouth quirks up at one edge. Sounds like a true, dyed-in-the-wool girls' night if they're watching *Pride & Prejudice*.

I set down my groceries and creep down the stairs, realizing I have a great opportunity to scare them now. Maybe that'll distract them from the subject-that-shall-not-be-named. But when I get to the pony wall and peek over, I pause.

The three of them are on the floor, fast asleep, with Stevie in the middle. There are only two pillows between the three of them, so Stevie's and Tori's heads are resting against each other. They've pulled the blanket from Austin's bed, and it's haphazardly thrown across them, the lower half of Siena's legs entirely uncovered.

Stevie's hair is still up, but the bun on top of her head has migrated to the side, almost in Tori's face. She looks so

peaceful, so at home between my sisters. It's not the image I need right now. Or ever.

Divorced or not, Stevie has never been interested in me in that way. As for me?

I'm trying really hard not to feel all the same things I felt in the past. I'm trying not to prove Lyla right.

IT'S NOT NORMAL. I realize that.

A just-divorced woman shouldn't wake up burning with curiosity over how her best friend's date went last night. But that's where I find myself—staring up at the ceiling and wondering how soon Troy and Lyla might decide to take things to the next level.

I thought for sure I'd still be awake when he got home last night. Tori fell asleep first, and even though Siena laughed and suggested writing on her face with Sharpie, her own eyelids “took a rest” half an hour later.

I made it farther than them into *Pride & Prejudice*, but all the junk food we ate must have put me to sleep soundly enough that Troy's arrival didn't wake me. Siena shook Tori awake at one to head home, and it was only when I saw Troy's car in the driveway through the window that I realized he'd already gotten home. I felt oddly disappointed he didn't come debrief us after the date.

I'm realizing more and more how being deprived of substantive human interaction for so many months has affected me. The first person I saw after it ended was Troy, and apparently, I've imprinted on him. My mind is constantly veering in his direction, and I feel weird and vulnerable when he isn't around. But imprinting is something reserved for birds and zebras and characters in *Twilight*, not normal adult humans.

I'm not reading into the little flickers of jealousy I feel when I think of Troy and Lyla. It would be silly for a few reasons.

First, you don't get to reject someone, go off and get married, and then be jealous when they find someone to love. That's called being a dog in the manger, and what is a dog doing in a manger in the first place?

Second, Troy is the only stable thing in my life right now. I can't afford to mess with that.

Third, and most importantly, I *just* got divorced. Despite all my best efforts to keep things alive, my marriage failed. Who knows if I have what it takes to make a relationship work?

What I really need is to get out more. I need friends. Siena and Tori are a great start, but they're also Sheppards, and I don't think relying on the Sheppard family for *all* my emotional needs is wise.

I also need to find my own house instead of mooching off Troy. That means I need him to show me some houses, and *that* means venturing outside despite the paparazzi.

I blow a big breath through my lips. It's been a while since I was in the driver's seat of my own life, but it's time to take charge again.

My phone buzzes once. Then again. Then again. I've mostly been tuning it out and leaving emails and texts unread for the past few days. I haven't even been tending to my virtual pets. But the sequence of notifications has me pulling it out in case it's Troy.

Siena: So ... I may need to hear the story behind this

The text that follows has a TMZ article link.

Tori: I was JUST getting on my phone to ask about that

My heart starts to thud. It's been a while since I've let myself look at what's being said about Curtis and me. Tori and Siena wouldn't text me over just anything, though, so while

my finger hovers over the link for a few seconds, I ultimately tap it.

The webpage loads slowly, and I blink as a picture of Troy fills the entirety of my phone screen. He's shirtless and glistening from his workout, holding the hose in one hand while the other brushes his hair back from his face.

Just behind him, poised above one sculpted shoulder, is my face, staring through a gap in the blinds. I'm not staring at the camera, though. I'm staring at Troy like a complete and utter creep.

My cheeks start burning like a California summer forest fire as I scroll down to the headline: *FOUND: THE REASON FOR CURSTEPH'S SURPRISE SPLIT.*

I read the headline a second time, then scroll back up to the picture. "No, no, no, no, no," I say, transforming into a puddle of shame. I may as well have my tongue out, the way I'm looking at Troy. Is this another example of AI? I swear I don't remember watching him like that. I mean, yes, I *looked* at him, but I didn't ... ogle him. Maybe.

I'll hate myself for it later, but I can't help it. I glance over the story below.

It seems Stephanie Carr, recently and unexpectedly divorced from Hollywood hunk Curtis Carr, has been taking refuge in a modest Irvine house with her new lover. Based on property records, the house—and the impressive body—belong to one Troy Sheppard. Little is known about the mystery lover or how long the affair has been going on, but one can only imagine what Curtis must be feeling to see his longtime sweetheart moving on so soon.

I groan and shove my phone across the counter. Curtis's team will brief him on this, just like they do every day, and the mere thought has me clenching my teeth. He never liked Troy, and it'll drive him crazy to see himself being discussed as the cuckold.

My eyes widen as a thought occurs to me. What about Lyla? How will *she* feel seeing this—the headline, for one, but

also me drooling over her boyfriend, whose house I'm living in?

I have to fix this. I *have* to. But how? I have no publicist to guide me through this stuff anymore.

One thing I know for sure: Troy needs to know before he gets a barrage of incoming texts and calls about the story.

He's not in his apartment, but I find him in the backyard, lying on his workout bench, doing chest flies.

"For the love of all that is good and holy," I say in exasperation, "can you ever keep your shirt on?"

His head swings around, and when he catches sight of me, his brows go up. He sits up and sets down the dumbbells. "Well, good morning to you too, Little Miss Sunshine." He reaches for a tank top hanging over the weight rack and pulls it over his head.

I immediately regret my outburst. Troy bears no blame in this situation. Less than zero blame. He deserves all the credit. He pulled me out of solitary confinement and welcomed me into his home. My repayment has been to swarm his house with paparazzi, who have invaded his privacy and published his name to the world, complete with lies about his love life.

I'm not winning any Friend of the Year awards here.

"I'm sorry," I say with a sigh as I come down the stairs. "It's just ... well, see for yourself."

His brows pull together, and he's still breathing hard from his workout as he takes my phone. The dark brows pull even closer together, and his breathing stills as I watch him nervously.

After a second, his eyes flick to mine. He totally noticed the way I was looking at him in the photo. It has to be that. I was tempted to scribble out my face with Sharpie like we used to do in elementary school with yearbook photos of kids we didn't like, but that method doesn't work great on phones.

"Um, wow," he says.

His tone doesn't tell me much. Troy's not the kind of person to admit when something's going to inconvenience him—hence his inviting me to stay here—but this headline and picture can't possibly be anything but unwelcome. It's going to make his life a lot more complicated, and I'm the one at fault. I mean, maybe if he didn't look so good, the media wouldn't be having a field day with this image, but I can't really blame him for that.

“Should I be offended or grateful they CGI'd my abs?”

“Huh?” I say, taken off guard.

He zooms in on the picture, and my heart goes haywire because firstly, I do *not* need a close up of Troy's abs right now, and secondly, the zoom brings my highly approving expression—to put it lightly—front and center. Or top and left, rather.

He shakes his head and hands the phone to me. “Yeah, definitely CGI.”

Thoroughly confused, I glance down at the picture again. “They didn't CGI your abs, Troy.” Not sure why I'm defending TMZ, but I realize now that I've solidified the image of me documenting every detail of Troy's bare torso with eyes like laser scanners. I shift my weight and turn off my phone screen. “I just mean, I don't think they'd go to that trouble.”

He gives a little scoff and lifts his shirt.

MUST I BE ACCOSTED BY TROY'S ABS EVERYWHERE I GO? What did I do to deserve this?

He evaluates his stomach, then drops his shirt and laughs. “You almost had me convinced.” He points to the phone in my hand. “Give me four weeks. Maybe five. I'll get there. I'd probably have to give up Magic Shell, though.”

I shake my head to refocus myself and lose the photo-versus-real-life side-by-side comparison of Troy's abs. He can't really be this unbothered by the article. “Troy, this is bad.”

“I said give me a few weeks. Geez, Stevie. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither is an eight-pack.”

“Can you forget about your abs for half a second?!” That would make one of us, at least. “We need to address this.”

His smile fades, and he gets serious, facing me. “I thought we agreed to ignore them.”

“We did,” I say. “But some things need to be addressed. This dumb article is going to cause a lot of problems.”

Holding my gaze, he nods, all of his humor gone. “Yeah. Okay. So, what do we do?”

I grimace. “I have to talk to them directly, I think. Give a statement and tell them the truth—they’ve got it wrong, we’re just friends and that’s all we ever have been.” I blow out a breath. I hate talking to the media. I always have. I get so nervous. They’re trained to ask questions that make you say stupid, stupid things you regret. And then they twist those stupid, stupid things into even stupider things that barely resemble the truth.

“Do you want me to do it?” he asks. “I will. Easy-peasy.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I’ll even keep my shirt on,” he says, like he’s sweetening the deal.

“Gee, thanks.” I shake my head with a reluctant smile. “They really captured your essence, didn’t they? You were even fixing your hair.”

“What they captured was a lot of water to the face. They’re lucky they got that shot at all.” He pauses. “You sure you don’t want me to talk to them?”

I shake my head. “It’s my fault they’re here. I should be the one to handle it.”

“You *still* assume you’re the only person living here deserving of paparazzi, Stevie. It cuts me deep. Real deep.”

“Well, as of today, that’s certainly no longer the case. The whole world has your name and picture.” Specifically, a

picture of him half-naked. Given my experience with celebrity gossip enthusiasts, they'll latch onto Troy in a heartbeat. He'll have a fan club and at least three dedicated Instagram accounts by tomorrow. "I promise I'll get them out of your luxurious hair soon, though. Speaking of which, is there any chance we could go see a couple houses?" I need to hop on the take-charge-of-your-life train before I cause any more problems—or get any more doses of shirtless Troy. An overdose is imminent.

"Yeah, of course," he says. "I'll text the one we bailed on a couple days ago and maybe two or three others to see if they can squeeze us in today."



TROY TEXTS me to let me know we've got a green light on three out of the four properties, and I hurry to shower and get ready. I slick my hair back into a low chignon, hoping to give uptight-business-woman vibes. I choose a black blazer and slacks for my outfit to confirm the look. I don't want to give the impression we're heading out on a date.

Troy looks every bit as much the professional when we meet in the foyer, with a black suit and a blue button-up shirt that, ideally, would draw a little less attention to his matching eyes.

"Seems like we had the same idea," he says, looking me up and down with a smile. "You ready for this?"

I take in a deep breath, trying to remember everything I heard Curtis say about acting during the time we were married. I'll need those skills to confront these paparazzi. "Let's do this."

Troy goes to open the door for me, but I stop him with a hand.

He looks a question at me, then releases the doorknob as understanding dawns on him. "Right. Too much chivalry might give the wrong impression."

I give a smiling grimace, brace myself, then turn the knob.

I've been blinded by the flash of paparazzi more times than I can count, and these photographers are farther away than usual, but it still comes as a surprise. I should have realized they would have multiplied once TMZ ran this morning's story.

There are two dozen of them now, clicking and flashing as I step outside, followed by Troy. It takes a few seconds before I can identify any one voice amidst the buzz of questions.

"How long have you two been living together?" "What does Curtis say about your relationship?" "What part did your connection with Mr. Sheppard play in the divorce?"

The assault of questions confirms my worst fears, but I force myself to keep cool and calm. I learned a lot watching Curtis in front of the media, and I try to channel it as we make our way toward the driveway and closer to the paparazzi.

"How long before the divorce did you begin living together?"

I stop, keeping my expression pleasantly neutral, and face the cameras. "We aren't living together. Troy is a good friend from my school years who has kindly—and temporarily—given me use of the empty half of his duplex."

"Mrs. Carr," a female reporter pipes up, "do you have any comment about the picture from the TMZ story today? Most would say the way you were looking at Mr. Sheppard's impressive physique"—she sends him a glance demonstrating she's amongst those impressed by it—"was *more* than friendly?"

I'm trusting my makeup to take the hue of red in my face from ripe-beet to under-ripe raspberry. Thankfully, I prepared for this while I was getting ready.

I smile at the media like an indulgent parent. "It's Miss Jacobs now. Regarding the photos, if you look carefully, you'll notice the focus of my attention is on the pressure washer hose attachment, which many of you can agree from firsthand experience is *also* impressive."

“Today is the first time you’re appearing together in public,” someone says over the din that follows my response. “Does this mean you’re making your relationship official?”

“Mr. Sheppard is my realtor,” I say with the patience, if I may say so, of a saint. “He’s a very capable agent and will be assisting me in that capacity.”

“Is that the only capacity in which Mr. Sheppard is ... assisting you?” the man says with a suggestive tone.

Good gravy, these people just don’t let up. “As I’ve mentioned, Mr. Sheppard and I are longtime friends. Friendship, and now a realtor-client business relationship, comprise the extent of our connection. Thank you.” I wave and start moving toward the car, trusting Troy will follow.

“Mr. Sheppard!” calls out a reporter. “Do *you* wish for more than friendship with Mrs. Carr?”

I turn, still smiling but my nostrils flaring. I don’t want them sucking Troy into their malicious line of questioning. He’s not used to their tactics, and, like I said before, this is my mess to clean up. “Mr. Sheppard is in a loving, committed relationship. And, again, my name is Miss Jacobs.”

“IS THAT TRUE, MR. SHEPPARD?”

In the next split-second, ten different possible responses and scenarios flash through my mind.

When Stevie came outside during my workout, frantic about the news story, it was clearly the wrong time to tell her about my breakup with Lyla. I told myself I would talk through it with her on the car ride to the showings, particularly since I need more time to figure out exactly how to convey it to her without freaking her out even more.

Apparently, that was the wrong choice.

These people camped out in front of my house are determined to believe Stevie and I are a couple, and even though Stevie hasn't lost her cool, I can see her frustration building. I can't blame her. It doesn't seem to matter what she says to these paparazzi and reporters to convince them we aren't dating. They're bloodhounds, and they won't stop sniffing until they find blood, even if they have to draw it themselves.

Stevie saying I'm in a *loving, committed* relationship is the first thing that's actually given them pause. And the way she's looking at me right now, waiting for me to confirm what she said?

She's desperate to get the message across: Troy Sheppard and Stephanie Jacobs are just friends. And we will be *just friends* forever.

“That’s correct,” I say in a way lower voice than I normally use. Evidently, my on-camera persona takes after James Earl Jones.

A flood of questions follows my response—all sorts of in-depth queries about my professed relationship—but Stevie cuts them off.

“We have an appointment to get to, so we won’t be taking any more questions. Now that you understand the nature of Mr. Sheppard’s and my relationship, I trust you will respect his right to privacy.”

We walk to the car and pull away from the house to a firework show of camera flashes. I’d say the likelihood of privacy is negligible.

Stevie lets out a huge breath after she gets her seatbelt on and we pass by the crowds. “Thank you, Lyla.” She lets her head drop back against the headrest, shutting her eyes.

I shoot a quick glance at her. “What?”

“Can you imagine if you didn’t have a girlfriend? It would make all of this a million times harder. I’m telling you, their questions would never have ended if not for that.”

“Ahhh. Gotcha.” I guess now isn’t the time to tell her Lyla and I aren’t going to be going out anymore and that we never *were* in a “loving, committed relationship.”

Stevie twists in her seat so she can see behind her. “There are a couple of them following us, as expected.”

“Do I need to channel my inner Vin Diesel? Use some evasion tactics?”

She faces forward again. “They’d be a step ahead of you. They’re *very* good at their jobs. Really relentless.”

“I think you’re underestimating how many times I’ve watched *The Fast and the Furious*.”

“Unless you’ve seriously increased your viewing frequency from college days, I don’t think I am. But I’m telling you, Troy, these people make it their business to know

all the tricks in the book. They are highly motivated and deeply nosy.”

I smile over at her mischievously. “That sounds a lot like a challenge. Have you ever tried to beat them at their own game? Mess with them a little bit to make it less easy?”

She scoffs. “Are you kidding? Curtis’s PR team would’ve killed me. They were terrified of antagonizing the media. We got briefed every morning on the latest stories and how we needed to respond.”

I frown, glancing in the rearview mirror. I recognize the car behind me as one that’s been parked on my street a lot the last few days. If it weren’t for that, I probably wouldn’t have realized we were being followed. They’re keeping enough distance to prevent suspicion. “Sounds kind of like living under tyranny.”

“That’s a great way to describe it.” She checks the passenger side-view mirror. “The places we’re going are gated, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” If Stevie wants any sort of privacy, that’s the only option. Thankfully, her price range allows for that.



MOST SHOWINGS TAKE LESS than half an hour with the average house and average client. But these mansions aren’t average, and Stevie isn’t either. I’ve shown a fair number of nice properties, but this is a whole different level and, with all the gadgets and smart devices familiar to her but not to me, Stevie’s doing as much of the house-showing as I am.

In the past six days, I’ve gotten used to seeing Stevie in her sweats in Austin’s bare-bones-decor apartment, but that’s not an accurate picture. *This* is her domain. She doesn’t bat an eye at a personal putting green, an indoor pool with a waterfall feature, a meditation room, or four kitchens.

We might have grown up in the same world, but Stevie hasn’t lived in that world for a long time now. Her staying at

my place is the equivalent of me going camping for a few weeks. She's back in her usual habitat now, while I feel like a kid at Disneyland. I'm wowed and impressed and giddy playing with all the contraptions we see—until Stevie reminds me there are cameras watching our every move.

The point is, the life she's used to is completely and utterly out of my reach. Once she finally closes on a house and moves in, she'll feel the *home, sweet home* feeling, while I'll drive home to my modest duplex, counting on the rental income from Austin's apartment to help me afford little luxuries like freeze-dried eggs.

Whether it's my breakup with Lyla, the news story this morning linking my name with Stevie's, or the sheer amount of time I've spent with her over the past week, I'm finding it harder to convince myself my feelings for her are a thing of the past.

After being bombarded with a CGI-enhanced version of my body, Stevie was the next thing I noticed in that TMZ picture. When I zoomed in on my abs, I was actually zooming in to get a better look at her, to see if I was crazy or if she really was staring at me in admiration.

She was. Or I thought so until she told the paparazzi it was the pressure washer she was mesmerized by.

I can't believe that, all these years later, I'm still dealing with remnants of my high school pipe dream, looking for evidence Stevie really does want me, despite all the evidence she's given—including a flat-out rejection—that she never has and never will see me that way.

I don't doubt she loves me the way a friend or a sibling loves, but she's not attracted to me. When a woman is given the choice between looking at a shirtless version of you or a garden hose, and she chooses the hose?

That, my friend, is the sound of four-foot-thick steel walls going up around the friend zone.

Stevie didn't want me when we lived in the same world; there's no way she'd want me now that we occupy different

universes. And in no universe, known or unknown, do I intend to put myself out there for rejection again, no matter what my feelings are.



THE CROWDS ARE a lot thinner when we pull up at my house in the early evening.

“Just the die-hards left,” Stevie says. “Looks like telling them about Lyla just about did the trick. Are you two going out tonight? Normally, I’d advocate for you picking *her* up, but given the situation, it might be nice to have her come here. Provide a little more evidence for these harder-to-convince types.” She raises her brows to indicate the paparazzi flashing their cameras in hopes of getting a shot through the rear window.

I put the car in park and turn off the ignition. “Um, no, we’re not going out tonight.” True statement. “She’s got work.” Also true. She always works Saturday nights.

I hate keeping things from Stevie, and yet, the more I’ve thought about it, the less I see telling her the truth going well. Sure, I can tell her about the breakup, but even if I did, I’d have to keep the reasons for it from her. There’s no way I’m telling Stevie that Lyla broke up with me because she refuses to believe I’m not in love with my best friend. That’s basically an invitation to another round of rejection, and call me a selfish liar, but I’m just not up for that.

It took me long enough to get over the first rejection. In fact, I’m not sure I *am* over it. I thought I was, but being around Stevie has brought it all out again. What’s the road to recovery for someone knowing you better than anyone else and choosing your brother over you?

I can’t blame her. You’re either into someone or you aren’t. But that doesn’t change the way it feels to be the unchosen one.

“Bummer,” Stevie says, opening the door. “Do you have other plans? Or are you up for a *Fresh Prince* marathon with

your bestie?”

“Always,” I say with a smile.

I probably shouldn't spend the evening with her, but I don't know how to say no to Stevie. If I did say no, *then* what? We'd spend the night separately but in the same house, and that's just dumb.

Instead, we sit on Austin's ridiculously small couch and watch more *Fresh Prince* while I try to school my feelings for Stevie into submission. I could avoid her, but I've tried that. I didn't see her for years, and clearly that didn't cure me.

I have to confront this weakness head-on. Sitting next to her on the couch, our legs and arms touching, the smell of her hair, now down, wafting into my nostrils, her body leaning on me the longer we stay ... this is the mountain I must climb.

My feelings for Stevie are like the villain in an action movie. No matter how many times he gets shot, he comes back, ready to cause trouble and make life miserable. The one bright spot in all this is that, in the end, he *does* die. I just have to figure out the magic bullet that'll do the trick.



MY WORKOUT IS CHECKED off my to-do list, and I'm already showered, with two plates of breakfast sitting on the table for whenever Stevie comes upstairs.

I pick up my phone, glance at the door, then type my name into the search bar and hit *search*.

I know. It's not a good idea, and I've been the one telling Stevie not to pay attention to what the media is saying since the divorce, but ... I can't help it. This is brand new to me. No stranger has ever cared about me, and then suddenly, I'm front and center on TMZ. Curiosity has its claws deep right now. Stevie doesn't see me as datable, but how does the public perceive things?

I want to know what people are saying about me. About me and Stevie. Maybe they'll confirm what I've known all

along: I'm not good enough for her, even with CGI abs.

TMZ doesn't allow comments on their stories, but they're far from the only ones running it right now. I have a plethora of options to click on. It's surreal seeing a picture of me popping up all over the search results, to say nothing of the headlines.

Mystery man's identity revealed

Will Cursteph become Troyphanie?

I wrinkle my nose. I always hated Cursteph as a moniker, but Troyphanie is so much worse.

I look at some of the comments on the latter story. The first comment is promising: "If she doesn't take him, I will!" But overall, the tone is less pro-Troy. "He'll never compare to Curtis," and a few variations of, "He's hot, but he's a nobody."

I navigate back to the search results and scan more headlines.

Stephanie Carr dating brother of up-and-coming music icon Austin Sheppard

I suppress an eye roll. Naturally, Austin gets brought into this. I'm not Troy Sheppard; I'm Austin Sheppard's brother. They also refuse to call Stephanie by anything but her married name.

My eyes land on another headline: *Moving on in sync?*

I tap the link and wait for the page to load, wondering with a knot in my stomach if somehow they got news of Lyla and me ending things.

Side-by-side pictures are the primary feature of the article but the last thing to load. The one on the left is the one I've seen a hundred times in the last 24 hours—so often that my own mental image of myself includes those rock solid abs—but the image beside it is new.

It's grainy and low-quality in comparison, but it doesn't take tack-sharp focus or 4k resolution to know what's going on: Curtis and a brunette woman are kissing on a white-sand beach.

“Oooh, what are we looking at so intently?”

I whirl around at Stevie’s voice, turning off my screen in a way that’s as guilty as it was instinctual. “Nothing.”

She cocks a brow, a little smile on her face showing I’ve successfully intrigued her. She’s got no makeup on, but given the way her skin is glowing and how the baby hairs framing her face are wet, I’m guessing she just washed her face.

She takes a step closer. “Come on, show me!” She pauses, pulling back slightly. “Wait. Is it private? A message from Lyla?”

My brows snap together. “What? No. It’s—” I stop. What do I say? I don’t want her to see it. I can only imagine what it would feel like to see your ex-spouse moving on like that.

But it’s only a matter of time until she finds out. Heck, maybe she already knows.

Her eyes scan my face like she realizes maybe this is more serious than she thought.

She swallows. “What is it?”

I grimace, turn on my screen, and hand it to her.

Her gaze lands on the picture of us for a split-second before moving to the picture of Curtis.

I watch her expression like a hawk. She stares at the photo for a few seconds, her eyes glazing over a bit like she’s not even seeing it.

She hands my phone back to me.

I’m not sure what to say. This is the part of Stevie’s life that’s a mystery to me, but I can’t imagine seeing the man she was married to kissing another woman doesn’t affect her at all.

“Are you ... okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says, taking a seat at the table without meeting my gaze. “I’m fine. Ooo, this breakfast looks good. They’re real eggs, right? Not the freeze-dried ones?”

I follow her lead of ignoring the picture. If it's distraction she needs, I can provide it. "These," I say, handing her a fork, "are real, locally-sourced, cage-free, free range, grass-fed eggs."

"I was with you until grass-fed."

"Just trying to reassure you."

"Are they really locally sourced?" she asks with interest.

"If locally sourced means I got them at the local source of groceries, then yes."

She shoots me a look. "Cage-free?"

I scoop up a forkful. "I personally have never put them in a cage."

"Free range?"

"They are free to roam about as they please, but apparently, they are content in their little carton cocoons."

She laughs and stabs a few pieces with her fork. "You, Troy Sheppard, are ridiculous."

"Oh!" I shoot up from my chair. "Forgot my new hot sauce."

"What a tragedy *that* would be."

"Be right back." I hurry to my room, where I stashed the package I got in the mail yesterday. I pull out the hot sauce and head back to the kitchen, pausing in the hallway when I catch sight of Stevie.

She's staring ahead, the fork in her hand limp on her plate. I can guess where her mind is. She's acting like she's unfazed by the picture, but it's all for show. It's hard to watch somebody hurting. It's even harder to watch them pretend they're not.

She turns and looks at me, and I hurry forward with a smile, holding up my hot sauce. "Got it. We've got quite the audience out there today."

“Waiting to get my reaction to that picture, no doubt.” Her voice is flat, like it’s no big deal. Or maybe like it’s such a big deal that if she shows any emotion, she’ll crack right down the center.

“What do you say we test your theory today?”

“What theory?” She’s pushing around her food a lot, but she has yet to take a bite.

“About them being up to all the tricks.” I wag my eyebrows. Stevie needs some distraction, and what better distraction is there than a really elaborate prank? “I’ve got a meeting with a client in an hour, but we could order in lunch afterward and strategize.”

“That sounds intriguingly nefarious, but I actually have lunch plans.”

“Oh,” I say, sounding more disappointed than I’d like. “Great.” Also less enthusiastic than I intended.

“I invited Maggie Jensen over. Hope that’s okay.”

I scoff. “You don’t need to ask permission to have people over. That’s your apartment, for all intents and purposes. Plus, I think it’s a great idea.”

She smiles. “I figure I’ve monopolized enough of your time, and you might be wanting a little break.”

I take a quick second before responding. Do I pretend to agree to save my own pride? Do I assume it’s *her* wanting a break and she’s trying to save my feelings by saying it’s me?

Navigating this whole Stevie’s-my-best-friend-but-my-heart-still-wants-more thing is getting complicated. But she *is* my best friend, and I want her to know, especially after that picture she just saw, that I’m happy to have her here.

So, I settle for telling that truth in a way that won’t overwhelm her. “I haven’t seen you in four years, Stevie. It’s going to take a lot longer than six days to need a break from my best friend.”

She holds my gaze, and immediately, I’m glad I said it. I think she needed to know that.

“Same here,” she says softly.

It’s quiet for a few seconds as we stare at each other.

She pulls her gaze away and stands up. “I should get ready.”

I clear my throat. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Thank you for breakfast,” she says, taking her plate to the sink.

“Anytime,” I say, ignoring the fact she only ate two bites of it. I don’t take it personally. The past few days, she’s eaten it all. It’s just an off day for her.

Stupid Curtis.

Hopefully a visit from Maggie will help. I like Maggie, and I think she’s someone Stevie can trust. Yeah, part of me wishes Stevie would open up to *me* more, but maybe she needs to talk to a fellow woman.

Meanwhile, I’ll be over here pretending I don’t want her to monopolize my time.

I DON'T GET ready when I close the door behind me in Austin's apartment. Instead, I pull out my phone and search "Curtis Carr" on the internet. The first result is what I'm looking for, which means it's also what a lot of other people have been looking for.

Great.

I stare at the photo of him and his recent co-star, Aria Summers.

There are so many feelings inside me right now. I'm an emotion casserole, and I've never liked casserole much.

I feel betrayed for all the times I wondered if there was more between the two of them and Curtis denied it.

I feel validated for pursuing divorce even though, at the time, it felt like admitting defeat.

I feel relief that Curtis is moving on because it means I don't have to feel guilty for doing the same.

I feel hurt he's moving on so soon and wonder what makes it so easy for him to move past me.

I'm mad at myself for letting him isolate me from the world for months on end while he was fraternizing as much as he pleased.

More than anything, though, I feel unsettled. Curtis and I loved each other once. We made promises. We thought what we had would last.

This picture is prime evidence of how all of that has crumbled. I don't want to be with Curtis anymore, but I can't help questioning whether something like romantic love *ever* endures. Some people's love seems to. There are plenty of couples who weather the storms of life together and come out holding wrinkly hands.

But that's not true for everyone. Maybe I'm cursed like my mom, able to inspire those feelings in men but unable to sustain them. I always told myself I wouldn't let my mom's tumultuous love life color my perception of marriage and love, but ... I don't know now. I always judged her for being too lazy to do the work to make love last, but maybe the truth is I have a lot less control over things than I assumed.

I feel eyes on me, and I look up.

Cardboard Austin is staring at me. It's not a threatening expression. He's frozen in time, smiling and singing into a mic. But my conscience convicts me, as if he's asking, "How long do you plan on looking at that photo of your ex-husband, Stevie?"

"I know, I know." I turn off my screen and set my phone down next to me. I take in a big breath, blow it out slowly, and straighten my shoulders.

I'm not going to let this picture sway me from my path. I waited months for this chance to start over, and I can't do that if I'm wallowing in self-doubt and questioning everything about life and love.

Curtis has obviously moved forward. I can do it, too.

So, I put on my big girl pants—literally, since I've gained a bit of weight since coming here—and get ready to welcome Maggie. Baby steps toward my goals. I'm not going to be making out with anyone on a beach in Bermuda tonight, but I can make a new friend.

Maggie suggested going out for lunch, but when I explained to her we'd be followed anywhere we went by an uninvited entourage of paparazzi taking pictures of us mid-

mouthful and trying to lipread our conversations, she promptly agreed to order in.

When she arrives, Maggie has this calmness about her that I envy, and any regrets I might've been entertaining about this lunch disappear the moment she hugs me. I've never thought of myself as a subscriber to the New Age spirituality movement, but if I were, I'd say she's operating at an elevated frequency.

"You survived the mob?" I ask.

She blows out a breath. "Barely." Her nose wrinkles, concealing a few of the freckles she got teased for mercilessly when we were younger. I love the character they give her face, though. She wears them well. "They were all asking if I was here for Troy."

"Shoot." I say, opening the door to Austin's apartment to let her pass through. "They probably think you're his girlfriend. I should have realized that might happen. They've been waiting for her to show up, I think."

Maggie looks back at me with clenched teeth as she goes down the stairs. "Should I have said something? I figured silence was probably the best option. I have a history of putting my foot in my mouth."

"You did right," I reply. "Troy is leaving soon, which will hopefully tune them in to the fact that you're not here for him. Otherwise, I'd be worried your face would show up on tomorrow's tabloids."

Her eyes widen with horror, and I'm wondering if this was a bad idea after all. Is it even possible for me to have normal friendships with normal people? Troy has been really easygoing about the paparazzi, but he's different. He's never been the type to make a huge deal out of things. Most people would be bothered by being hounded by cameras when they're trying to have a casual lunch with a friend.

"I'm so sorry, Maggie," I say. "I should have been clearer about how not enjoyable it is to be my friend nowadays. When

you leave, I'll walk you out and answer their questions so they don't think you're Troy's girlfriend."

She smiles at me, and it's genuine and sweet. "It's not a big deal. I was just picturing this face"—she points to herself—"on the cover of anything, and—" She cringes. "I wasn't made for the spotlight like you. But I'm so glad you asked me to come over. Should we order some food?"

I swallow and nod, trying not to let it show how touched I am by her kindness. I am in dire friendship straits if I'm getting emotional over someone being willing to hang out with me for an hour.

Maggie pulls out her phone, glances to her side, and freezes. It's cardboard Austin. Her eyes flit to me, then her gaze travels around the living room, where multiple posters of Austin adorn the walls.

Like most people I went to school with, she probably remembers I had a huge crush on him back in the day. It wasn't exactly a state secret.

My eyes widen. Maybe she thinks the cardboard cutout and all these posters are mine.

"I promise I'm not crazy," I hurry to say. "This is Austin's apartment. Apparently, Troy thought it would be funny to put up all this stuff last time Austin was in town."

"Okay," Maggie says with a laugh. "That makes more sense."

By the time the food arrives, I'm regretting not inviting Maggie over sooner. Being around her makes me realize how warped my view of life has become. So much time in Hollywood will do that to you, and being married to Curtis sure didn't help. Everything was so focused on appearances and cultivating the right image.

Maggie, on the other hand, is genuine, homegrown goodness. She's humble and self-deprecating, but behind it, she's got confidence—something she severely lacked when I knew her before.

Like Troy, she makes me feel normal. She makes me wish I had a sister.

“How has it been, being back in the area?” she asks as we dig into our Indian food.

“Good. Weird. It was nice until those guys showed up.” I indicate the paparazzi outside.

“Do they just stay here all day and night?” She’s horrified, and for good reason.

“Kind of. Their numbers wax and wane. Today, they happen to be waxing extra strong.”

“It’s so intrusive. Or maybe you’re just used to it by now.”

I shake my head. “I probably should be, but I’m not. I’ve learned to pretend it doesn’t affect me, but there’s a reason I haven’t really left this apartment since they found me.”

Maggie stares at me, her fork hovering in the air. “So, you’re a prisoner.”

I laugh. “That sounds more miserable than it’s been. Troy makes sure I don’t go crazy.”

“But you *want* to go out, right? If it were *me*, I might be okay with it—cozying up with a huge stack of romances until they just gave up—but I’m fully aware I’m not normal.” She doesn’t say it self-consciously. It’s just a statement of fact, and it makes me like her even more.

“I’d love to get out, but the timing ...” I shake my head. “They just published a picture of Curtis and his new ... woman, so their curiosity is insatiable right now.”

She glances up at me, searching my face. “And how do you feel about that?”

I lift my shoulders, letting them sit there for a few seconds before they sag again. “On one level, I’m fine with it. For so long, I’ve been worried how everything I do will affect his image and his work, but now, I guess I feel a little more freedom to ... move ahead?”

She nods. “You *should* feel freedom to move forward. No one should let the past hold them hostage.”

She’s right, and the way she says it, I know she’s actually *feeling* it. I hope she isn’t letting the awful way she was treated when we were younger hold her back.

“Maggie, I’m sorry I wasn’t a better friend to you at school. It makes me cringe to think about.”

“You were always nice to me,” she says.

I give a scoffing laugh. “If by that you mean I didn’t go out of my way to be rude, yeah. But I wasn’t *nice*.”

“Hey,” she says with a smile, “someone not going out of their way to be rude was a big deal to me then.”

I shake my head, feeling even worse.

“I don’t hold any grudges,” she says. “It’s not worth it, and I really like my life now. But enough about me. You say you feel freer to move forward now. What does that look like?”

“The million-dollar question,” I say. “I mean, getting a house of my own—one without Austin Sheppard merchandise everywhere, maybe. Somewhere to make new memories. Having my own garden to work in. Working on finding my own passion. Making new friends—or old friends.”

She smiles. “That sounds really nice. I hope you find all of that.”

“Thank you.” I hesitate for a second. “I’ve thought a little bit about dating.”

“Yeah?” There’s no judgment in her tone. Just encouragement. “See, I thought you and Troy were together when I saw you at the grocery store, but I didn’t know then that he had a girlfriend.”

I laugh, and it has a nervous quality to it I’m not used to. “No, Troy and I have always been really good friends, but that’s all.” Thanks to me.

“I know, but I always thought you two would be great together.”

I take an enormous bite of food to compensate for the way my heart is thudding. I never thought we would be great together. I was too busy daydreaming about life with Austin. But now? I've definitely thought about it a time or two. Or ten.

But it doesn't matter. I said no to that chance years ago, and the time has passed. He's taken.

Maybe this is good, though. If I've felt something for Troy, it means I can feel something for someone besides Curtis, and that should give me hope—or maybe it should terrify me. I don't know yet. Some casual dates could be a great way of meeting people and taking ownership of my life again.

“Do you have anyone in mind for a date?” Maggie asks.

I shake my head, even though an enormous Troy-filled banner is lighting up my brain. “It's kind of hard to meet people in my current situation. Maybe in a few weeks when things have died down.”

“If you want to wait, you should,” she says. “But if it's the paparazzi holding you back?” She shakes her head, frowning. “You deserve freedom just as much as the next person. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, right?” She scoops some biryani onto her spoon. “I wonder how they'd like it if their houses were swarmed with cameras.”

I smile, feeling grateful for her indignation, despite how new our friendship is.

“It's kind of hard to go on casual dates when the media is itching for a story,” I say. “I don't think many guys are looking for a first date with ten cameras in their faces—and if they are, they're probably more interested in the exposure than in me.”

Maggie blows a puff of air through her lips. “That makes things really tricky.”

I nod and go back to my food. These are the realities of my life now, and there's no use dwelling on what can't be changed.

“My cousin Landon is single,” Maggie says. “He could handle that kind of pressure.”

“Really?”

She nods. “He’s super easygoing. *And* he’ll make sure you have fun. He’s good at that.”

I bite the inside of my lip, trying to imagine what it would even be like to go on a date with someone. It’s been a long time since I dated, and unlike Curtis, who has clearly dived right back in, I’m very out of practice.

“No pressure at all,” Maggie says, “but it’s an option if you need to ease yourself back into things. With Landon, it would be more like hanging out.”

Hanging out. I could do that, right? I can’t rely on Troy for everything indefinitely. He shouldn’t feel like he has to babysit me and make sure I’m not alone for too long. He has a job and a girlfriend, for heaven’s sake.

“Okay, yeah,” I say, feeling jittery.

Maggie’s brows go up. “Really? You want to go out with him?”

“I mean, he’s normal, right?”

She laughs. “Yes. Totally normal. Here, I’ll show you a picture.” She pulls out her phone, but I put up a hand to stop her.

“It’s okay. I don’t need to see.” I know too many people who look normal but are complete jerks for his appearance to tell me anything meaningful. The fact that Maggie is vouching for him is what matters to me. “Do you want to give him my number?”

“Definitely.” She looks at me intently. “You sure?”

I nod decisively. “I’m sure.” Uncertainty strikes again, and I hedge. “Just ... if I don’t text him back, make sure he knows it’s not about him, okay?”

She smiles. “Definitely.”

“IT’S BEEN a pleasure meeting with you, Evelyn,” I say, sticking my hand out for a handshake.

“Thank you,” she says, wiping her hands on her apron. She’s on lunch break at the restaurant where she waitresses. We’ve had to work quickly, which I don’t mind because even though I really like Evelyn, my mind keeps flitting to Stevie back at home, wondering how her new friend-date with Maggie has gone.

“Do you think we’ll be able to find what I’m looking for?” Evelyn asks.

“I do,” I say firmly. “It might take a little patience and some compromise on a few of your wish-list items, but if we can get you pre-qualified for the loan, we can jump on the right place when it pops up.”

The wrinkles at the sides of her eyes deepen with relief.

“I’ve got your email address here”—I hold up the legal pad where I’ve taken notes on all the things she’s looking for in a property—“so I’ll set up that hotsheet today. You’ll start getting emails with potential options as they come on the market.”

Right at the top of the legal pad, circled in blue pen, is Evelyn’s price range. It’s low, even for an apartment. And by low, I mean it’s about a tenth of the price range I’d like my clients to be looking in.

But beggars can’t be choosers, and my client roster is not only starting to dwindle from neglect, there’s a glaring lack of

high-end clients on it, so I'll take what I can get. Evelyn's son gifted her a nice little sum of money recently, and she's using it for a down payment on the first property she'll have ever owned.

Under all her excitement and hopes for this apartment, she's reasonable, and if I had to make a list of qualities I'd choose in a client, *reasonable* would take the top spot. Well, wealthy might take the top spot, but *reasonable* would have spots two through five.

I head back to the house and notice immediately that Maggie's car is still there. That's got to be a good thing, right?

She's not the only one around, though. I sigh at the number of paps hanging out on the sidewalk. They've been joined by a few fans, some of whom have brought camp chairs and posterboard. Oh, joy. The pressure washer is looking really tempting again. Last time, it led to a headline fiasco, but I have my shirt on now.

But I think Stevie's right. Doing stuff that aggressive is like spraying a hornet. It just makes them mad and more determined to sting. I don't want Stevie to be the one getting hurt.

The paparazzi are already pelting me with questions before I even crack my car door open. It's all the usual stuff—questions about my “alleged” girlfriend, as they call her, about my history with Stevie, about how she feels seeing her ex moving on with his former co-star.

I almost shout, “Get a job!” until I realize this *is* their job—to skirt the line between journalism and stalking. Stevie and I are their prey.

They're going home hungry because today, I'm taking the wombat approach.

I'd never even heard of a wombat until last night, but I could be considered the local expert after using the Discovery channel to distract me from thoughts of Stevie. Wombats' backsides are the closest thing to buns of steel in nature. When threatened, they crawl into their hole and plug it up with their

rear. It doesn't matter how much the predator scratches and claws; the wombat's butt can take it.

I'm not planning on literally plugging up my front door with my derriere—it would take a lot more glute workouts to make that possible, and I have a feeling the pictures and headlines might make me regret it—but I'm taking all of their stupid questions and letting them bounce off my buns of steel.

I walk rather than jog to the door, even though I'm anxious to get inside and see Stevie. Opening up my news app to the headline *Man can't bear two hours away from his so-called best friend* wouldn't be a good look.

I shut the exterior door, and the din of questions turns muffled and much more bearable. It's white noise now.

I hesitate in the foyer, wanting to knock on Stevie's door to say hi and see how things are going but realizing that's also crazy.

I turn the knob on my own door just as hers opens.

"There you are!" Stevie says. "We need you."

I look behind myself, then back to Stevie, raising my brows and pointing to my chest.

"Yes, you," she says, pulling me by the hand toward her apartment.

I laugh, feeling as giddy as a schoolboy being chased by his crush. She pulls me down the stairs, letting go of my hand just as we reach the bottom.

Maggie is sitting on the floor, a few Styrofoam containers in front of her.

"We ordered way too much food," Stevie says, "and we need you to make sure it doesn't get wasted."

I frown. "What am I, your garbage disposal?"

"Salve for our consciences," Maggie says, smiling widely and scooting over to make room for me. "I hate wasting food, but I also don't love leftovers. It's a conundrum."

“Same,” Stevie says. “But if you don’t want it, maybe some of the paparazzi outside will.”

“Over my dead body.” I rub my hands together and scope out the options. “What’ve we got here?”

Stevie points to the containers one by one. “Garlic naan, cheese naan, tikka masala, butter chicken, black daal, and chicken biryani.”

I raise my brows. “What group *were* you ordering for?”

“We couldn’t decide and got a little carried away.” Stevie freezes. “Oh! I’ll go get your hot sauce.”

I watch her leave, a little smile on my face. She knows not having hot sauce next to me at a meal makes me feel all sorts of wrong.

“How are you, Maggie?” I break off some garlic naan and dip it in the masala.

“Really good,” she says. “Glad I came—and glad I ran into you guys in the first place.”

“Me too,” I say between bites. “Stevie’s been stuck with me and only me for so long, she was going crazy.”

“Lies,” Stevie calls out as she returns.

I shoot a look at Maggie and shake my head subtly.

Stevie knees me gently in the back, four of my favorite hot sauces held precariously between her fingers. “I saw that. Troy’s kept me sane,” she says as I take the sauces. “*He’s* the one who needs a break. How was your new client meeting, by the way?”

“Good,” I say, dripping hot sauce over a piece of naan. “Though, it’ll be a small miracle if I can find this lady everything she wants within her price range.”

Stevie clenches her teeth as she sits down. “Oof. *Two* hard clients you have to deal with now.” She glances at Maggie. “Troy’s helping me find a house too.”

“Neither of you are hard clients,” I say, screwing the lid onto one bottle and taking up the next one. “And Evelyn

doesn't expect to get all the items on her wish list, which is exactly why I think she deserves to find a place with all of them. But that's not really within my control." I drip the second hot sauce on the biryani and mix it in.

Maggie watches me with fascination.

"Welcome to Troy's Chemistry Lab," Stevie explains. "He takes his hot sauce very seriously."

"The proper ratios are vital," I say, watching closely as one last drop falls onto the rice. I hurry to pull up the bottle to prevent another drip. "This one is two million Scoville units. One extra drop could mean death."

"Oh, my gosh, really?"

Stevie shakes her head. "No. But it *would* lead to Troy doing hyperventilation-style breathing and crying like a baby for ten minutes."

"Anyway," I say sternly, "enough of that. What have you ladies been up to?"

"Besides eating enough food for the state of California?" Stevie asks. "Just talking, really. Catching up." She rubs her lips together, looking more serious suddenly. "Maggie's setting me up with her cousin."

I choke and sputter, and hot sauce-laced basmati rice goes flying everywhere. Maggie and Stevie protect themselves as best they can, but their arm shields are no match for the shrapnel I've launched.

"I put one drop too many," I say in a voice hoarse from the choking as they pull pieces from their hair. I clear my throat, hoping my excuse takes. "Now you see how serious the science of hot sauce is."

Stevie is going out with Maggie's cousin. She's going to start dating again. That reality sinks into my heart like an emulsified Carolina Reaper pepper, burning me from the inside out.

"So, your cousin, eh?" I say, shoveling some more food in my mouth.

Maggie nods, backing up slightly, like I might erupt spicy rice again.

“Apparently, he’ll be really cool about it.” Stevie shrugs. “I just need to ease myself back into things, you know? I figure the longer I wait, the more awkward I’ll get, so it’s better to rip off the Band-Aid now.”

Rip off the Band-Aid, indeed. That’s exactly how this feels. Someone ripped off one of those superstrength fabric Band-Aids from my inner thigh, then poured some of this hot sauce on it.

“Sounds like a great idea.” I have to say *something*.

“I hope so,” Stevie says. “Do you and Lyla have plans tonight?”

“Um, I’m not sure what her plans are.” Why do I think it will make me feel better to say technically true statements that are actually misleading?

“You know,” she says, “the paparazzi all assumed Maggie was Lyla when she got here. It could be good for them to see your real girlfriend at some point, though I realize it’s a lot to ask of Lyla to agree to being in the tabloids.”

Lyla would probably love it, honestly.

Stevie rips off another piece of naan. “Knowing these people and their super sleuthing skills, they’ll probably figure out her identity soon anyway. I’m kind of surprised they haven’t already.”

My stomach drops. I hadn’t really considered how deep they might dig into my life. What if they *do* find her? And then she tells them we aren’t together anymore? I can only assume she’s read the articles referring to her. She’s got to be wondering why in the world I haven’t clarified that we aren’t dating and weren’t ever in a “loving, committed relationship.”

I take in a deep breath, and it burns all over my mouth from the hot sauce. Lyla and I only dated briefly. We were never serious. I never met her family, and she never met mine. It’s not like we left a big paper trail or digital footprint of our

relationship, and after our talk last time, I really don't think she'd go to the press.

I should have a bit more time to figure out how to tell Stevie that I'm not dating Lyla anymore, because I do need to tell her.



I'VE ONLY DONE one set of squats when Stevie comes down the stairs from my apartment, wearing yoga shorts and a loose tank top.

“Care for a workout buddy?” she asks.

“Join on in,” I say, grabbing my shirt from the weight rack and pulling it over my head. Ever since Stevie's outburst about how often I'm without a shirt, I keep one nearby during my workouts. I can't compare with those doctored abs from the TMZ picture. Maybe I should sue them for false advertisement. Any girl I date going forward will feel misled when she sees the real ones, but giving up Magic Shell isn't worth it to me.

“Leg day?” Stevie asks.

“Yes, ma'am. But you can do whatever you want, obviously.”

“I'll just follow along with you, if that's okay.”

I force my eyes to stay forward, but you know what's amazing? How you can look straight ahead while being entirely focused on what's in the corner of your eye.

Stevie is lean, but she's strong. Not like that's news to me. She was on the soccer team in high school, and I watched most of her games.

“Can I ask you something?” she says between sets.

“Of course.” My heart immediately catapults into my throat as I use a towel to wipe the sweat from my brow. That's the fun of having a guilty conscience. It immediately assumes the game's up and your lie is about to be exposed to the world.

“Do you think it’s too soon for me to date?”

The towel slows on my brow. Stevie wants *my* advice about whether she should start dating. How do I even answer that question?

Yes. It’s way too soon to date. We should stay in this weird, partially locked down, platonic housemate situation indefinitely.

Or maybe, *No. It’s not too soon to date. In fact, you should date me. I know you’ve never seen me that way and you’d rather admire a hose attachment than me, but please give me a chance.*

“No,” I force out. “Of course not. Do *you* think it’s too soon?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” She blows out a breath. “I mean, it’s not like I’m hung up on Curtis, and clearly, *he’s* not holding back. So ...”

I nod slowly. So, she’s not pining over Curtis. I didn’t really think she was. She hasn’t given the vibes of someone in the throes of deep heartache, but still. They were married, and she made it sound like he was the one wanting to part ways. That can’t be an easy pill to swallow.

I look her in the eye. “You should do what *you* want to do, Stevie. If going out sounds fun to you, do it. You’ve been holed up in this house for too long, and before that, you were holed up for even longer.”

“I know,” she says, running a finger along the edge of one of the ten-pound weights. “I guess I’m just nervous. A lot about dating has changed, and I guess it feels like the stakes are a lot higher now that I know how things can end.”

I pause before answering. “You mean divorce?”

She nods, her focus pinned on the weight. “Even if I found someone I wanted to have a serious relationship with, who’s to say it would turn out any differently?”

It would unless you choose another idiot.

“No one goes into a relationship or marriage anticipating it will end badly,” she says, “so how can you trust it’s really going to last?”

It kills me Stevie is worried about this, that Curtis treated her in a way that’s made her doubt she can find someone to love her forever.

It also kills me I’m giving Stevie advice for how to choose her next husband. But if I want to call myself a true friend, it means supporting her in what makes her happy.

“I’m no expert, obviously, but I don’t think it’s chance when love lasts, Stevie. It’s intentional. You find someone who has proven love is their priority, that they’re committed to the work a relationship entails.”

She holds my gaze, and I keep in the words I want to say. *Pick me. I’ve loved you as long as I’ve known you.*

“And if I choose wrong,” she says, “you’ll tell me, right?”

I swallow, then nod. “You bet your bottom dollar.” And I mean it. This time, if I see her falling for someone who I don’t think will take care of her, I’ll tell her like I should have done the first time.

She smiles gratefully. “You really are the best friend anyone could ask for. I don’t know where I’d be without you.” She wraps her arms around me, and I hold her close. With each breath I take, I commit to doing whatever it means to embrace that role in her life. Best friend.

Just a friend.

Her phone goes off nearby, and she pulls away.

I try to get myself ready for another burning set of squats. A quick glance at her biting her lip tells me whatever she’s looking at, she doesn’t know how to feel about it.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s Maggie’s cousin, Landon. He wants to know if I’m free tomorrow night.”

Oof. So soon.

I make a mental note to have plans that are really engrossing tomorrow night so I don't drive myself crazy. Maybe cardboard Austin can sit with me while I do the New York Times crossword or watch another special on more crazy Australian creatures. Heaven knows there are enough options.

Or maybe I'll burn myself to oblivion with hot sauce. That ought to keep my mind off Stevie being on a date. It's not like I've never sat at home while she's gone out.

Be a good best friend, Troy.

I take in a breath. "You're telling him yes, right? I mean, we *did* have a standing appointment for *Fresh Prince* episodes, but I suppose they can wait."

She turns off the screen. "I don't know. Maybe it's not a good idea. We'll have paparazzi following us everywhere. They'll sit at the table next to us so they can overhear our conversation. There'll be camera flashes and no privacy at all. And so much speculation afterward. It'll be awful."

I walk over to her and take her by the shoulders. "Hey, you would want to go, right? If it weren't for the paparazzi?"

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine.

There's hesitation, and that little villain who refuses to die is standing on my shoulder, saying, *She's hesitating. Maybe she wants to be going out with you.*

The hesitation disappears, and she nods. "Yeah. I do."

The feelings-for-Stevie villain has been successfully shot down again. I wish I could say I'm confident it's for good.

I squeeze her shoulders, then let go, shrugging mine. "Then we just have to get creative."

Her expression is skeptical.

"What if I told you that you could go out on this date, and the paparazzi would never know you'd even left?"

"I'd say you've forgotten about the twenty cameras parked outside."

"Haven't forgotten them. I promise."

She narrows her eyes. “You’re not going to spray them again, are you?”

“No, but not because they don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to go out with them completely unaware, Troy.”

I grin. “Then let me prove it to you. We can do a practice run tonight.” I don’t know if it’s my newly minted determination to be a good best friend or if I’m overcompensating for not wanting her to go on dates with anyone but me, but either way, I’m going all in on this. Overenthusiastic Dating Cheerleader is now my middle name. It’ll suck to fill out legal paperwork going forward.

“Troy, you don’t have to do this,” Stevie says. “I’ve made your life crazy, and I already feel terrible about it.”

“You say crazy, I say fun. Besides, if you don’t get out, you’ll get cabin fever.”

Her mouth twists to the side. She knows I’m right, so I take the opportunity to drive home my point.

“I see how you watch my departures longingly.” Okay, that wasn’t the word choice I was going for, but I said what I said.

She chuckles. “I *do* miss the days when I could leave in my pajamas and not worry about it.”

“Exactly,” I say. “Just imagine yourself frolicking around in your pajamas tonight, not a paparazzi in sight.”

“That’s not really your plan, is it?”

I raise a brow. “Isn’t it?”

“And what happens if your plan fails, and the paparazzi *find* us frolicking in said pajamas?”

I shrug. “Maybe they’ll come frolic along with us. Or maybe they’ll realize celebrities are human too.” I grab her hand, which is totally allowed when you’ve shifted into best friend mode like I have. “Come on, Stevia. Give it a chance. You know you want to.”

Her lips press together thoughtfully as she stares at our hands together. She looks up, still incredulous. “You really think you can pull it off?”

“Girl, I’ve got evasion skills you’ve never seen.” I move my shoulders from side to side, drawing a smile from her. “We can do it after the showings later. Do you trust me?”

She hesitates for a second. “Yeah. I trust you.”

My mouth breaks into a smile. “Let’s do this, then.”

IT'S our third and final showing of the day. We've been through the entire mansion—beautiful and faultless—and now it's time to check out the security features of the home. This is the part Troy has been waiting for.

It feels strange, looking at these massive houses I'd be sleeping in alone. I've always felt a little dwarfed by big homes. Having said that, they have all the security you could ever want—there definitely won't be paparazzi hanging out on the sidewalk—but that can't make up for the strangeness of being alone in such a huge space.

The listing agent walks us to the exterior gate, stopping just in front of a panel on the inside. “The gate can be programmed to work from your phone or car,” she says. “It will open automatically once you're within a certain distance so you don't have to wait once you're ready to pull into the drive. Obviously, this gate is a secondary security measure, as the community itself has a gate and security booth.”

“When is the booth manned?” Troy asks.

“Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

“How are those guards vetted?”

The woman explains the hiring process for the guards as Troy listens with a frown, nodding here and there.

I suppress a smile. He has all sorts of questions about the security options of every home. The fact that he's so concerned about my safety fills me with a tangible warmth. I

don't deserve Troy, but boy, am I ever grateful for him. I hope Lyla appreciates what she's got.

A car comes down the road, slowing as it approaches. The tinted window of the red Porsche rolls down, and a middle-aged man in a sports coat grins at us from inside.

"Hey there!" he says with a wave.

I glance at the listing agent, unsure what to make of this stranger's unabashed curiosity or what exactly is expected of us.

"This is Richard Nelson," the listing agent says. "He lives in the property just above this one."

I smile politely at him, wondering if he recognizes me or if he just stops to say hi to every potential neighbor.

"You can call me Rick," he says. "You thinking of buying this dump?" He winks.

"My client is looking at a number of properties." Troy sounds so businesslike, as if our relationship was entirely formal. You'd never know how often he spontaneously breaks into the Carlton dance.

"Always good to know your options," the man agrees. "This is a great neighborhood, though. Probably heard of a few of the residents. Rose Bryant. Rocco Sterling."

I *have* heard of them—I've met Rocco a number of times, actually—but I just give my best *how interesting* expression.

When Troy asks another security question of the listing agent, Rick seems to take the hint.

"Well, it was great meeting you. We'll hope to see more of you." With an eyebrow wag, he zooms off.

Once I've asked my questions and Troy has sufficiently grilled the listing agent on all things safety related, we get back in his car and start the drive back to his house.

"International business tycoon," Troy says, reading from his phone while we're stopped in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

“That’s how our buddy Rick has enough money to live in that community.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

“All right,” he says as we start moving again. “What’d you think of the places?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if the fact that I know people in that last community should be a point for it or a strike against it.”

“Yeah, I guess it depends what you’re looking for.”

“Which is the problem. Part of me wants familiar people nearby, while the other part wants to start fresh. Would I feel lonely living by myself in a huge house in the middle of a bunch of strangers?”

“I doubt you’d be living there alone for long,” Troy says.

“What do you mean?”

He gives me a funny look. “You’ll be joined by your future husband at some point.”

I don’t say anything, but my heart beats more quickly. My future husband. Those words make me anxious—and the tiniest bit hopeful.

“You don’t seriously think you’ll be living alone until you die, do you?” he asks with a little half-smile. “You’re amazing, Stevie.” He grabs my hand and squeezes it. “And you’ll find someone equally amazing—or at least almost as amazing. I know it.”

I swallow as he lets go of my hand, his eyes back on the road like he didn’t just wreck me. I don’t deserve Troy. *He’s* amazing. He has single-handedly made my life not just bearable but happy since the divorce.

He’s everything you could want in a friend, yes, but he’s also everything you could want in a husband. No wonder Lyla loves him.

No wonder *I* love him.

I steal a glance at him, and my breath hitches as I look at the face I know almost as well as my own.

I *do* love him. I've loved him as a friend for years, but I was so blinded by my own silly, girlish dreams of a life of fame, I couldn't see the perfect guy standing right next to me.

Not only did I not see him, I actually *rejected* him when he offered me more.

Well, I got my dream life of fame, and guess what? It was a mirage. Smoke and mirrors.

I don't want that now. Or ever. I want something substantial, something real. I want Troy. But Troy is taken. Is it too much to hope there's someone just like him out there?

He glances over at me and catches me looking at him. He gets a quizzical look on his face. "What?"

I clear my throat—and my thoughts—as we near home. "Just wondering what devilry you've concocted for tonight. Are you going to tell me your plans, or is this like the time you told me you had a surprise, and we ended up with a flat tire on the freeway?"

He grins as he pulls into the driveway. "That was an adventure, wasn't it? And no, I'm not going to tell you the plans, but I *will* tell you how to dress."

"Black tie optional?"

"Black sweats mandatory."

"I don't have black sweats."

"You're in luck. I have an extra pair."

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to ignore the cameras flashing as people capture us in the car. Squinting like I am, I can almost imagine it's just lightning. Constant, privacy-invading lightning.

"We should get out before they start making assumptions," I say. I'm trying really hard to be conscious of Lyla's feelings and to minimize the fodder we give the paparazzi. I saw enough photos and headlines about Curtis and this or that co-

star to not wish the experience on anyone, even if it *is* Lyla's fault they're here at all. "They're really good at making something out of nothing."

And what *I* need is someone who can help me make nothing out of the something that is my feelings for Troy.

I'M ONLY WEARING Troy's sweats as a means to an end. The "end" is going on a date with another guy.

These sweats are not only comfortable, they're a cocoon of intoxicating cologne. How had I never realized how good he smells?

"You ready?" Troy asks, twinning with me in nearly identical sweats. We're in his apartment, which still smells like the Thai curry we made for dinner. I got brave and put one drip of his hot sauce in my bowl. Bad choice. I thought I was going to die. My mouth is still tingling an hour later.

"No, Troy," I say, watching his boxing footwork warily. "I'm not ready. Because that would require knowing what in the world I'm about to do."

He smiles. "You're about to live. Now, come on. Let's go." He jerks his head toward the back door. It's a squeaker, and Troy puts a finger to his lips like I'm the one responsible for the grating sound. But apparently, he knows his house well, since it opens quietly.

He stops on the top landing of the stairs and puts a hand to his fake ear-mic. "Monkey Lover is on the move. We're going radio silent."

"Again with the Monkey Lover thing," I hiss, secretly amused. Something about Troy playing security detail thrills me on a deep level.

He looks at me somberly. "Are you ready for this mission, Monkey Lover? Its success relies on utter and complete

silence.”

My lips twitch. He’s maintaining his serious expression so well, I’m tempted to suggest he try his hand at acting. Except not really because while I don’t doubt Troy could be great at whatever he puts his mind to, I’m selfish enough to not want him to get tainted by fame.

I give a firm nod, and Troy turns away again. His feet are light as he heads down the stairs, and I follow his foot placement as exactly as possible, worried if I misstep, they’ll creak and summon the paparazzi. Them catching Troy and me sneaking out is a worst-case scenario situation, which I probably should have considered before agreeing to this madcap plan.

But if I don’t find a way to leave the house without the paparazzi swarming me like bees, I’ll not only be stuck inside indefinitely, I’ll be stuck inside with only my growing feelings for Troy as company.

We approach the back fence, and right when Troy gets to it, he crouches down and cups his hands together, looking at me expectantly.

I point to myself, mouthing the word *me*?

He nods and puts out his hands again. He plans to help me climb this back fence, which means I’ll be in the backdoor neighbor’s yard, uninvited. What if they have a guard dog?

No. Troy wouldn’t throw me to the wolves like that. He’s got my back, just like he always has.

I set my shoe in his hand, and he lifts me without any of the sort of grunting that can immediately send a woman into a spiral of self-doubt. It shouldn’t come as a surprise. I’ve seen how strong he is, and no, I don’t think they CGI-ed his abs. I’ve had plenty of opportunity to see for myself that they’re a dead match for the TMZ photo.

I grab the top of the fence and hoist myself over, landing as much like a cat as I can on the back neighbor’s grass. Heart beating in my ears and adrenaline rushing through my veins, I

glance at the back of the neighbor's house, where the windows are lit up and the family is sitting down to dinner.

It might look like a peaceful, idyllic picture, but Troy's spy talk has got me on high alert. They *could* be an innocent family sitting down to dinner, or they might be paid actors, waiting to attack us with whatever deadly gadgets they have hiding under their napkins.

Or maybe they'll just call the cops on us for trespassing.

I turn away, smiling. The prospect of jail shouldn't be this fun.

Only then does it occur to me that Troy has no one to help *him* scale the fence. I step over and go on my tippy toes just as he comes running toward it. I double back as he grabs the top of the fence and pulls himself up, using his foot to push himself the rest of the way over—and into me.

We tumble to the grass, a tangle of limbs and hushed exclamations, and come to a stop just shy of the outdoor chairs set up near a firepit.

I'm on top of Troy, one hand pressing into his chest, the other in the grass.

"You okay?" Troy asks, a hand on my shoulder, his face inches from mine.

"Yeah," I say breathlessly. When I said us sneaking out would be the worst-case scenario paparazzi shot, I lied. *This* would be. Hands-down. No takebacks.

I hurry to get off him and brush myself off in an awkward crouching position, like standing up straight will get me noticed when tumbling all over the yard didn't.

Troy pushes himself to a stand. "Sorry," he whispers. "I didn't see you at the fence until it was too late."

"It's okay," I whisper, even though my pulse is yelling *I may never recover* in accelerated morse code.

I motion for him to lead the way, and we head for the side-yard, where Troy opens the gate with the dexterity of a seasoned trespasser. I, however, am not so experienced, and

when I latch it shut, there's a distinct click that resounds from Irvine all the way to Niagara Falls.

I cringe, but he motions for me to follow him. When we get to the sidewalk, he puts up a hand for a high-five and walks backward. "Nice work, Monkey Lover," he says at normal volume. He puts out his hands and looks around us at the lamp-lit street. "How does it feel to be free?"

I take in a breath and look around. I do feel free. I'm energized, I'm undercover, and I'm wearing sweats. What else could I possibly desire?

My eyes fix on Troy.

Wrong answer.

"It feels pretty dang good," I say. "Now what?"

His eyes jump to a spot behind me, suddenly alert, just as a flash goes off somewhere on the street. "Now we run." He grabs my hand and starts running, and I'm only a half-step behind him. Not because I'm slower but because this sidewalk isn't big enough for Troy Sheppard's shoulders and me to exist side by side.

I suppress the impulse to glance behind me. We're both wearing hoodies for a reason, and a backward glance will give them exactly the shot they need to prove it's us.

Troy tugs my hand, pulling me to the left, and we cross the street. Once our feet hit grass again, I can hear the patter of the paparazzo's feet in pursuit of us. I pick up my pace, squeezing Troy's hand a bit more tightly.

We approach a group of townhomes, and Troy pulls me onto their small front lawns, then hard left into the little alley between. We hurry through to the street leading to their garages. Troy keeps us hugging those garages until he suddenly pulls us toward one of the side-yards again.

I resist slightly, worrying the paparazzo will be waiting for us in front of the townhomes, but Troy's hand is insistent, and I surrender.

He's right. There's no sign of the paparazzo. It's a game of cat and mouse, and I'm desperately hoping we are Jerry and the paparazzo is Tom. Tom never won.

We're nearing the end of the row of townhomes, where it's open space again until we can cross the street and hope for an accessible backyard or something. I glance down the side-yard between the second-to-last and last set of townhomes. It's full of recycling bins, and I yank Troy with me.

He only resists for a split-second, and I pull him through the maze, letting go of his hand as I crouch down in the small area between two bins and the townhouse wall. Troy squeezes into the space right next to me.

It's quiet except for our heavy breathing, which I force through my nose instead of my mouth. It's dark outside, but Troy's eyes are alert enough I can see their blue.

Footsteps sound, and we both still, our breathing stopping altogether. I can't stop my heart, though, and it's pounding mightily, hopped up on adrenaline. I grab Troy's hand again. His eyes flick to mine, and my heart flutters, even amidst the possibility of being found by this stalker paparazzo.

It's wrong of me to feel what I feel for Troy when he has a girlfriend. I've only seen Lyla one time, which might be why I'm having a hard time keeping her present in my mind. It's not like Troy's constantly texting her or calling her. How serious can they be when they've hardly spent any time together since I arrived?

I shut my eyes. Right now, I'm the dictionary definition of justification.

But the way Troy is looking at me ... is there something inside him that still wonders what might have happened between us if I hadn't been such an idiot?

No, Stevie. You were justifying before, and now you're seeing what you want to see. Back off.

"Is it safe?" I ask in a whisper so soft, it wouldn't register on the decibel scale.

His eyes squint as he listens for any sound. “Let me check.”

I nod, but he doesn't move. He stares at me. It's expectant and intent, with a hint of a question. His gaze shifts down. Is he going to kis—

“Can I have my hand back?” he asks, a tinge of amusement in his voice.

I release it like a bomb about to blow me to smithereens.

“Thanks,” he says, standing and stealth-walking to the edge of the townhome. He looks around, then checks the backside of the townhomes. “Coast is clear.”

“They could be hiding,” I say.

His grin spreads. “Game on.”

The game, I discover, includes hopping another fence. This time, I keep my distance as Troy sails over after me. I can only handle so many close encounters before my integrity crumbles like a dried-up sand castle.

We run in silence, not holding hands this time. Maybe Troy's afraid I'll keep his and never give it back.

He stops in the safety of a bougainvillea bush at a corner house. “I think we've lost them,” he says between breaths.

“I think so too. Which is great because I'm not a sprinter.”

“But are you a swinger?” he asks.

I raise a brow. Is he asking me what I think he's asking me?

“The type that actually swings on swings.” He points behind me, and I turn.

There's a tall chain-link fence with a wide-open field behind it and a swing set beyond that. It's a school.

“Come on,” he says, leading the way.

Breath finally slowing, I walk beside him.

“Exactly how many fences will we be climbing tonight?” I ask, even though I'm thoroughly enjoying this adventure. I

haven't done anything like this since ... well, since I stopped hanging out with Troy.

He only smiles and starts scaling the diamond-shaped links. Not wanting to be left behind, I follow suit, and soon it's a race to the top.

"You have smaller shoes," he says when I win. "It's not fair."

I climb over the top and head down, sending Troy into a hurry to catch up. We descend in silence, but when we're still six feet from the ground, Troy lets go. His feet land with a thud on the grass.

He puts his hands on his hips like he's a superhero. As I finish my more careful descent, he breaks into the Carlton dance.

I smack him on the arm. "Last one to the swings is a freeze-dried egg."

It's me. I'm the freeze-dried egg. I can't keep up with Troy. I work out consistently, but Curtis's personal trainer had me doing stuff that wouldn't "bulk me up" too much. I listened back then, afraid of becoming ... I don't even know what? Strong? Such a dumb thing to fear. Now I'm determined to do every one of Troy's workouts with him.

Troy stops shy of the swings and puts out a hand. "Ladies first," he says, the joy of victory stretching his smile wide. It's amazing how long I was able to see that smile and not feel what it makes me feel now—like it might be able to power my entire world.

But I'll have to find another power source.

I sit in the swing, and Troy starts pushing me, his hands pressing against the small of my back. I use my feet to counter the force, turning back to look at him. "I don't trust you pushing me for a second."

He puts his hands up in surrender. "Sheesh. No good deed goes unpunished."

I immediately regret telling him to stop. “Does almost killing someone count as a good deed?”

“We’ve talked about this, Stevie. It was a normal underdog.”

“It really wasn’t.”

“Come on, then, underdog expert. Show me how it’s done.” He sits down in his swing and waits patiently.

I stop my gentle swinging, but I’m not actually sure I can push Troy hard enough to do an underdog. He’s a big boy. A big, beautiful, perfect boy.

I’m determined, though, so I go behind him and pull the swing back as far as I can. Using all my “toned but not bulky” force, I shove him forward. It’s like trying to push an anchor, and even from behind, I can see he’s smiling by the way his cheeks lift.

I don’t give up. I push and pull and push until he gets some momentum. He has mercy on me and uses his legs to help out. When he finally has enough speed and height, I brace myself, ready to show him how to properly give an underdog.

I wait until he reaches the back apex of his swinging arc, then I put my hands on his lower back and rush forward, pushing his body, then ducking my head and running to the side.

I glance up and catch sight of him flying, his face full of terror as he’s propelled toward the ground. His feet hit first, and he tumbles forward, emitting a few grunts as he rolls.

My eyes wide, I hurry over, falling to my knees by his side. “Oh, my gosh, are you okay?”

He moans softly, and I lean over him, afraid to move him but needing to see he’s not really hurt. His eyes are clenched shut, and I put a gentle hand on his arm. “Troy, are you all right?”

He moans again. Suddenly, one of his eyes peeks through a cracked lid, and his mouth pulls up at the side.

I let out a relieved breath. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“I thought you were pretending to be me and I was pretending to be you,” he says, still in the fetal position, his face full of adorable mischief.

I sock him in the arm. “You are the ... meanest little boy!”

He grins like I just gave him a compliment.

I hold my hands up like they’re around his neck and pretend to strangle him. But it doesn’t satisfy me, so I do the only thing that perfectly straddles the line between violence and non-violence, between torture and fun. I tickle him.

Laughing uncontrollably, he writhes and rolls to evade me, but I’m pure determination. I follow him wherever he goes, tickling his armpits, his neck, his stomach. Again, not CGI abs.

Once he’s understood the depth of my dedication and depravity, he abandons his efforts to get away and instead launches a counterattack.

This was all a fatal error on my part. I thought of tickling precisely because I know *I’m* useless against it. It’s like Achilles shooting all his enemies in the heel.

I curl up in a ball, trying to protect myself, but Troy wrenches my arm up to get access to my armpit. I gasp for breath between laughs, and he’s laughing right along with me.

“Mercy, mercy!” I eke out.

He stops, dropping back onto the ground next to me like he just depleted the last ounce of his energy. His chest rises and falls as he stares up at the sky, our shoulders pressed up against each other.

My breath comes in quick, uneven gusts, and my abs and cheeks ache from laughter. It’s been a very long time since I’ve laughed this hard. I look over at Troy, whose hands are on his stomach as he smiles up at the stars.

My throat thickens. It almost hurts how much I care for him. I so wish I had made different choices when I was

younger, that I hadn't been so beguiled by my own vanity and need for approval.

I have no one but myself to blame. All I can do is be grateful for what I *do* have, and I'm sure glad I have Troy at all.

"I'm so glad you texted me that day," I say.

He looks over at me and smiles. Our faces aren't far apart. I haven't been close like this to anyone but Curtis in a long time. It sends my heart into my chest.

"Me too." His eyes search mine.

My breathing should be slowing by now, but it's not. Am I the only one thinking how simple it would be to just ...?

No. It wouldn't be simple. It would be so complicated. And so wrong. "Thank you for tonight," I say. "I really needed this."

"Of course. And now you can go out on your date."

I swallow. Right. This has all been about making sure I can go out with Maggie's cousin.

"Yeah, as long as he can handle a rousing round of parkour first."

"Hey, you deserve someone who's willing to do that and more for a date with you, Stevie." At my side, his pinky brushes mine, and I can't breathe. Is he talking about himself?

Is *this* a date?

Nope. It's not. He's with Lyla, and he's far too standup a guy to do anything even close to cheating.

But why is he looking at me this way, then? And why can't I stop looking right back at him and hoping he'll kiss me?

A dog barks in a nearby yard, and I blink. I lied again. *This* would be the worst-case scenario paparazzi shot—me staring into Troy's eyes, willing him to kiss me when he has a girlfriend.

I sit up. "We should go."

He sighs and sits up more slowly. “Yeah. We should.”

I KEEP the tone light and fun on the way home, despite the knot in my stomach.

I could have sworn we were going to kiss. Not just that I wanted to kiss Stevie, but that she might've even wanted to kiss me back.

But that's the moment she shot up and said we should go.

We find our way to my backdoor neighbor's house and climb the fence without incident this time. I can't tell if the silence between us is radio silence or something else. Is she worried I've crossed the boundary again? That I'm going to make things weird or beg her to give me a chance?

I wish I could say she'd be wrong, but it scares me how close I was to doing it all over again, to putting myself out there for one-in-a-million odds like Lloyd Christmas on *Dumb and Dumber*.

I can't seem to find the courage to tell her I'm not with Lyla anymore. Now more than ever, it feels like doing it would confirm her fears and cause her to see me as a threat rather than a support.

When we get to the house, Stevie acts normal, asking if I want to watch some *Fresh Prince*. I politely decline, claiming I have some work to catch up on.

It's true. I need to update Evelyn's hotsheet. But even more than that, I need to recalibrate. I'm having to do that every time I spend any significant amount of time with Stevie now, and it's kind of exhausting.

Her date tomorrow night should shake some sense into me, though. It'll be like a hammer to a magnet—maybe the force of it can disrupt my connection to her. That's what I'm hoping.



STEVIE IS ALREADY UP and at 'em when I get to the backyard for my workout in the morning. I wore a shirt again for her sake. It's ab day, and I lay out two yoga mats on the floor, putting them far enough apart that my magnetic tendencies might be weak enough to resist.

“So,” she says as we both sit down on the mats, “I got a text last night.”

“Yeah?” My mind jumps to Curtis. Maybe he's coming around and realizing what an absolute idiot he's been.

“Apparently, our good friend Rick mentioned us to Rocco Sterling.”

I chuckle and lie on my back. “I forbid you from living in that neighborhood. Rick is like a built-in paparazzo.”

“He is. But I think you'll be a little less annoyed by him in a second.”

I raise my brows. She's sitting cross-legged, facing me with a light in her eyes that ignites my curiosity. Or maybe my inner magnet. Who even knows at this point?

“Rocco texted me last night.”

My mind sorts through its celebrity gossip archives. Is Rocco Sterling single? I think so. Is Stevie about to tell me he asked her out? Can I drum up some fake excitement for her?

“He asked me if I'm moving into the neighborhood, and I told him I wasn't sure,” she continues, her smile growing. “He said it would be a shame if I did.”

My brows pull together. “What a jerk.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “He's moving out of the neighborhood. Or hopes to. He wants a bigger place.”

This whole conversation is confusing me. “And you’re happy he’s leaving so you’ll know fewer people in the neighborhood? Stevie, I liked that house a lot, but I really think you’ll regret living by Big-Mouth Rick.”

“I completely agree. I asked Rocco if he has an agent already. He doesn’t.”

I still, my ears perking up like a rabbit’s.

She smiles, pleased by my reaction.

I can’t stand it any longer, so I sit up. “You’re killing me, Stevie. Get to the punchline.”

She scrunches her nose. “But it’s so much fun torturing you! Fine. He wants you to be his agent.”

I shoot to my feet. “Are you serious? Rocco Sterling wants me to be his agent?”

She nods, looking up at me from her seated position, her face full of glee at my reaction. “It’s a little far, since he’s looking at homes in Malibu.”

Malibu. The place where people don’t bat an eye at a \$10 million price tag. I can’t even comprehend the commission on that sort of property.

This is it. This is my door into the luxury real estate market, and Stevie just flung it wide open.

She pulls out her phone and taps the screen. The music for the Carlton dance comes on, and I start dancing like a programmed *Fresh Prince* zombie, except I’m grinning from ear to ear.

I make my way toward her, my arms swinging from side to side, and pull her up to a stand. She’s smiling as widely as I am, and even though I’ve never seen her do the dance, she joins in for once. We face each other, smiling and flailing like fools until I start losing my breath.

“Thank you,” I say. “Thank you, Stevie.” I pull her into a hug.

“You’re welcome,” she says into my shoulder. “You deserve it.” She pulls back and looks at me. “Word to the wise: if I know Rocco, he’ll make you work hard.”

I put up my hand like I’m swearing on the Bible. “I will mop his floors with my shirt.” There is nothing I wouldn’t do to have this client.



IT’S 4 O’CLOCK, and I just got off the phone with Rocco. He talked my ear off for a good half hour, while I took feverish notes on a legal pad. He was talking into his car’s phone system, which can provide less-than-stellar audio even on the best days. Add in him driving his convertible on the Pacific Coast Highway, and it was all I could do to piece together certain sentences.

I figure the call was my audition, and based on how we ended the conversation, I seem to have passed.

But now my brain hurts. I set down my pen and lean back in my chair, rubbing my hands over my face. I still can’t believe I’ll be helping Rocco Sterling buy his next mansion.

At least one of my dreams is being fulfilled.

My phone buzzes, and a text pops onto the screen.

TORI

Um...what?

Linked in the text below is a headline: *The girlfriend that wasn’t—Carr and her “friend” might be more after all*

My breath starts coming quickly, and I scroll down enough to see the first line of the story.

The connection between recently divorced Stephanie Carr and longtime “friend” Troy Sheppard is growing more suspect as Gossip Gazette received reports from someone closely involved that Mr. Sheppard and his purported girlfriend broke

up shortly after Mrs. Carr's arrival. Perhaps because of her arrival?

Before I can continue, my phone buzzes again, this time with a call. It's Lyla.

I blow a breath through my lips and answer it. "Hey, Lyla."

"Hey." There's a quick pause. "Um, did you not tell anyone we broke up?"

I clench my teeth. Clearly, she saw the story. "I ... didn't."

There's a pause. "Well, that explains a lot. I know you're not into celebrity gossip, but have you by chance seen *Gossip Gazette* today?"

"My sister just texted me the link. I've only read the first couple of lines." I frown, remembering the wording. *Received reports from someone closely involved.*

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Lyla asks.

I rub my forehead. "It's kind of complicated. I intended to, really, it just ... things with the paparazzi got out of hand, and I didn't want to add fuel to the speculation about Stevie and me by letting them know I didn't have a girlfriend."

"I wasn't ever your girlfriend, Troy."

"Right. I know that. I—" I cut myself off. Taking the easy way out of describing the relationship between Lyla and me is really coming back to bite me in the butt. Unfortunately, I am *not* a wombat with a steel derriere, so it's going to be painful. "Look, I'm really sorry, Lyla. I didn't mean to get you involved in this."

"It's okay. It's my fault anyway, right? I was the one who told Tina in the first place." She sighs. "I called her when I saw the story this morning, and she said she was contacted by the press again yesterday. When they asked her about us, she told them we weren't together anymore. She didn't think it would be a big deal because it was true. Anyway, I just called to warn you, but sounds like you knew anyway."

"Thanks," I say pathetically. "I appreciate it. And again, I'm really sorry." I feel like the biggest idiot.

And now I have to tell Stevie.

Once I hang up with Lyla, I take a second to gather my thoughts. It doesn't do much good. They're scattered like the candy from a piñata. I don't want Stevie to be blindsided by this, though, so I need to tell her.

My biggest concern beyond that is what this will do to things between us. I lied to her, plain and simple, even if it was done to make her life easier and less complicated.

Clearly, it failed. Things are officially complicated. They've got the official *complicated* seal and everything.

I head down the stairs and into the foyer, then knock on Stevie's door. I tap my thumb against my legs, trying to prepare myself. She'll be mad. Of course she will. Not only does the media know I don't have a girlfriend, they know I lied about it. Or maybe they think Stevie and I agreed to lie about it together to hide our *connection*, whatever that word means.

The door opens, and Stevie smiles brightly at me, dressed in cutoff jean shorts and a black V-neck t-shirt. Her smile wavers. "You okay?"

"Um, yeah. And no. Can I come in?"

She nods, worry displacing the light in her eyes, then leads the way down into Austin's apartment.

I glance at the cardboard version of him, wishing I could switch him places right now, that my worries could be which songs to play at performances rather than whether I'll have a best friend in five minutes.

But putting it off is only going to worry Stevie more. She already seems to know it's serious. She's gone straight to the couch, tucking one leg beneath her and gripping her ankle with both hands.

I sit down beside her and sigh. "I have something to tell you."

"Okay," she says, her voice full of uncertainty.

I hesitate for one more second, but I don't want to freak her out more than is necessary. "Lyla and I aren't together."

IT TAKES me a second to register what Troy's saying. He and Lyla aren't together. He doesn't have a girlfriend. Troy is available. Single. A bachelor. Flying solo. Unattached.

I'm a human thesaurus, and those words are flitting around my brain like delightful butterflies.

"When did ...?" I don't finish.

He takes in another breath. "The night Tori and Siena came to hang out with you. We were never really officially together in the first place, but that was the night it ended."

I stare at him for a second while my mind does the math. Not exact math. Just an estimate because, truthfully, the days since I got here are hard to tell apart. But it's definitely been a few days since that night.

Suddenly, it hits me. He and Lyla broke up a few days ago, and he didn't tell me. This whole time, I've thought he had a girlfriend, which apparently was *never* true. We've talked about her multiple times since then, and he never said anything. It makes sense now why she hasn't been over, why Troy never has plans with her, why he's never texting or talking to her on the phone.

What doesn't make sense is why he would keep it from me. We're supposed to be best friends.

"It gets worse," he says, looking grim.

My heartbeat kicks at my ribs even harder. "Worse how?" As far as dating relationships go, I thought breakups were as

“worse” as it could get.

“The media found out I’m single. They’re running with it.” He hands me his phone, and I take it slowly. My mind is operating at the speed of light, while my body is channeling my inner sloth.

My eyes scan the headline and the accompanying photo of Troy and me in the car together, then they shift to the article itself. I don’t even read all of it. It’s not necessary to get the very not-subtle implication: Troy and I pretended his relationship with Lyla was ongoing so we could keep ours a secret. That’s not even the end of it, though. They think Troy and I have been in that secret relationship for a while and that it’s the reason Curtis and I got a divorce.

I give his phone back to him, too frustrated to read more. The gossip is annoying and false. It usually is. But that’s not what’s got me riled up.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He turns his phone off, grimacing. “I should have, and I’m sorry I didn’t. Things just happened in such a weird way. When I got home from being with Lyla, you guys were asleep, and I didn’t really want to talk about it in front of my sisters anyway. I planned to tell you in the morning, but then before I could, you told the paparazzi I had a girlfriend. Telling you right *then*, with cameras in our faces, didn’t seem like a good time.”

“And after?” My frown deepens. I just don’t understand. “Why not at least let me know when we were alone again?”

He rests his elbows on his knees and clasps his hands between them, his focus there. “Stevie, do you remember when I invited you to come stay here?”

“Yeah, of course,” I say, not understanding the connection.

“At first, you said no.”

I think back on that day. It’s a whirlwind in my brain. So much happened after such a long time of nothing at all happening. The texts with Troy, the finalization of the divorce,

Troy coming over, packing to come stay with him. But I do remember saying no.

“Why *did* you?” he asks. It’s not accusatory, but I can tell from the way he asks that he’s proving a point.

I don’t say anything. I’m too embarrassed by my reasoning, by the conceit that led me to assume Troy might have ulterior motives in inviting me. I could lie about it, make up some excuse related to the divorce, but I don’t want to lie to him.

“I saw it in your eyes, Stevie,” he says, saving me the necessity of answering. “You were thinking about that stupid day all those years ago when I told you we should be more than friends. Only once you found out about Lyla did you change your mind.”

He lets that sink in, and so do I. *That stupid day*, he calls it. That’s how he feels about the day I’ve been wishing I could do over.

“I should’ve told you the truth,” he says. “That’s on me, and I really am sorry I didn’t. I thought I was helping you—you already had so much to deal with, I didn’t want you to worry I might ... come onto you or something. And then it just kind of spun out of control. I was worried that if I told you why Lyla broke up with me, it would only make things worse.” He shakes his head, staring at his hands.

“Why *did* she break up with you?” And why is it disappointing to me that it was *her* who did the breaking up? Does he wish they were still together?

“She was jealous.” He shakes his head again. “She couldn’t believe there wasn’t something between us.”

I try to breathe normally. The frustration in his voice makes it clear: the thought that there’s more between us is annoying, a nuisance.

There’s silence as I process.

I’m as much to blame as he is, if not more so. He accurately assessed my hesitation to come stay with him, and when things ended with Lyla, I messed everything up by

capitalizing on his relationship to placate the media. All this time, all he wanted was for me to believe one thing: that he's not in love with me. That he's my best friend and *only* my best friend.

"I understand," I say quietly, reaching to put a reassuring hand on his back, only to pull it away again. Do best friends put hands on each other's backs? I curse my atrophied social skills. "I was just sad you didn't tell me because"—I shrug—"I thought we were best friends. We *are*, right?"

He looks at me, searching my face. This hesitation doesn't bode well, not to mention how weird it feels to be talking about friendship when my mind has ventured so far ahead of that. My brain is Lewis and Clark, exploring new territory.

No, my brain is Lewis, exploring on its own because Clark isn't interested.

"Best friends always." He sits up and pulls me into a hug—a hug I could stay in forever if he'd let me.



TORI

I'm just pulling up. You ready for this?

STEVIE

So ready. You're a lifesaver.

I TURN off the curling iron and look in the mirror. It's been a while since I've curled my hair properly—and even longer since I've curled it myself. When you're stuck inside for months at a time, you lose basic life skills like hair styling.

But I think I did a decent job. I may have to tweak a few things once I see Tori, but that's okay.

There's a knock on the front door upstairs, and I realize a kink in our plans. I can't open the door. It'll ruin the ruse.

“Troy!” I call once I make it to the foyer.

His footsteps sound on the stairs, then his door opens. “Who’s here?”

“Tori,” I say. “Can you open it?”

His gaze lingers on me for a second before he obeys. “I thought you had a date.”

I step behind my door just in case any paparazzi are feeling extra daring today and are close enough to snap a shot of me inside. “I do.”

Troy’s confused as ever, but he opens the door, and Tori steps inside swiftly.

As soon as it’s closed again, I step out and take stock of her hair. She does the same with mine.

“Perfect,” we say in unison.

“Whoa,” Troy says, his eyes jumping back and forth between us. “What’s going on?”

I smile widely and step next to Tori to enhance the similarities. We both used a 1/2” barrel to curl our hair, which is *really* close to being the same color blonde, and we’re wearing *almost* the same outfit: straight leg jeans, a tucked in white t-shirt, and a blazer. Her blazer is black, and mine is blue, but we can switch later.

“Stevie is a criminal mastermind,” Tori says. “She roped me into this little magic trick. The paparazzi see *me* come in, and when Stevie comes outside and takes my car”—she attempts a slight of hand which makes me hope she’s not counting on a future in prestidigitation—“voilà! They’ll think it’s me leaving.”

Troy looks back and forth between us. “And then when she comes back in your car and you have to leave eventually?”

I shrug. “Hopefully they’ll think Tori’s just coming and going again. Besides, by then it’ll be too late for them to get what they wanted: pictures of me on my date.” I look at Tori, who shares a wicked, conspiratorial smile with me.

“Should we switch blazers now so we don’t forget?” she asks.

I nod, and both of us shrug them off, then swap.

Troy blinks and shakes his head vigorously like he’s seeing double. “This is ... weird.”

“Excellent,” Tori says. “If it’s got *you* this weirded out, it should work great on the paparazzi.”

“Especially since it’ll be dark by the time I leave,” I say.

“It doesn’t get dark until 8:30,” Troy says.

Tori raises a brow. “And?”

Troy shrugs. “Just seems kind of late for a first date. But I guess you need the dark to round out your shenanigans.”

If I didn’t know better, I might have said he was jealous, but he’s made it pretty clear that’s not the case. Besides, Troy’s always been protective of me. It’s what makes him such a great best friend. I should be grateful he hasn’t insisted on doing a background check on Landon or insisted on coming as security detail. It would be really hard to give Landon a proper chance when Troy is right next to me, calling me Monkey Lover. I don’t even want to know what his code name for Landon would be.

I suppress a sigh. I need to redirect my brain away from Troy. Hopefully this date will help with that. It’s not like I’m expecting much out of it, but I do hope I end up with one more friend. And maybe, just maybe, the attraction I feel for Troy is my sign that the possibility of love hasn’t gone up in smoke along with my marriage.



MY HANDS ARE SHAKING as I get into Tori’s car in the driveway and buckle my seatbelt, but I try to act natural, to hold myself like Tori would.

Whatever I’m doing, it works. The paparazzi on shift hardly take note of my departure. There are no flashes to

compromise my vision, and when I make it down the street successfully, I do a fist-pump.

I turn up the music and sing along as loud as I want, feeling as free as I did last night. It was the adventure with Troy that inspired me to think outside the box. It helped me remember that if I want something, I have to make it happen.

I lower the volume as I pull into the restaurant parking lot. It's not a fancy place, just one of those corner cafes that aren't much to look at but have great food. That fact alone helps me relax as I walk in. If it had been a Michelin star restaurant, the pressure would've been on.

As I step inside, a man just inside the door turns, his eyes narrowing. "Stephanie?" he asks.

I hesitate, realizing this could be my date or a fan who's recognized me.

"Landon Mitchell," he says with an easy smile. He's a good-looking guy—curly blond hair and sun-tanned skin.

"Hi," I say, smiling with relief.

"Thought I might be a crazy person?" he asks knowingly. I clench my teeth together guiltily as he laughs. "I promise I'm not any crazier than average. Should we find a table?"

I'm relieved when he finds us seats in a corner booth where it's less likely we'll be noticed. The first ten minutes are the usual small-talk you'd expect on a first date. It's not awkward, thankfully. Maggie was right. Landon seems laid-back, which isn't nothing. Most people are pretty jittery when they meet me for the first time, which is still weird to me. Landon's easygoing chatting is a relief.

We talk about his family, where he lives, and his career in tech, and then the conversation turns to me.

"So, what comes next for you?" he asks.

I give a breathy laugh. "Still trying to figure that one out."

He nods, scooping a bunch of toppings onto his nachos. I have to give it up to him. Most people wouldn't choose a dangerous food like nachos on a first date. Maybe that's why

this feels less like a date than it does chatting with a new friend.

I try to pay attention to how I feel with Landon, and even though it's comfortable, I'm not feeling any sparks. I don't think he is either. We're both just having a good time. That simultaneously relieves and disappoints me.

But I didn't feel sparks for Troy until recently, either. Does that mean I'm just really bad at identifying who's good for me?

"Part of me wants to kind of ... reinvent myself," I say, running my finger along the top of my glass. "But other times, that feels extreme, and I crave familiarity. Or the past." One specific day in the past, to be clear.

"You can always try something small," he says.

"Something like what?"

He shrugs. "Anything. Your wardrobe, your hair, your routine. You could follow Maggie's lead and change your name. There are lots of options."

"Why *did* she start going by Maggie? Did she just like it better?"

He takes a drink from his lemonade. "She got called Maggot one too many times. Kind of ruined the name Margot for her, I think."

I cringe. "Ugh. I had forgotten about that." It makes me feel sick inside.

He smiles. "She's past it now." He cocks a brow. "Thanks to that name change, maybe. So, there's a plug for that."

I laugh. I *could* change my name. Then when people ask if I'm Stephanie Carr, I could truthfully shake my head. I mean, technically I already can. I'm Stephanie Jacobs again now. But it might be nice to *really* change it. Like Landon said, the possibilities are endless. I could be Darla or Jessie, or I could go the Elon Musk route and give myself an Elvish name or a bunch of random letters put together.

Probably not the option I'll go with, but Landon's got me thinking. A change might help me figure out who I want to be after four years of letting the media and Curtis's PR team craft an image for me.

“YOU SEEM DISTRACTED,” Tori says, side-eying me from the other end of the couch.

Once Stevie left on her date, I knew the only thing that could really distract me. But even *Fresh Prince* isn't doing the trick. Stevie and I have watched so much of it together recently that I keep looking over, expecting Tori to be her. And then inevitably I think about Stevie on her date and check the time and wonder what they're doing at that exact moment.

“I've got a new client who's kind of high-maintenance,” I respond, keeping my eyes on the screen and refusing to let my finger tap on my knee again.

“Ah,” she says, looking unconvinced. “And here I was, thinking your mind was on Stevie.”

I shoot her a look, and she just smiles like the annoying little sister she is.

Tori's asleep by the time the door finally opens around 11, and instead of shooting up from the couch like I want to, I take a few deep breaths and wait for Stevie to come in. I always keep my apartment door unlocked in case she needs me. If she needs to run straight into my arms again, there will be no major roadblocks in her way.

It's what a best friend would do.

When the door to my apartment opens, Tori stirs, wipes her eyes, and sits up from her slumped position on the couch. She's always had the ability to sleep in the most unlikely of places.

Stevie appears at the top of the stairs, and I glance over at her. “Oh, hey! You’re home already.” The way Tori smirks tells me I’m not convincing anyone that the last two-and-a-half hours didn’t pass like a kidney stone.

“How was it?” Tori asks, stretching her arms above her head.

“It was ... really good,” Stevie says with a smile that fills my heart with inky blackness. “I had a great time.”

“A great time as in you’ll be going out again?” Tori asks with a cocked brow.

Stevie shrugs. “Guess we’ll see.”

I wish I could wear a metaphorical blindfold because I really, really don’t want to see.



I WAVE at Evelyn as she hops on the bus to head back to work. She smiles at me, then disappears through the folding doors.

I told her I’d take her back to work myself, but since I got a call right then from Rocco, which lasted way too long despite my gentle efforts to end it, she insisted on taking the bus.

I really like her. The apartment we just saw was a disappointment to both of us—it’s amazing how photography can make a dodgy place look good—but she took it in stride. She’s hopeful we’ll find the perfect place, and I’m determined to make that happen.

As for Rocco, he wants a compilation of possible properties by five tonight, comparing their pros and cons. Given the traffic I’ll be encountering on the way home, I’ll have to hop on it the minute I pull in the driveway.

That’s fine, though. This is all part of the dream. I calculated the lowest estimate of commission I’ll receive from his purchase, and I almost fainted. Maybe I’m deluded, but the thought that important people might come to know of me on

my own merits instead of Austin's is looking more likely with this windfall.

I pull onto my street and note that the number of paparazzi has dwindled a little bit. Maybe they're losing interest. It makes sense. So many celebrity lives to invade, so little time.

Rather than addressing the latest rumors, Stevie and I have left them alone. There's bound to be some other relationship scandal amongst the upper-crust of Hollywood society that will pull the focus from us soon. I'm counting on it.

Just as I pull in the driveway, I get a text.

TORI

Are you cool if I set Stevie up with a friend?

I type "No" and immediately erase it. This feels like a trap. This is probably Tori trying to get me to admit my feelings for Stevie. Well, she's barking up the wrong tree.

TROY

Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?

TORI

Two words: buttered toast.

Mentions of my wisdom teeth video disappeared during Stevie's marriage to Curtis, but they're back in full force now, apparently.

TROY

eye roll emoji

I head inside, not waiting for a reply. If I dwell too much on all this stuff, it starts bringing me down, and I'm on the up and up.

"Troy? Is that you?" Stevie's voice calls from downstairs.

“Yeah!” I call back, walking to her door and waiting for her response.

“I need your help!”

I’m down the stairs in two seconds flat. “Where are you?” She doesn’t sound like she’s in distress, but it would be like Stevie to play things down even if she were.

“The bathroom,” she calls back.

I skid around the corner, into the hallway, and stop in front of the bathroom door.

It’s open, and my eyes scan the scene: the box next to the sink, the dark streaks of an undetermined substance on the counter, the paused YouTube video on her phone, the scissors.

Stevie’s staring in the mirror with a concentrated expression, looking like a wet dog. A cute wet dog, but a wet dog nonetheless.

“Uh ...” I say.

“I can’t get the back,” she says, using the weird, thin brush in her hand to indicate the only dry part of her hair. “Could you help me?”

I step into the bathroom. “What exactly am I helping you do?”

“Dye my hair black,” she says like this is an everyday occurrence I should be used to by now.

“Oh. Wow. Okay.” Stevie with black hair. That will be new.

“I’m cutting it too,” she says with excitement. “I found a really good YouTube video with the exact cut I want, but I might need your help in the back for that too.”

I look at the box with a picture of a woman with long, glistening black hair. “Where did you even get this stuff?” Stevie hasn’t left the house by herself except for her date.

“I ordered it this morning. Same-day delivery is the greatest invention since electricity.”

“I think there were some other pretty good ones in there.” I take the brush she hands to me. “You sure about this?”

“I mean”—she points to the hair she’s already applied dye to—“it’s too late to turn back now, unless I want to look like a skunk. But, yeah. I’m sure. Talking to Landon last night, I realized I need a change. I’m not ready to skydive or join a convent, but this feels doable.”

I bite my tongue instead of saying *If Landon told you to jump off a cliff, would you do it?* I’ve fully embraced my role as best-friend-who’s-here-to-support-Stevie-in-all-her-wildest-dreams-yea-verily-even-the-ones-that-crush-my-heart.

I dip the brush in the bowl of dye. “Then let’s do it.”



TWO HOURS and a lot of rewinding the YouTube video later, I’m sitting on the couch in Austin’s apartment with my laptop, working on Rocco’s comparison list while Stevie showers a second time—once to get the dye out and then again after the cut. The blow-dryer is going right now, so it can’t be long until she comes out.

This comparison list is a ridiculous exercise. Rocco wants pros and cons, but when you’re buying a beachfront property in Malibu, California in the range of \$14-\$17 million, the cons list has items like *outdoor kitchen has obstructed beach view* and *\$7489 per square foot* (as opposed to the more normal \$5500 per square foot, obviously).

The bathroom door opens, and I glance up.

Stevie pauses in the doorway.

It’s surreal. I’ve known her a long time, and her long, blonde hair has always been a quintessential part of her. Now it sits just above her shoulders, jet-black.

I set my laptop aside and stand up.

She clenches her teeth, looking more uncertain of herself than ever. “What do you think?”

I walk over, and a little smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “I’m ... trying to get used to it, but”—I touch a hand to the hair falling down in front of her ear. It’s soft. And so dark —“I like it.”

“Really?” she asks, her vulnerability on full display.

“Really. Do you?”

She nods quickly and tucks the hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“It’s the new you,” I say, wondering what other changes she’ll want to make now that she’s done this and liked it. Apparently, this Landon guy’s opinion holds a lot of sway with her.

She looks up at me, her gaze lifting to my hair. “Our hair almost matches.”

I laugh and tap a gentle hand to my hair. “Girrrrl, you *wish* you had hair like this.”

A text comes in, and she grabs her phone from her back pocket. “It’s Tori.”

My smile wavers slightly. “Oh?”

Stevie glances up at me quickly, then back down to her phone. “She wants to set me up with someone.”

“Oh.” My vocabulary consists entirely of this word now.

She looks at me nervously. “What do you say? Can I trust her not to set me up with a crazy person?”

I want to say *no*. So badly. “Yeah, you can trust her.” I’ll just hole up in my apartment and try to find things wrong with Malibu beach homes while she goes on yet another date—and potentially comes back wanting to shave her eyebrows or something.

MY HEAD VIBRATES GENTLY, and I reach an uncoordinated hand under the pillow to silence my alarm. I'm still not used to these early hours, but Troy's consistency with working out inspires me to sit up rather than turning over and falling back asleep.

I've got a bunch of notifications about virtual pets I'm neglecting, but I ignore them and do my zombie-walk to the bathroom. I glance at the mirror, starting at the sight.

My heart races as I take stock of my new self. I drag a hand through my hair—a much quicker task than I'm used to. There are a lot fewer tangles to deal with.

That's a plus, right?

I swallow, turn away, and use the bathroom. But when I wash my hands in the sink, I'm faced with my reflection again.

The adrenaline that drove my hair choices yesterday has faded to trace levels, and I'm facing down something I've come to hate mightily: regret.

It's not the only thing I hate. I hate the way I can't push my hair behind my shoulders because it's too short. I hate the way my part line stands out against my dark hair. I hate how pale and lifeless I look framed by my fake black hair. I hate the way I thought I could reinvent myself by dyeing and cutting my hair—and how it was partially motivated by the hope Troy might suddenly see me in a different way. I hate what a mess I've made of my life and how every time I try to exert any type of control, things get worse.

“Stevie?” There’s a knock on the bathroom door, and I hurry to wipe at the tears on my cheeks. “You ready to work out?” Troy asks.

“Just a second,” I say in an upbeat yet watery voice, blinking as fast as I can. It just pushes more tears out. Even if I get rid of them, there’s no hiding that I’ve been crying. My cheeks are blotchy and my eyes are red.

“Are you okay?” Troy asks. Curse him for knowing me so well he can tell when my voice sounds off.

I take in a deep breath, look at myself in the mirror one last time, and open the door.

His brows snap together. “What’s wrong?”

I swallow, but the waterworks have been turned on, and there is no stopping them now. I put a hand to the hair at my neck, and my chin trembles. “I hate it so much,” I say shakily, and I hide my face in his chest.

His arms pull me close. “I thought you liked it.” His soft voice is at odds with his firm hold on me. He smells like his laundry detergent. I don’t like my hair, but I like *this*.

“I did. But today I hate it.” I leave out the part about the other things I hate, but the thickness in my throat reminds me of them. Top of that list is the fact that we’re friends hugging when I want more than that. It’s the impulse telling me to pull back just enough to lift my chin and press my lips to Troy’s.

“Then maybe tomorrow you’ll like it again.”

I shake my head.

“Let me see you.”

I grip his back as he tries to pull away, and he laughs, giving up easily.

“I really do like it, Stevie,” he says.

“That was yesterday,” I respond. “A lot can change overnight.”

“Then let me see, silly.”

I let out a resigned breath and reluctantly pull away.

He steps back, drops his arms from around me, and puts a hand to his chin like he's summoning all his objective powers. Or checking me out? It's hard to tell.

"Daaaang, girl," he says, going all in on the latter. "Mm mm mm."

"Stop it," I say, even though I can't help smiling. "I look like a witch who got in a fight with scissors and lost."

He drops his hand from his face, leaving his smooth guy vibes behind for his usual self. "I'm not just trying to make you feel better. It's"—his eyes jump to my hair—"really different, yeah, but, Stevie, you could style your hair with spaghetti sauce and still be the most beautiful woman I know."

My breath catches in my throat. Does he really mean that? He could have said, *I'd still think you're beautiful* or *I'd still think you one of the most beautiful women I know*. But he didn't. He said *the most beautiful woman I know*.

I mean, beauty isn't everything—of all people, I've learned that—but just knowing he thinks of me that way makes my heart pound a little harder.

"Aside from Hilary Banks, of course." He winks.

"You and your Hilary fetish." I turn my head to face my reflection. It brings on a new wave of shoulder-sagging dejection. I don't even recognize the woman in the mirror. "Why didn't you stop me? It's your job as my best friend to keep me from making heinous life choices."

He puts his hands up. "Hey, it's an unpaid position, and it's kind of a full-time gig."

I punch him in the arm, which only hurts my knuckles, while he laughs softly.

"What would make you feel better? The Carlton?" He starts it up, looking like a fool without any music to accompany him. There's hardly room for it in this bathroom, making it even more ridiculous.

It *does* make me feel better, though. How could it not? I think it's a universal mood enhancer.

"That does help," I say as he winds down. "I can think of one other thing that might do the trick. Something that would make me feel less alone."

"What is it?" he asks with a breathless smile. "Anything. You name it."

I try to keep a straight face. "If you dyed your hair blond. And cut it into a mohawk."

His smile flattens, and his eyes go wide. He steps back one pace, his hand going instinctively to his hair. Even at this time of morning, right before a workout, it's perfectly coiffed.

I may as well have asked him to sacrifice his firstborn.

"Settle down there, Troy," I say with a tentative touch to his arm. "It's a joke. I would never ask you to do anything to your precious hair."

He lets out a huge sigh of relief. "Don't be scaring me like that, girl."

"Don't make it so tempting. You ready to go work out now? I'm ready to take out my anger on your weights."

I get changed and meet him outside. My hair is barely long enough in the front to reach into a ponytail, but I make do with bobby pins, hoping Troy is right and I'll come around to it.

Should've gone with the Musk-inspired name change.

It's arm day, and I put everything I've got—my anger toward my hair, my growing feelings for Troy—into those free weights until my arms feel like jelly.

Whenever I sneak a peek at Troy, the same question pops into my head: what would happen if I told him how I feel? Every time, I get the same feeling I have when I'm about to go over the top of a rollercoaster. It's adrenaline and hope and fear all at once.

How would he respond? Would it ruin things? Would he tell me I had my chance and didn't take it? Would I lose him

altogether?

My stomach plummets. I can't lose him. He's all I've got. He's everything.

We finish our last set, and he wipes his sweat with a towel. "Feeling any better about your hair?"

"My hatred for it still burns bright, and on top of that, I'm embarrassed you saw me cry over it."

He laughs and throws the towel over his shoulder, which looks extra-large right now after working out those muscles. "Of all the people who could understand crying over hair ..."

"I chose the right person to come to?"

He nods. "I'm going to shower, okay? Meet you for breakfast at my place in thirty?"

My shower water runs gray again, letting out the last bits of the extra dye. When I chose black, I hadn't really thought about the fact that my semi-permanent dye would fade until I'm left with gray hair for a while. This is why I had a hairdresser before. I can't be trusted.

It takes a lot less time to style it, though, which means when I get to Troy's apartment, he's still not done getting ready. He's probably taking a comb through his hair for the fiftieth time. He's one of the few men I know who blows his hair dry.

I get to work in the kitchen, pulling out some yogurt and putting bread in the toaster. I've got a knife to the butter when I hear Troy come in.

"Hope you're good with yogurt and toast because—" I turn to put the knife in the sink and glance at Troy. I freeze.

He offers a grimacing smile and rubs his head. His shiny, bald head.

I CAN'T SPEAK. I'm speakless.

Troy shaved his head. His precious, precious hair. The reason we ever became friends in the first place. It's gone now.

"I know," he says. "My one beauty."

"Are you quoting the OG *Little Women*?"

"It's *not* the OG one," he says. "I think there were two before it. You've spent enough time with my mom. You should know this."

Sue Sheppard is a *Little Women* connoisseur and watches all the versions every Christmas, but the Winona Ryder one was always her favorite.

"Silly me," I say, my gaze flitting to his head over and over. There's a sense of real loss inside me as the light glints off it. "Troy, you did *not* have to do that. I was totally kidding."

"I know," he says with a shrug.

"How do you feel about it?" His dark eyebrows and blue eyes are even more striking without hair.

"I don't know," he says casually, putting a hand to his head and rubbing. "It's giving Vin Diesel vibes."

I laugh. Vin Diesel *wishes* he looked like Troy Sheppard.

He keeps rubbing his bare skin, his expression thoughtful. "It's smooth. For now, at least. It'll keep me cooler, too. It'll

probably cut getting-ready-time in half. And as a bonus, I can act as a human reflector.”

“But do you like it?” I ask.

He drops his hand and stares at me. His eyebrows tug together in an adorably pathetic expression. “I hate it.”

I grimace sympathetically and motion for him to come to me. Shoulders slumped, he shuffles toward me, and I hug him just like he hugged me. And just like then, I never want to let go.

“I can’t believe you shaved your head,” I say. “You win the best friend award.”

“Finally,” he says with a satisfied sigh.

I pull back. “Can I touch it?” I’ve tried to touch Troy’s hair countless times in my life, but the force field he’s constructed around it makes him able to anticipate even my sneakiest attempts.

“Have at it.”

I stretch my hand to the top of his head, and my fingers tingle at the feel of the smooth skin. I can’t believe he shaved off all of his cherished hair. To make *me* feel better.

“It won’t bite,” he says, amused at my hesitant touch.

I smile and splay my fingers, running my hand toward the back until it reaches the crown of his head. His eyes are fixed on me, the remnants of a smile on his lips. We’re close. Really close, and a sudden urge to bring his mouth to mine makes my pulse buzz.

What *would* it feel like to kiss Troy? To show him what I think of his ridiculous gesture of solidarity, to let him know how I really feel for him without having to figure out how to phrase it? My pulse tells me it might blow my mind.

I step back. “You really Bicc-ed it, didn’t you?”

“Go hard or go home,” he says. “When’s your date?”

Right. I’m going on another date. “Tonight. We’re going glow-in-the-dark mini-golfing.”

“You’re one busy woman,” he says.

“It’s just two dates,” I reply, feeling the need to downplay things. “*First* dates. I don’t have anything tomorrow, though. Maybe we can hang out here? Unless you have work stuff.”

“I’d like that. I have a showing in the morning with Evelyn, but the rest of the day is free.”

“How *are* things going with real estate?”

“Good, thanks to you. Evelyn and Rocco couldn’t be more different, though. She balances him out, I guess. You’d love her, Stevie. Sweetest lady in the world. I’m tempted to adopt her as my grandma.”

“I bet she’d agree willingly,” I say. “I’d love to meet her sometime.”

He lifts a shoulder and flips my hair carelessly. “You could always come along tomorrow if you wanted.”

I scrunch my nose. “Would that be weird?”

“She’d be thrilled. Trust me.”

I smile and nod. “Okay, yeah. I’ll come, then.” Because I can’t say no to more time with Troy.



I GRIP the edges of the bathroom counter and stare myself down in the mirror.

Something is wrong with me.

I shouldn’t be looking forward to going to a work appointment with Troy and sitting around with him in loungy clothes all day tomorrow more than I look forward to my date tonight.

“Get it together, Stevie,” I say. “You made your bed. Now lie down in it and *be happy!*” I smack the counter with the last two words.

Shockingly, my tactic doesn’t work. I sigh and walk away.

I slip on a baseball cap and peer through a tiny crack in the curtains. The Cannes Film Festival is going on, which seems to have called some of our glorified Peeping Toms away. That'll make it a lot easier to leave on my date. My haircut should help too.

Troy lets me take his car, and the paparazzi don't even attempt to follow me. I'm vaguely offended. Is it my new hair? Am I boring them? Or maybe Troy wasn't joking and they really are here for him. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for news stories about him to get out. They'd be wholesome, at least.

My date is with Guy, who meets me outside the miniature golf place. He's attractive and nice and funny and weirdly good at mini-golf and ... I feel nothing for him.

No sparks.

No desire for a second date.

And the worst part? He seems to like me a lot. Enough that, at the end of the date when he walks me to my car, I have to dodge a kiss.

Maybe it's too soon after the divorce and my brain can't wrap around the idea of getting physically involved with someone. That's a plausible answer, right?

It might be, except for one tiny problem: my brain has already wrapped itself around the idea of Troy. Wrapped around it like a boa constrictor.

Is my two-first-dates record the beginning of a pattern? Or do I just need to keep hunting until I find somebody besides Troy who doesn't make me want to high-five them when they give me the I'm-about-to-kiss-you look?

A LOT of people work out twice a day.

Today, I'm one of them. Because Stevie's gone, I even do it shirtless. I've never pushed myself so hard, much less twice in a day. The worst part is seeing the vein that's usually just visible on my forehead, reaching back on my shiny, sweaty scalp.

I look weird without hair. I mean, I always knew my hair was a key feature, but now I *know* know. I'm Samson. Without my hair, I'm nothing.

I wasn't lying to Stevie when I told her I hate it. I do. But her surprise and making her laugh? That was worth it.

I'm well-aware I've reached new levels of patheticism. I don't think that's a word, but the only reason is that the world has been waiting for me to provide the best example of it, to pioneer the path. It wasn't enough for me to just confess my feelings to Stevie eight years ago. That fell into normal, if excruciatingly humiliating, levels of patheticism.

With this hideously bald head, however, I have reached the top tier of the scale—and can use my own scalp as a shining trophy.

I hop in the shower around ten and wonder if I should be using shampoo or body wash for my head now. Or Rogaine.

I've just gotten into my plaid pajama pants when I hear the car pull in. I hesitate for a second, trying to find the line between overeager obsessor and best friend.

I'm pretty sure it's normal for a friend to ask how a date went, so I meet Stevie in the foyer.

"How'd it go?" I ask right as she shuts the door. The question might be friend-zone material, but the delivery definitely crossed into overeager territory.

"Good," she says. "I mean, terribly, if you're asking how I did at golf. The guy should be at the Masters Tournament of mini-golf."

"But he wasn't annoying about it, right?"

"No. He was nice." She shrugs.

A shrug is good, right? Well, not for *him*, maybe.

She pulls her purse from her shoulder. "I'm just trying to figure out the dating thing again, you know? It's weird, but I imagine that's normal after ... everything."

"Yeah, definitely. It also doesn't help that dating is weird anyway."

She scrunches her nose. "It is, isn't it?"

I grimace. "'Fraid so."

She sighs and heads for her door. "Whatever it is, it makes me tired. I'm going to bed."

"Glow-in-the-dark mini-golf will really take it out of you," I say, trying not to feel disappointed there'll be no post-date hangout together. "Good night."

"Night."

I stare at the door after she shuts it, wondering if Stevie would come home from a date with *me* feeling so tired and weird.

I don't think she would, but I'm too afraid to ask for that chance again. I promised myself I never would.



“YOU COULD ALWAYS GO in my trunk,” I say as we finish up our workout the next morning.

“Your trunk?” Stevie repeats. As we started discussing her accompanying me to the open house with Evelyn, we realized we wouldn’t have the protection of a gated community if any of the paparazzi decided to follow us in the car.

“Could be fun,” I say.

“Could be the worst thing I’ve ever done,” she counters, racking her weights.

“Also a distinct possibility,” I agree, racking my set too.

She looks at me for a few seconds. “I’m in.”

I glance at her. “What?”

“I’ll go in your trunk.”

“Stevie, I was totally joking. I’m not putting you in my trunk.”

She faces me and smiles. “You don’t *have* to put me in there. I’ll get in myself. It’ll be fun! An adventure.” When she sees my expression, she doubles down. “I’m serious. I want to come to the open house with you. I don’t have to stay in the trunk for long. Just until we’re sure we’re not being followed. If I start running out of air or something, I’ll call you.”

I search her face. She’s serious about this—about doing it *and* about thinking it’s going to be fun. She must really be desperate to get out. That’s the problem with not living in a mansion; it takes all of five minutes to know every nook and cranny of the house, and now she has cabin fever. “Fine. But only for, like, two blocks.”

She grins and rubs her hands together like I’ve just agreed to take her to get ice cream.

An hour later, I’ve pulled my car as far back in the driveway as it can go, hoping to minimize the possibility of being seen as I load up the trunk with the essentials.

“The coast is clear,” I say when Stevie appears at the back of the house.

She hurries over to the safety the open trunk provides by shielding us from view.

“Oh, my gosh,” she says, reaching inside and picking things up one by one. “A pillow and blankets? A camping lantern? A portable charger? *Two lunch bags of snacks?*” She looks at me. “Exactly how long do you plan on leaving me in here?”

“Two blocks, tops,” I say, putting the pillow back and fluffing it. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Am I sure?! If I wasn’t before, I am now.” She pulls a bag of trail mix from one of the lunch sacks, throws a handful in her mouth, and climbs in the trunk.

“Wait.” I grab her arm suddenly.

“What?” She tenses, and her gaze shoots around warily.

“I’m having daymares.”

She relaxes. “I’ll be fine, Troy. There’s plenty of oxygen for two blo—”

“Not about that. About the paparazzi finding out I stuffed you in a trunk. Can you imagine the headlines? Or how I’d do in jail?” I frown and rub my head. “Do you think my bald head would help my cause or hurt it? It’s a little skinhead-y.”

She brings her foot down from the bumper and puts a hand on my arm, trying not to laugh. “I think we’re getting a little carried away here. They’ll never know, and you’re not going to jail, okay? I promise.” She glances at the setup again. “What happens if I want to stay in here longer? To take a nap on the drive or something?”

“Nope. Not happening.”

She shoots me a pouty look. “Party pooper.” As she stares at me, though, her mouth pulls up at both sides into a wicked grin. “Let’s roll.” She hops nimbly into the trunk, curls up in her spot, and pulls the blankets over herself. She’s way too excited about this.

She’s right, though. We’re not followed by anyone. In fact, there are only two people with cameras on the sidewalk at this

point. They're the fanatics, I guess, and I wave to them as I drive by. They have their cameras up and their fingers ready to click, but when they see it's just me, they lower them.

Jerks.

Stevie begs me to let her stay in the trunk when I stop a couple blocks later, but I'm adamant, and she gives in, bringing the bags of snacks with her.

Evelyn is waiting for us at the house. As expected, she takes to Stevie immediately, and as we walk through the apartment, she loops her arm through Stevie's. It makes me smile. She has no idea who Stevie is—she doesn't have time for movies or celebrity gossip—but she loves her.

It makes perfect sense to me, but it also confirms what a great person Evelyn is. Stevie's got a perma-smile on her face. I'm sure it feels amazing to be out and about, and I wish it were going to last longer.

The apartment isn't what Evelyn's looking for after all, but her hope persists, and so does mine. She kisses Stevie on both cheeks when we leave, sending the clear message that I've dropped to second-favorite.

"Don't forget," Stevie says when we get to the car. "I have to return to my trunk hideaway."

I grumble while she rubs her hands together in delight. "Not yet, though," I say. "We're going to make a quick stop first."

"Oh? Where?"

"That's privileged information." I can't bring myself to take her home quite yet. It makes sense to maximize the amount of time we have away from the house without the paparazzi onto us, and I had an idea while she and Evelyn were chatting outside the apartment, so I stepped aside for a quick call and returned with a smile on my face.

It's a little out of the way, but I'm pretty sure it'll be worth it.

Fifteen minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of a non-descript gray building.

Stevie's brows are pulled together as she looks around for a sign. It's pure luck that we're parked on the side of the building without any visible signage.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"You'll see."

She gives me a wary look as she opens her door while I bask in the joy of anticipation.

We head toward the front of the building together. "I know you've been feeling guilty for neglecting Mavis and Swinger and Furzy," I say. "I figured coming here might make you feel a bit better."

She stops as the big letters above the front doors come into view: Harmony Haven Animal Sanctuary. Her jaw slips open, and her head turns to me.

"They're always looking for volunteers to help give the animals some love while they wait to be adopted. What do you say? Want to go snuggle some real animals?"

Eyes wide, she nods her head.

For the next two hours, we play with dogs, cats, bunnies, guinea pigs, and an iguana. Stevie is in her element, and being the sucker I am, I can't help watching how sweet she is to the animals without thinking what she'll be like as a mom. It blows my mind that Curtis wouldn't have jumped at the chance to have a family with her.

"Don't be strangers," the woman at the front desk says when we head for the front door.

"We'll definitely be back," Stevie assures her.

I open the door for her, but once we're outside, she stops and turns to me, looking at me in a way that makes my heart stutter.

"What do you say?" I ask. "Was it as good as virtually petting Mavis's scaly back?"

“It was a million times better.” She throws her arms around me, her cheek pressing against my neck. “Thank you, Troy,” she says in a muffled voice. “That was amazing. So much more fulfilling than deworming my virtual pets.”

I chuckle, trying to keep my tone light when my world feels so completely right with her in my arms. “I’m not sure who got the better end of the deal, the animals or us.”

She pulls back and meets my gaze with another grateful smile. “Definitely us.”

“You know the worst part?” I say as we walk to the car.

“What?”

I rub my head. “How much I identified with that hairless cat.”

It’s only when we get to the car that she reminds me she has to go back in the trunk for the last bit of the ride. I grumble while she claps in delight.

When she emerges from the trunk in my driveway a while later, it’s with a huge smile.

“Last time I give you any ideas.” I slam the trunk shut.

“I sure hope not,” she says as we head for the back stairs. “Today is the best day I’ve had in a really long time.”

I glance at her, wondering if that’s true. She lived the life of a movie-star for a few years, flying to foreign places, schmoozing with other rich people, and being pampered by a fleet of people who catered to her every whim. Is she really saying being thrown into a trunk, going to an open house, and petting random animals beats all that?

“Care if I borrow your sweats again?” she asks. “I still have them.”

My brow hitches.

“What? They were really comfy.”

I open the back door into my apartment. “They’re from Walmart.”

She shrugs. “Comfy is comfy.”

“Suit yourself,” I say.

“Great.” She heads for the stairs. “I’ll meet you at your couch in ten. I call right side.”

Who calls sides of a couch? I shake my head with a smile and go change into my sweats.

Ten minutes later, I’ve got *Fresh Prince* queued up and two bowls of popcorn ready—one with spice, one without—when Stevie comes upstairs.

I chuckle at the sight of her with her hood pulled up, just like I have mine. We are two very self-conscious people right now.

She tugs the strings on hers, making the opening scrunch weirdly around her face. It’s so much cuter than it should be. She trudges to her place on the right side of the couch, and I take a seat in the middle. Left side seems a tad too pointed. We’re best friends, not enemies.

I turn on the show while she tries to get comfy, which is evidently no small task. She curls her legs up under her. She sits normally. She crosses her legs.

“You okay there?” I ask, amused.

She sets a pillow against my arm, leans against it, then stretches her legs along the right end of the couch.

She sits that way for a few seconds, then settles in. “Please tell me this is comfortable for you.”

“Yup,” I say. It’s totally comfortable and not at all making my heart beat fast.

“Thank heaven,” she says. “I think my body is angry about my joy ride in the trunk.” She grabs the bowl of popcorn on the floor and sets it on her lap. I do the same, throwing back popcorn like I didn’t cover it in spice. Focusing on the burning in my mouth helps keep my mind out of the forbidden places it wants to go.

After a few minutes, though, my shoulder is aching. “Hold on a sec.”

She leans forward while I extract my arm and drape it across the back of the couch. *Sweet relief.*

She rearranges the pillow, pushing it against me, then she sits back right under the crook of my arm. Ten minutes later, she’s done with her popcorn and has nestled in.

Kill me now. This is pure agony and utter divinity. My mind wants to explore all the options available to me in this position. I envision taking my arm from the back of the couch and letting it fall around her. She’d tip her head back and pull me down to kiss her, just like I’ve pretended not to imagine a thousand times.

The front door opening jolts me from my thoughts, and Stevie shoots up, looking at me with wide eyes.

We’re both thinking it—some lunatic has picked the lock and is inside our house.

“Honey, I’m home!”

Stevie’s eyebrows snap together in confusion, shaded by the hood she’s still wearing.

“Austin,” I say, my tone a mixture of relief and unwelcome surprise. My brother is home. The brother Stevie was in love with in high school. The brother *everybody’s* in love with now.

“You here, Troy?” Austin calls. My door opens, and he bounds up the stairs two-at-a-time.

“Yeah,” I say as Stevie sits up normally.

Austin appears at the top of the stairs, his gaze landing on us right away. He draws back, his eyes fixed on Stevie, his brow wrinkling as he takes her in. “*Stevie?*”

She smiles and lifts her shoulders in a *yep, it’s me*, gesture. “Hey, Austin.”

He grins. “I was *wondering* why there were paparazzi outside! Man, I haven’t seen you in years!” He strides over, and she gets up to give him a hug while I purposely watch

Will try to hypnotize Carlton with a spoon. I see every bit of their hug through the corner of my eye, though.

They pull apart, and Austin looks at me, then to Stevie again. “Did I miss the dress code memo? What’s with the black sweats and hoods?”

“That’s a funny story, actually ...” Stevie says with a smile full of clenched teeth. She puts a hand to her hood and pushes it back.

Austin’s brows shoot up. “Oh. Wow. Okay. *That’s* a new look.” His gaze shifts to me. “And you?”

With a reluctant sigh, I pull down my hood.

Austin’s jaw drops. He stares. And stares and stares.

“He did it to try to make me feel better about *my* hair,” Stevie explains.

“Like two questionable choices cancel each other out or something?” Austin says, his shock turning into amusement.

“I thought you wouldn’t be home for a while still,” I say, pulling my hood back on. I’m not trying to be rude. I just want to know what his plan is.

“I have the reunion at Sunset Heights. Remember?”

I swear in my head. I had completely forgotten, which is ironic given that the whole reason all those dumb posters are in his apartment is because of the reunion.

“They want a bunch of old videos, showing my path to success or something. I left my hard drive here, so I thought I’d go through them and work on a few songs while I’m here.”

Stevie looks a question at me.

“What?” Austin says, noting the exchange.

“I told Stevie she could use your apartment until we find her a place of her own,” I explain.

“I should have asked you personally,” Stevie says, “but I can totally sleep on Troy’s couch.”

“No, no,” Austin says. “I’ll take his couch. It’s totally cool. You should have your own space.”

“My own space that’s your apartment?”

He shrugs. “I could always crash with a friend instead. I don’t want to disrupt things here. My buddy Rex is in town.” He pulls out his phone like he’s about to text him.

“Rex Montgomery?” Stevie asks.

Austin’s gaze jumps to hers. “You know him?”

“I sat at the same table as him at an event last year, and we made friends.”

“Then you might know Lucas too?”

Stevie laughs. “Impossible *not* to know him.”

Not impossible. I don’t. Right now, they’re playing celebrity bingo, and I don’t even have a card.

Turns out Stevie and Austin have a lot in common. Not only do they run in similar circles, they can sympathize over life in the public eye and having a huge, obsessive fan base.

“So, you guys are just having a chill day?” Austin asks once they’ve finished the bingo game and both won.

“Yeah,” Stevie says. “I’ve gone out more in the past few days than I have in months, so we figured a little relaxation was called for.”

“Hey,” I say, tripping over the edge of Self-Sabotage Cliff that looks over Masochist Bay, “you guys should go out and catch up.”

They both stare at me, like it’s just occurred to them I’m still in the room.

“Stevie’s been trying to get her feet wet in the dating world again,” I explain. “You guys haven’t seen each other in a really long time.” I shrug. “Just an idea.”

It’s exactly what I need. My worst nightmare is materializing in front of me, and I see it for what it is: the final encounter with the villain. The chance to put an end to my

feelings for good. If Stevie and Austin are going to date or end up together, I'd rather it happen sooner than later.

"Can I talk to you for a quick sec, Troy?" Austin asks, gesturing over his shoulder to indicate he wants privacy.

"Oh," Stevie says. "I can go. I need to grab my water bottle and charger downstairs, actually. I'll be back in a few." She doesn't give either of us the opportunity to protest, and the door shuts behind her a few seconds later.

"What's up?" I say, setting the remote aside and standing up.

Austin just raises his brows.

I lift my shoulders and raise my brows right back at him like I don't have the slightest clue why he wants to talk.

"What're you doing, Troy?"

"Well, I was *trying* to watch—"

"Stop. Why did you tell Stevie and me to go on a date?"

"Because I think it's a good idea." It really is. It's facing my greatest fear directly and letting my older brother take the only woman I've ever loved. It just makes sense. My brother is annoying as heck sometimes, but he's a good guy *and* he can give Stevie the life she's used to enjoying. They could be really happy together, and I want both of them to be happy.

"You don't really think that," Austin says. "A man doesn't tell a woman he's in love with to go out with his own brother."

I shake my head and turn away. "I'm not in love with her, Aus." Amazing how boldly I can state a bald-faced lie like that. It's one I've been telling myself for years, so I've had plenty of practice.

"Yeah," he says with a scoff, "that bald head of yours just screams *I've moved on*."

I rub it self-consciously. "You're reading into it too much."

"Am I? Do I need to bring out the wisdom teeth video again for a little refresher?"

“That was ten years ago, Austin. Time to get over it.”

“I will when you do,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Look, if you don’t take Stevie out, you’re an idiot. She was always into you.”

“That was ten years ago, Troy. Time to get over it.”

Dang. I really walked right into that one. “Just take her out, okay? You’d be doing me a favor.”

He looks at me for a few seconds. “You know what? Fine. I will. I’ll take her out.”

“Good,” I say while my heart slips beneath the water of Masochist Bay like Jack Dawson in Titanic. Like Rose, I watch instead of offering it space on my large floating door.

“Good,” Austin says. “Glad we got that ironed out.”

I narrow my eyes. He gave in way too easily and looks far too smug.

“You’re planning something, aren’t you?” I say.

“Huh?”

He totally is. He’s probably going out with Stevie just so he can tell her I’m in love with her. He’s planning to throw me under the bus.

“Don’t, Aus.”

“Don’t what?”

“Whatever you’re planning to do on the date,” I say. “To paraphrase my favorite actor, keep my name out your freaking mouth.”

He snorts. “You’re going to sock me in the face like I’m Chris Rock and you’re Will Smith?”

“100% I will.”

He chuckles and puts up his hands in surrender. “Fine. I won’t even say your name.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Self-sabotage complete.

GETTING my water bottle from downstairs is quite the process.

Because I make it into a process. How long is this private conversation going to last? Thirty seconds? An hour? And how am I supposed to know when it's over? In a word, my escape was poorly planned. I can't be blamed, though, given how awkward it was. Troy essentially ordered his brother to ask me out, and Austin responded by saying he needed to talk to Troy in private.

Is it possible they're talking about something completely unrelated?

No. It's absolutely not.

Finally, I hear the sounds of footsteps in the kitchen of Troy's apartment and others coming in my direction.

I grab my thoroughly sanitized water bottle and hurry up the stairs to my door just as Troy opens his. I hold up the bottle. "Got it."

"Oh, good. I was just coming to make sure you were okay."

"Yep!" I follow him back into his apartment. "Just thought I'd give the water bottle a good washing, you know? They can get so gross after a while."

"Yeah, definitely. You want to finish the episode?"

"For sure," I say. I guess we're pretending like nothing awkward happened, which is awkward in and of itself, and Troy and I don't usually do awkward.

We go up the stairs, and Austin is grabbing a handful of popcorn from Troy's bowl.

"Hey, Stevie," Austin says. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Um, I don't know." I glance at Troy, who gives ye olde eyebrow wag. Apparently, he really does want me to go out with Austin.

"Do you want to go grab something to eat later?" Austin asks.

I force myself not to look at Troy. What would be the point? He's the one who instigated this, which I'm trying really hard not to be hurt over. He's being nice. He knows I was an Austin Sheppard fangirl all of my teenage years and into college. This is him being a good friend.

Which is why it's so bittersweet.

"Yeah, that sounds fun," I say, trying to convince everyone in the room, including myself.

"Cool. Leave at, say, 7?"

I nod.

"Great. I've got some video stuff to sort through before the reunion, so I'll just be over here." He gestures to the table, then goes to grab his laptop from his backpack.

Troy is already sitting on the couch, and I join him. Given what just happened, I decide against setting myself up like I had been before, opting to sit in a normal position that doesn't subject me to Troy's warm body and cologne.

The truth is, we really don't have to finish this episode because I don't even know what has happened up to this point. I was too distracted by thoughts of Troy—all the way up until he asked his brother to ask me out.

If that's not humiliating, I don't know what is.



THERE'S ONLY one paparazzo outside Troy's house when Austin drives me away in Troy's car. The poor cameraman is so shell-shocked by the good fortune of having not just me but Austin Sheppard there that it takes him a minute to get his act together.

Austin doesn't seem to mind, so I don't make a big deal of it.

"So, you're performing at the high school reunion?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "My manager thinks it's good to do some of these smaller, more intimate venues here and there. And honestly, I am kind of excited to do it. I'm going to see if some of my old band buddies will come perform with me, maybe try out one of the songs I'm writing."

I smile. It was seeing Austin up on the school stage when I was a freshman that really ramped up my crush on him in high school. Something about a young man with a guitar in his arms singing about love is catnip for angsty teenage girls. I was dripping with enough angst, I might as well have been swimming in it.

"Do you do most of your own writing?" I ask.

He grips the wheel. "Not as much as I used to. My producer usually has a bunch of stuff he wants me to record, so there's not a ton of time for my own stuff."

I grimace sympathetically. "The glamorous life of fame."

He glances at me. "Yeah, I guess you'd understand how it goes."

"I mean, I didn't write songs or scripts, but I can sympathize with feeling like your path is kind of mapped out for you already by other people."

"Yeah, exactly," he says as we pull in to the parking lot, his voice full of pleasant surprise.

We go inside and get seated, and I can't decide how to feel. It's strange to live a dream when it's no longer your dream. I've recently acquired new ones, and this date feels like a step backward from those. But maybe that's the point—dreams

aren't real. Maybe if Troy and I did somehow get together, it would end in failure like my last marriage. I don't know if I could handle that.

"So," Austin says once we've ordered, "how's being back in town?"

I scrunch my nose. "I don't know, honestly. I haven't spent much time outside of your apartment. Thanks, by the way, for unknowingly letting me stay there."

He laughs, and I get a quick view of the smile that I literally drooled over at one point in my life. I appreciate that Austin is a handsome and talented man, but he's not Troy.

"My pleasure," he says. "If I'd been asked, I would have said yes. But my brother knew that."

"That's because you guys have the best, most supportive family in the world. You're so lucky. You both know that, right?"

He shrugs. "They're all right." He winks before taking a sip of his drink. "So, you've been dating while you've been back?"

"Just two dates. Casual ones with people I'd never met."
And then with you.

"And?"

I suck in a big breath and let it out in a gush.

He laughs. "That good, huh?"

"They were both really great guys. I just ..." I spin my glass around and around.

"Your heart is already taken?"

My gaze jumps to his. He meets mine with a knowing but serious glint in his eyes. What does he think he knows? Is he talking about Curtis? About himself? Or does he know the only person I can imagine myself with is Troy?

I swallow.

“I suspected as much.” He clenches his teeth and lets out a hiss. “Really regretting my promise right now.”

My brows pull together. “What promise?”

“That I wouldn’t say his name during our date. He threatened to pull a Will Smith at the Oscars.”

I let that sink in for a second. Troy made Austin promise not to say his name during our date? Why in the world...? “Why would he make you promise that?” I’m so lost, but my heart is beating fast. I don’t know if the reason is bad or good, but I want to know it. I *need* to know.

Austin taps a finger on the edge of the table, looking at me. “How about this?” He leans forward, clasping his hands together on the table. “Let’s talk about a couple of friends of mine. We’ll call them ... Roy and Evie.”

My lip twitches. “Roy and Evie. Got it.”

“Now, I’ve known both Roy and Evie for a long time, and personally, I’ve never understood why they haven’t given things a shot.”

My heart races. I wish I knew if he was expressing personal speculation or saying this because he has reason to think Troy—or Roy—would welcome something like that.

“Well,” I say slowly, “maybe Evie was really dumb and shot him down when he suggested it one time. Maybe she lost her chance and it’s too late now.” Embarrassingly, my voice cracks at the end.

“Maybe it is. Maybe it’s not. There’s no way to know unless one of them tries.”

“He hasn’t given me any reason to think he wants more, Austin. In fact, he’s given me a lot of reasons to believe he *doesn’t* want more. Whenever he talks about the day he suggested giving things with us a try, it’s to make fun of himself for it. He refers to it as *that stupid day*.”

Austin chuckles and sits back. “Of course he thinks of it as a stupid day. He got rejected. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t wish it had gone differently.”

I want to believe what Austin's saying so badly it hurts. "You really think Troy might want more? Has he said something to you?"

"Well, I don't know who this Troy fellow is," Austin says, giving me a severe look, "but *Roy* ..." He pauses. "It'd be asking a lot for him to put himself out there again. A man can only take so much rejection. The only way for Evie to know is to be the one to go out on a limb this time."

I swallow, holding Austin's gaze. Can *I* handle rejection? From the person who matters most to me in the world?

I'VE ACQUAINTED myself with every on-market property in Malibu, both for sale and rent. I've redone (very unnecessarily) the hotsheets for all of my current clients.

In the last few days, no new properties have come on the market that match Stevie's or Rocco's parameters, which is normal for really high-end homes. Evelyn, however, is in luck tonight, which means so am I, since I'm desperate for distraction.

No part of my brain wants to explore what Stevie and Austin are up to right now. I've had plenty of time to regret and reaffirm and re-regret my decision to set them up. What will I do if they hit it off? If Austin *doesn't* come sleep at my place because he and Stevie are up late, "watching movies" on his stupid small couch?

I shake like a wet dog and refocus on my texts with Evelyn. There's a property that's as near as it can be to perfect for her, and I've already texted the agent to express our interest. They're doing an open house tomorrow, and Evelyn is over the moon about it.

EVELYN

It's perfect!

TROY

I think so too. Is 2 o'clock okay for you?

EVELYN

I will make it be okay. Should we go early? 1:30?

I smile.

TROY

We could, but since the open house doesn't start until 2, it might not do us much good.

EVELYN

1:50, then?

TROY

1:50 it is. Maybe we can get some one-on-one time with the agent to help our cause.

EVELYN

Should I bring cookies?

Thank heaven for Evelyn—the only person who could make me smile on this miserable night. Most clients do not bring cookies to open houses, but part of what makes her so lovable is her enthusiasm, and the more lovable she is, the more likely the agent and seller are to consider our offer.

TROY

Only if there are enough for me.

EVELYN

I'll make a double batch *GIF only a grandmother figure would send of a bear hugging a heart*

I close out the thread and set down my phone, glancing at the time. How have they only been gone an hour and a half? It feels like a lifetime.

What I need is a good workout.

I head to my room and change into basketball shorts. I don't put a shirt on because I need to stop making all my decisions based on Stevie. I also need to stop trying to impress her. Best friends don't try to impress each other, and they sure as heck don't try to impress their brother's girlfriend.

Am I getting ahead of things here? No. It's called preparing for the worst.

I stick in my wireless headphones and turn up the volume on my workout playlist so loud, my watch warns me I'm damaging my hearing. Hey, whatever it takes not to hear Austin and Stevie's return from their date. Their date that *I* set up and that they went on in *my* car.

I pull dumbbells from the rack and get to work, focusing my brain on exhausting every last ounce of power from my biceps. It takes all my concentration, which is a relief after so much time fighting my thoughts.

I rack the weights after my fifth set, breathing heavily and paying attention to the burn in my arms. The burn doesn't last nearly as long as some hot sauces I've had, and I momentarily consider chugging one of them.

Desperate times.

A tap on the shoulder has me whirling around, and Stevie rears back to avoid my reaction.

I pull the earbuds out of my ears, trying to calm my breathing. "Sheesh. I thought you were a paparazzo or something."

"Didn't mean to scare you," she says, "but I *did* call your name like five times. You must have your music pretty loud."

"Yeah, it helps me stay in the zone."

"And I just pulled you right out of it."

She has no idea. I'm not sure what time it is exactly, but it can't be very late. I'm surprised she's home already. Has she come to debrief me on her date?

Just the thought makes me queasy. It's something I had to get used to in high school and college—Stevie talking about

Austin or whatever date she just went on—but I’m not up for it right now.

The silence stretches on for a few seconds, and her eyes are on me, like she’s not sure what to make of my mood. Normally, I’d make a joke about her scaring me or I’d reassure her it’s okay. I just can’t fake it right now. It took everything I had to set her up with Austin, and I’ve got nothing left in me to give. I’m spent.

But part of me needs to know how the date went. What if tomorrow they go out again and I’m not mentally prepared for it?

I grit my teeth. “How did it go?”

I wish I’d brought a shirt with me. I made the choice not to when I was running on adrenaline and a need to assert myself. Now, I feel weirdly vulnerable without it.

“It was ... good. Nice to catch up.”

“That’s good.” I busy myself with cleaning up the workout space so I don’t have to meet her eye.

“But I don’t know. I think I might take a break from the whole dating thing.”

My hand pauses on a carabiner. “Why’s that?”

“I mean, everyone has been nice, and I’m glad to be making friends, but ... that’s all it is. I don’t feel a desire for more.” She sits down on the bench and looks at her feet. “The guy from last night tried to kiss me at the end, and I—” She stops, and my muscles tense. If I have to hear about her kissing another guy, I will lose it.

Not lose it as in go berserk. Lose it as in break down on this gym mat and cry like a half-naked, six-foot-one baby. That’s how stable I feel at the moment.

“I didn’t want to kiss him,” she continues. “I don’t want to kiss *anybody*.”

I shove the triceps attachment into its bag. What she’s telling me should probably make me feel better, but it doesn’t. It’s the reminder I never needed that never ever in her time

knowing me has Stevie wanted to kiss me, while I've never ever in my time knowing her *not* wanted to kiss her.

"Troy," she says, standing up, "I fulfilled a teenage dream of mine tonight, going out with Austin. Do you know who I was thinking about the whole time?"

I shake my head, but my head fills the silence. Curtis? Landon?

"You," she says.

I still.

She steps toward me. "I know I have no right to say this to you after our history, and I should probably keep my mouth shut because I'm terrified what saying this might do to what we have. My life is already a ridiculous mess, and I'm probably just messing it up even more." She stops just shy of me. "But I have to be honest with you, Troy. I can't stop wondering what would happen if you and I gave things a chance."

I *have* lost it. I'm making up this conversation in my head. Stevie's mouth is moving, but my brain is dubbing over it in the language I want to hear.

No. I take that back. This is Austin's doing. *He* put Stevie up to this. He's persuaded her she owes me a chance.

If he were here, I really would pull a Will Smith on him.

"Don't, Stevie," I say, finding more things to tidy up.

"Don't what?"

"Don't do this. You said it yourself. You're just divorced. That's confusing enough, and I can only assume Austin's been putting stuff in your head about giving things a chance with me." I shake my head and face her. "You don't owe me anything."

Her brows pull together tightly. I'm still not used to seeing her with her dark hair, but I wasn't lying when I said she's the most beautiful woman I know. Inside and out. I want her, every single bit of her, so much it physically hurts. The burn of my hot sauce has got nothing on it.

“I *am* just divorced, yes,” she says. “Technically. But Curtis and I were separated for a long time before that, Troy, and things weren’t good between us for a long time before *that*. I’ve had a lot more time to process things than you have.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t know *what* to say. My mind is muddled, and my heart is trying to make its escape from the cage I’ve had it in most of my life.

“As for Austin,” she says, taking one more step toward me, “he didn’t tell me I owe you anything.” She stares into my eyes. “This is about what *I’ve* been feeling. It’s about hitting myself over the head for telling you ‘no’ all those years ago. It’s about what might have been if I hadn’t. It’s about the fact that I can’t stop thinking how it would feel to kiss you.”

I couldn’t talk if I wanted to. I can’t even *blink*.

“I know you think of that day eight years ago as a mistake, and I know you don’t feel that way anymore—based on how you talk about it, I don’t know if you ever really *did* feel more for me, but”—she lifts her shoulders and swallows—“I had to say something.”

I scrub my hand over my jaw. I *have* talked about that night like it was a mistake. I hated seeing her retreat into herself afterward and how hard I had to work to reassure her I didn’t really feel that way.

If she couldn’t love me the way I loved her, I was happy at least having her as my best friend.

And that’s why I don’t know what to do right now. She’s offering me everything I’ve ever wanted.

Or so it seems. She says she’s been feeling this way for a while, but it can’t have been long. She’s only been here a week and a half. What if, even on an unconscious level, Stevie’s clinging to me because I’m the one she *can* cling to right now? What if we do give things a shot, and she realizes it’s not going to work?

“Stevie,” I say, rubbing my bald head. I can’t look her in the eye because, now that she’s put the invitation on the floor, I may not be able to stop myself from kissing her if I do.

She waits and waits for me to continue, but I don't. I honestly don't know what to do or say. I don't know what would be worse: always wondering what it would have been like to have Stevie in that way, even if only for a short time? Or being haunted by the memory of it once it ends, knowing I had my dream in my arms and lost it?

Because I've seen this happen before. You don't just lose your relationship; you lose the friendship too. It works out for some people, yeah, but what you don't hear are all the stories where it *didn't*. It's a heck of a lot to put on the line.

"Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut," she finally says, "I just ...". She lifts her shoulders helplessly.

"I just don't know if it's a good idea right now," I say.

She nods, her cheeks infusing with color. "Yeah. Okay. I understand." She offers a pathetic smile. "I'm tired, so I think I'll head to bed."

I clench my eyes shut as she turns away. What am I doing? All these years, I've held resentment in my heart toward Stevie for not giving me a chance, for rejecting me. Now that she's offering me that chance, I reject *her*?

I jog after her and grab her hand. "Stevie, wait."

She turns toward me, her eyes glimmering with tears. She blinks and lowers her chin so I can't see them anymore.

Without saying a word, I lift her chin with my knuckle, search her glistening eyes for a few seconds, then press my lips to hers.

She sucks in a breath of surprise, and I pull back, afraid I've gone too far, that I was too convincing when I told her it was a bad idea.

She looks back at me, her dark blue eyes wide. I've scared her. It's all those years of pining—they've made me overeager. I let go of her hand and prepare to apologize for coming at her like Godzilla.

She raises her hand to my lips, and I still while she traces them with a finger, leaving tingling in their wake. She closes

her eyes, slides her hand to my cheek, and pulls me toward her.

Our lips come together a second time, and I shiver as her cold hand comes to rest on my bare chest. I cover her hand with mine and move in closer, slipping my hand around her waist.

I know Stevie's lips. I know their exact shade of pink, their subtle cupid's bow, and the way the freckle on her left cheek disappears into her only dimple when she smiles. But now, I'm experiencing those lips, mapping them with my own in a slow, gentle exploration of the territory beyond the one we know so well. It's territory I've dreamed of but never thought I'd get to see for myself. The sweetness and the exhilaration of it sets me on fire.

Now that I'm kissing her, I can't imagine doing anything else. I want to show her what it means to be loved—really loved—by a man. I want to undo all the hurt Curtis caused, to hide away somewhere remote and spend an entire week telling her everything I love about her until she sees herself the way I see her, the way I've seen her from the day we met.

I slow my kisses as realization slowly dawns on me.

I've spent years loving Stevie, thinking how it would be to have the chance to love her the way I want to, detailing every last thing I admire in her.

But she hasn't. She hasn't been picturing life with me for a decade and a half, aching for the chance to tell me how she feels. She's only begun to consider me in that way.

She needs time to catch up.

I DATED QUITE a bit before I got married. I kissed my fair share of guys. And then, of course, I was married for almost four years.

I've never been kissed like this, though. Troy's hand is still covering mine on his chest, but he threads his fingers through mine and holds them even more tightly against him. He kisses me slow and steady, like he doesn't want to miss anything, like we have all the time in the world.

And then he slows down even more ... until he stops entirely and pulls away, letting go of my hand.

I look up at him, rubbing my lips together like the bits of Troy they now hold might escape if I don't. "Is something wrong?" I drop my hand, reluctantly losing track of his heartbeat.

His Adam's apple bobs, and he shakes his head with a rueful smile. "Everything's good. Too good."

I smile slightly. "What do you mean?"

He sucks in a breath and leans his forehead against mine. I shut my eyes and breathe in the feeling of well-being I have anytime I'm with him. It's amplified right now. Everything feels right in the world. I haven't felt this way for years. But those words—*too good*—prickle at the back of my brain like a little warning.

"You know how you said I haven't had as long to process your divorce as you have?" he asks softly.

“Yeah.” My stomach tightens. Maybe he needs more time. I couldn’t blame him. And if he needs it, I’ll give it to him. As much as he needs.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time, Stevie. A *really* long time.”

I can’t help myself. Keeping my forehead against his, I run a hand down his arm until I get to his hand. I thread my fingers through his and hold it tightly.

“Your feelings for me are brand new.” He pulls back and looks at me, a hint of a smile on his otherwise serious face. He looks down at our hands and smiles sadly. “They’re like little sprouts.”

I see where he’s going with this. “Unproven.”

He nods. “I never really had you, Stevie. I know that. Not in the way I wanted. But I’m still scared I’m going to lose you all over again.”

My heart aches at those last words, at the vulnerability in his unstable voice.

“I don’t know what I’d do if we raced into this and then you changed your mind.”

“I don’t think I will, Troy.”

“I know, but ...”

He doesn’t have to finish. We both know what he could say: I didn’t think I’d change my mind about Curtis, either. I’ve learned a lot since then, but Troy has every reason to be wary.

“I’d rather give you some time to figure things out,” he says. “There’s a lot on the line here for both of us.”

I nod.

His gaze fixes on mine, and I’m on fire with the way he’s looking at me. “I want to kiss you so badly right now, Stevie. You have no idea.”

My heart flips, and I’m praying he *will* because I want to kiss him every bit as badly, and I’m afraid I’ll combust if he

looks at me like this any longer.

“But I’m in deep, Stevie,” he says, “and if I kiss you again, I won’t be able to stop.”

I can barely breathe. I don’t want him to stop, but I’m trying to hear him—really hear him—above the clammer of my heart and body.

He squeezes my hand. “I think we should make sure this is what you really want. I know there’s no way to *know* know, but ... I think it’s better to pump the brakes for a minute now than once we’re headlong into things.”

“Yeah,” I say softly, my heart throbbing. “Of course.” I understand what he’s saying. I really do. He put himself out there, and I rejected him. It makes perfect sense he’d want a little more evidence that he’s not headed down the same path again. And I want to give that to him.

We stand there in silence, holding hands neither of us want to let go of.

He finally releases mine and takes in a deep breath. “Can I walk you home?”

I smile slightly. “I’d like that.”

He leads the way up the stairs and into his apartment. Austin is asleep on the couch with his headphones in.

When we get down to the foyer, we stop in front of my door.

“This is me,” I say.

“I’ve got a showing with Evelyn tomorrow. You’re welcome to come if you want.”

“I’d like that—if it’s okay with you.”

“Of course,” he says. “You’re still my best friend, right?”

“Right.”

It goes quiet, and I almost think he’s going to kiss me again. Instead, he presses his lips to my cheek. It generates as many butterflies as if he’d kissed me on the lips. Almost.

“Night, Stevie.”



I ROLL over and let my eyelids flutter open as the morning sun creeps through the edges of the curtains. I frown, trying to identify the strange sensation I’m feeling inside.

And then it hits me.

It’s hope.

Ever since things started to sour with Curtis, there’s been this weight in my stomach, like I messed things up for real and for good. It’s made it hard to feel positive about the future.

Until now. Because of Troy.

I hug the throw pillow next to me and stuff my face in it to hide the goofy smile when I remember our kiss last night.

We’re not together. I understand that. But I’m hopeful we will be. He wants to make sure I’m not jumping into things too quickly, which I understand. According to him, he’s felt this way for me for a long time. By some miracle, I didn’t mess things up forever by rejecting him that night or by marrying Curtis.

I pull out my phone to check the time. It’s still early. My body has started adjusting to waking up for workouts with Troy.

My eyes widen at the number of notifications I missed during sleep.

One of them is from Rex, Austin’s and my mutual friend.

REX

You and Austin?!

My heart starts beating fast as I tap the link he sent, but I already know what it is—the picture that paparazzo got of us leaving for dinner last night.

It's completely benign as far as pictures go—us in the car together—but I learned a long time ago how little that matters. Speculation will be rampant. This particular headline says “Steph Carr dating both Sheppard brothers?”

I shut my eyes and take a deep breath. *It's okay. It doesn't matter if people believe lies about me. Or that they're still calling me by my married name.* I tap out of the story to see what other lovely notifications I have awaiting.

One is a voicemail, from Mom, no less. I brace myself for whatever wisdom she has to impart this time.

“Hey, sweetie,” the recorded message says. “It's Mom. We just debarked, and I saw the news about Curtis. Just wondering how you're doing. It took me a while to accept the news when the Catastrophe”—that's her nickname for her second husband—“and his new girlfriend made *their* announcement. It looks like you have plenty of distraction, though.” She chuckles mischievously. “No judgment here, baby. You do what makes you happy. Call me when you're free, and don't forget you deserve the world! Muah.”

Usually, I just sigh after Mom's voicemails, but today, I feel a little sick.

Tentatively, I pull up the browser app and type in Curtis's name.

There it is. The first result: “Curtis Carr and girlfriend Aria Summers expecting first child.”

My eyelids flutter. Aria has her hand on a barely noticeable bump.

I check the source: *People* magazine.

I scroll down the page, where there's an actual quote from Aria. “*Obviously, we're so thrilled to be on this journey together. I've experienced Curtis as a father and partner on-screen, and I can't wait to see him take on that role in real life.*”

I swallow, and the heavy feeling I woke up without returns, this time with reinforcements.

Curtis is going to have a baby. He's starting a family. The thing I wanted, the thing he said he couldn't give me ... he's doing that with Aria.

“YOU’RE UP EARLY,” I say as I pull my tank top over my head.

“You can thank your terrible couch for that,” Austin says, shuffling into the kitchen. “It’s more like a torture device than a bed.”

“That’s because it’s *not* a bed, Aus. It’s a couch.”

“Ah. Well, *that* makes me feel 100% more rested.”

I chuckle. “Sorry, bro. I’m up for the day, so you can take a nap in my bed if you want.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” he says, reaching for a cup from the cupboard. “How did it go with Stevie last night?”

I shoot him a look. “I should be punching you in the face right now.”

He fills his glass with water. “Hey, I kept my promise. Never once said your name. We talked exclusively about my friends Roy and Evie, who happen to have a similar situation to you two.”

I scoff, but I’m not actually upset with him. I don’t know what’ll happen with Stevie and me, but thanks to Austin’s interference, I have more reason to hope than ever before.

“Crazy coincidence, right?” He sends me the least subtle wink I’ve ever had the pleasure of witnessing. “Stevie said you’re helping Rocco Sterling find a house? Dude ...” He sticks out a hand to shake mine.

“Only thanks to her,” I say, playing with the lid of my water bottle. “But man, this deal could really change things for me. Not just the commission, either. If Rocco refers me to his friends ...” I shrug. “I might actually have something to offer Stevie.”

I’m trying not to get ahead of myself. I don’t know if I’ll have the opportunity to date Stevie, much less build a life with her, but I want to more than anything, and this deal with Rocco makes me feel like it might just be within my reach.

Giving her time to figure out what she wants also gives *me* time to prove I’m a risk worth taking. Would I like to be kissing Stevie and introducing her to people as my girlfriend? Even thinking about it makes my heart race.

But I’ve waited this many years. I can wait a little longer. It’ll be worth it to know she’s sure about this and that I’m not naively shoving my heart into a food processor on the purée setting.

Austin scoffs. “Dude, she doesn’t care about that stuff.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter as I head for the door.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I open the door and head down to my workout area. Austin can’t possibly understand. He takes things for granted because he already inhabits the same world as Stevie.

There’s no sign of her in the workout area yet, and I do a couple of warmups while I wait. She’s never more than a couple minutes late.

Two or three minutes turns into five, and the little devil on my shoulder jabs me with his pitchfork and says, “She’s already regretting last night.”

I rub my shoulder and hesitate briefly before tapping softly on the closest window.

The curtains pull aside a minute later, and Stevie fiddles with the latch, then pulls the window open.

“You coming out?” I ask.

“Um ... yeah.”

I crouch down, my brows pulling together. “Are you okay?” My heart starts racing. She’s crying.

Shoot. She’s about to break up with me already.

“Yeah, I am,” she says, nodding quickly. She pulls in a shaky breath and looks up at me. Her eyes are red and her cheeks and nose are pink. “Actually, no. Not really.”

“Hold on. I’m coming down.”

I take the stairs three at a time, worry mixing with a sinking feeling into an anxious sludge that fills my stomach. Austin’s already retreated to my bedroom, so my progress is unimpeded.

Stevie’s sitting on Austin’s couch, a blanket pulled over her as she stares at nothing.

I take in a breath and walk over, trying to prepare myself for the worst. I guess this is why I stopped things last night, right? So that this moment didn’t come in three weeks or three months instead of ten hours after we kissed.

She moves her feet, and I take a seat next to her.

I’m quiet, leaning my elbows on my knees and staring at my clasped hands as I wait for her to come out with the bad news.

“I’m assuming you saw the stories?” she says.

My eyebrows snap together, and I look up at her. “What stories?”

She sighs, then hands me her phone. I find myself staring at a dark, grainy photo of Stevie and Austin in the car. The headline reads something about her dating both Sheppard brothers.

I glance at her. Is this what has her crying? I don’t quite understand, but I’m guessing it doesn’t bode well for me that it’s affecting her this way.

I shrug and give her the phone back. “I already knew they’d get pictures of you guys on your date.” It didn’t seem

like either of them was worried about it, which was a signal to me that they were okay being put together by the media.

“I just hate bringing you guys into this,” she says. “But that’s not it...” She taps her phone a couple of times, then shakes her head and sets it down on the couch. “I’ll just tell you. I don’t need to give the stories more traffic.”

“Tell me what?”

“Curtis and Aria are having a baby.”

My eyebrows rise. The story about them spending time together only came out a week ago. They’re already pregnant? Or maybe they’ve *been* pregnant.

I watch Stevie carefully, noting the hurt in her red eyes. This must be stirring up all her old feelings for Curtis. How couldn’t it? When I asked her about the divorce, she mentioned Curtis not wanting a family. It’s got to sting pretty badly to see him starting one so soon with someone else.

I grab her hand and squeeze it, even though I’m hurting inside too. If Stevie’s not really over Curtis, we’re not even close to her figuring out whether *we* should be together.

“I’m sorry, Stevie. That’s got to hurt like crazy.”

She looks down and shakes her head. “It’s not that, Troy. I mean, yes, it doesn’t feel great to see him having a baby with her when he refused to with me.”

“I always knew he was an idiot,” I say.

She smiles sadly, but it fades right away. “I did everything I could to make my marriage to Curtis work. Even when he was done, I tried. I bargained, I begged ... I made a fool of myself trying to save things and not end up divorced in my twenties like my mom. But it failed anyway. In the end, nothing I did mattered.”

I turn toward her and take one of her hands between both of mine. “And you know what that tells me, Stevie?”

“How pathetic I am?”

I shake my head and tuck her dark hair behind her ear. “How amazing you are. It tells me you fight for what you want, that you don’t give up when things get hard.”

“And what does it say about me that Curtis *wouldn’t* fight for it?”

“Nothing. It literally says nothing at all about you. It tells me he’s used to things coming to him easily.”

She looks up at me, swallowing hard. “Maybe you’re right. But I’m scared, Troy. Scared of things ending between us like they did between Curtis and me. I’m scared it won’t matter what I do. I’m worried that I’m too much like my mom and can’t make a marriage work.”

Marriage. She’s talking about marrying me. Well, she’s talking about marriage to me *not* working, which is a little different, but still. It makes my heart twist and tug to know she’s even thinking about us in that way.

“Stevie,” I say after a minute. “Look, I love your mom. She’s a party. A really weird party, but a party nonetheless.”

She gives a watery laugh and traces my knuckles with her other hand.

“But you two are *very* different people,” I continue. “I’d be hard pressed to tell you anything you have in common that’s not related to your appearance—and now that your hair is black, even that’s out the window.”

That gains me another smile, but I look at her intently. “You’re your own person, Stevie. None of us are replicas of our parents, and we’re not destined to repeat their mistakes. There are no guarantees in life or relationships, but there are definitely things that maximize the chance of success, and you have those qualities, Stevie.”

“But my marriage *still* failed,” she says. “I only knew Curtis for a few years, Troy, and the divorce wrecked me for a while. We don’t talk at all now. We’re essentially strangers. I can’t even fathom what it would do to me if that happened with you and me.”

I nod, my throat thick. “Yeah, that’s a terrifying thought.”

It's quiet for a minute as we both consider the magnitude of the choice we have to make.

I sigh. "Look, the last thing I want to do is pressure you to be with me or to rush into things if they don't feel right to you, Stevie. But as for me, I know if I don't give things with you everything I've got, I will *always* wonder. I will go absolutely crazy because I've basically been wondering since we met."

She squeezes my hand tightly, her eyes filling with tears again.

"I don't think I'm doing a very good job of sounding like I'm not pressuring you," I say with a grimace.

She laughs and wipes her eyes. "You're doing great. I don't feel pressure from you. I just ... have a lot to think about."

I nod, and we're both quiet again, staring at our hands. I sigh. "I've got to get going so I can make it to that showing with Evelyn. Do you still want to come, or would you rather have some time alone?"

"I think I'll stick around here and try to ... figure out life, I guess?"

I smile and wipe at a wet spot on her cheek with my thumb. "Shouldn't take too long," I say with a wink. I lean over and press a kiss to her forehead, then leave her to decide whether she's ready to take another chance on love. On me.



THE PICTURE of Stevie and Austin has brought another influx of paparazzi, and I can hear a couple of them even through the closed windows of my car as I try to pull out without hitting any of them.

"Do you think your brother Austin is a better fit for Stephanie?" one yells.

"Has the fight for Stephanie put strain on your relationship with your brother?"

I do the only thing I can think to do: wave with a big grin and pretend not to hear them. But when I get stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 5, I pull out my phone and look up the article Stevie showed me.

As stupid and full of completely off-the-charts speculation as it is, there's one line that's a sucker punch right to the gut: "As far as we're concerned, the obvious choice for Stephanie is Austin."

I turn off the screen and toss my phone onto the passenger seat.

It's just a stupid tabloid.

Besides, once I get this real estate deal with Rocco in the bag, the playing field will be a lot more level. I won't have a massive following of tweenaged girls (though I have gotten a couple thousand new followers in the past week and a half), but I'll be on my way to rubbing shoulders with a lot of the people in Stevie and Austin's world. Next time they play, maybe I'll be able to cover a couple celebrity Bingo spaces.

A text pops up at the top of my screen.

EVELYN

I'm a little early, but I couldn't help myself.

I smile. Evelyn is a bright spot amidst today's turmoil.

A couple of minutes later, she texts again.

EVELYN

I've only seen the exterior, and I'm in love, Troy.

And then again four minutes after that.

EVELYN

I ordered a glass of milk for you from the cafe down the street. Cookies can't go without milk.

Her happy mood and excitement seeps through the phone, and I set it down, relieved to see traffic start moving again. According to my GPS, I should be there in about twenty minutes.

My phone starts ringing, and I scramble to put in my Bluetooth earphones when I see Rocco's name pop up on the screen.

"Hey, Rocco!"

"What's up? Hey, I need you in Malibu ASAP. Brand new house coming up for sale. It's not even on the market yet, and the seller is open to an off-market deal, which puts it in my price range."

My heart starts pounding. "Okay, how soon is ASAP?"

"Right now. He's agreed to let us come check it out to see if we can arrange things before they go to the trouble of listing."

I swear under my breath. "Rocco, I'm on the way to a client showing in Huntington Park right now."

"Huntington Park?" I might as well have said my client is in the market for a port-a-potty.

"Yeah," I say, my neck and cheeks heating up.

"Come on, Troy. You can rearrange the showing, I'm sure."

I clench my teeth. "Unfortunately, I can't. It's an open house, and at this price point, I'll be shocked if they don't accept an offer in the next twenty-four hours. But I can come immediately after. It shouldn't take long."

There's a short silence. "Look, Troy, this is happening now or not at all. With a purchase this large, I expect you to be there when I need you, and that's right now."

The life I've dreamed about—a life with Stevie—is slipping through my fingers. I was telling the truth when I said I couldn't reschedule this showing. But clients don't *have* to have agents with them when they go to showings. I could just let Evelyn know I got caught up with something—stuck in

traffic, even—and that I’ll call her as soon as I can to talk about the property and a potential offer. It would be best if I could be there to talk to the agent and make the case for choosing Evelyn, but maybe I can call the agent after I’m done with Rocco.

I feel sick thinking about leaving Evelyn to fend for herself, her hands full of cookies—and the milk she got for me.

But how can I let the deal with Rocco pass by when it could make or break my entire career? When it might make Stevie feel that much surer about taking a chance on me?

“Troy,” Rocco says after my silence. “Are you coming?”

I take a deep breath and square my jaw. “I’m on my way.”

I SHOULD HAVE GONE with Troy. He's been gone all day, and the last time I tried to call, it went straight to voicemail.

I was supposed to spend today figuring out my life, but instead, I've spent it wondering if I gave Troy the wrong impression from our talk earlier. Did I make it seem like I was waffling over my feelings for him? I'm not. I know I want to be with him. Heck, multiple times today I've considered getting an Uber to take me to the showing. I don't even know where it is, which turns out to be a necessary detail to execute that plan.

But I also want to be able to go to Troy with confidence in what I tell him. He deserves that. And in this moment, I'm still terrified that, in a year or five years, I could end up like I am now—reading an announcement that Troy has moved on with someone else and is sharing with her the things I thought we would share together.

If that happened, I wouldn't have him to lean on like I have the past couple of weeks.

There's a knock on the door to my apartment, and I shoot up from the couch and hurry up the stairs to open it, hoping it's Troy.

I blink. "Austin."

"Hey. Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Um, sure." I laugh shakily. "I mean, you don't really have to ask. It's your apartment." I head back down the stairs and return to the place I've been sitting all day: on the couch.

“You doing okay?” he asks as I pull the blanket back up over me.

“Yeah,” I say lamely.

He cocks a brow at my unconvincing tone. Apparently, whatever acting skills I acquired during my time with Curtis have abandoned me.

I chuckle. “I mean, I’m just ... torn.”

He leans against the wall by the TV and crosses his arms. “About Troy?”

“Yes. No. I mean, sort of. He wants me to be more certain of my feelings before we move forward, which I understand. But it’s not my feelings that are the problem.”

“What is it?”

I lift my shoulders. “Plain old cowardice? I’m just scared of repeating the past ... of thinking I’ve got him and then ...”

“Losing him.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. “You never marry someone thinking you’ll be near-strangers in a few years, but that’s what happened to me, and it’s what’s happened to my mom. *Three times.*” I meet his gaze. “I really tried my hardest to make things work with Curtis, Austin. Even after I’d emotionally checked out of the relationship—which was long after he had—I tried to convince him to do counseling or these crazy expensive marriage retreats or—” I shake my head and look down at my interlaced fingers. “I think that happening with Troy would break me.”

Austin walks over and sits on the edge of the cushion, facing me. “Can I show you something?”

I nod.

His face screws up in a grimace. “Troy’s going to kill me. But I guess I’ve got to die at some point, and sacrificing myself for you two is a worthy cause.” He pulls out his phone and takes a few seconds to navigate to whatever he plans to show me.

He's certainly got me curious.

Once he's there, he looks up at me for a second. "I want my ashes thrown over the Pacific, okay?" He extends the phone to me, then suddenly pulls it back, his nose wrinkling. "But not, like, Ensenada. Something prettier. Cabo, at least. Or Hawaii."

I can't help smiling, even though my impatience is getting the better of me. "You've got it."

"We can put it in writing before Troy gets back." He hands me the phone.

It takes me a second to figure out what I'm looking at. It's a video, but the still is blurry.

"Prepare yourself," Austin says. "It's not pretty."

I frown and tap the play button. The camera moves, and the fumbling sends a flurry of sound through the mic. After a couple of seconds, the video stabilizes.

Troy is sitting in the passenger seat of a car, a bandage wrapped around his head and under his jaw. I recognize the car he's in—it's the Sheppards' old minivan Troy used to drive in high school. His hair is mussed from the bandage, and it gives away the era immediately—this was during his mullet days. Yikes. This must have been when he got his wisdom teeth out sophomore year.

Troy moans, his head rolling from side to side on the headrest.

"Just try to rest, honey." His mom's voice is calm and kind, as always. "The surgeon said if you don't, you could make the bleeding worse."

"How can I possibly rest, Mom?" Troy's words are garbled, like he's got a mouth full of marbles. "I'm dying."

She reaches a hand over to his shoulder, her expression half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're not dying, sweetheart."

"I *am*. My heart is ripped to shreds." He puts a hand to his chest and yanks it away dramatically.

A little snigger comes from behind the camera, but a stern look from Mrs. Sheppard nips it in the bud.

Troy slumps to the side, and the cameraman—Austin, I assume—reaches forward to keep him upright. “She’ll never love me, Mom,” Troy says. “Why won’t she ever love me when I love her more than ... more than ... more than Austin loves himself?”

“Hey!” Austin says.

Troy turns, his eyelids heavy and low. They widen as they land on Austin. “You,” he says with drunken vehemence. “It’s *your* fault. All your fault.” His face screws up. “I’ll kill you!” He swipes at Austin, missing by a mile.

“Honey, you *have* to calm down,” their mom says, keeping her eyes on the road while she tries to restrain him.

Troy surrenders, his shoulders slumping. “I’m too tired to kill you now. Mom, can you remind me to kill Austin after my nap?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

“I’m not Stevie.”

“I said *sweetie*, not Stevie.”

Troy’s face crumples. “I *do* love Stevie, Mom.”

“I know. And she loves you too.”

“Like a friend.” He spits out the last word. He lets out a huge sigh. “She’s just so ... perfect. She smells like”—he inhales with a sleepy smile—“graham crackers.”

“Yeah?” Austin says, his voice trembling with suppressed laughter. “What else do you love about her?” He adjusts the camera angle to give a better view of Troy, whose expression turns dreamy.

“Her hair is so soft and creamy. Like buttered toast.”

Austin snorts.

“Mom,” he whines, turning toward her, “when we get home, I want buttered toast. And Stevie.”

Mrs. Sheppard glances over at him and pats his arm. “You’ll feel better one day, sweetheart. It won’t always be this way.”

“It will, Mom. Because I’ll always love her.” He starts to roll down the window.

“What are you doing, Troy? I don’t think—”

“I LOVE YOU, STEVIE JACOBS!” he yells, sticking his head out of the window. He draws it back in and immediately starts to whimper. “That hurt.”

“I bet it did,” she replies.

He cradles his jaw with a hand. “It hurt a lot. But not as much as I love Stevie,” he says through sloppy tears. “I don’t think she heard me.” He presses the window button, and it starts to roll up. He jabs a button with a finger, then another button, then the lock button.

“A little help here?” Mrs. Sheppard says, turning toward Austin and catching sight of the camera. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. Have a little compassion, Austin. And roll up his window so I can lock it. I think he’s starting to bleed again.”

The video cuts off.

I stare at the phone, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

“Troy’s on board the Stevie Train, Stevie,” Austin says, taking the phone from me gently. “He didn’t hop off when you—very accurately, I might add—thought I was the bee’s knees. He didn’t hop off when you rejected him. He didn’t hop off when you got married.” He lets that sink in. “Look, I don’t know your ex-husband, but from what you’ve said, he’s a lazy idiot. Troy’s neither of those things. If anyone has proven they’re in it for the long haul and that they’ll do whatever is necessary to make things work, it’s him. He’s not hopping off this train. Ever. Okay?”

I wipe my eyes. When did I start crying?

Austin stands up and lets out a big sigh. “Man, being the wise one is hard work. You going to be okay?”

I smile and nod. “Yeah. Thank you for showing me that video.”

“At risk to life and limb,” he says. “For years, I’ve thought it was a shame you’ve never heard yourself compared to buttered toast or graham crackers.”

I laugh through my tears. “I think I get why your mom didn’t want me to come over that day.”

Austin raises his brows significantly. “Uh, yeah. The Stevie confessions continued until his precious nap.”

I pull my lips in, trying to suppress a smile. “Would you send that video to me?”

He blows a breath through his lips. “In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess. But don’t forget about my ashes, okay?”

“I won’t,” I say as my phone rings. I hurry to pick it up, hoping to see one name and one name only.

My brows pull together at the sight of Rocco’s contact icon.

“I’ll see you later,” Austin says with a quick wave.

“Thank you again, Austin.” Once the door closes behind him, I answer the call. “Hello?”

“Stephanie,” Rocco says. “Your friend left me hanging.”

I don’t respond right away because I have no idea what’s going on or what he’s talking about. “Um, I’m sorry, but what?”

“I needed to see a brand-new house here in Malibu—potential for an amazing, off-market deal—and he left me hanging.”

He’s upset. There’s no doubt about that. But I’m still not entirely sure what happened—or why he’s calling *me*. “Did this just happen?”

“Yep. Earlier today.”

“And he just didn’t show?” It doesn’t sound at all like Troy.

“He told me he would come—and then called me back five minutes later and said he couldn’t make it because he had to be at a showing for another client. In Huntington Park. Obviously, I had to fire him.”

Evelyn. Troy had to go to the showing for Evelyn. Rocco made him choose between them.

“Just wanted you to know so you don’t recommend your friend to anyone else—at least not if they’re looking for professionalism.”

“Rocco,” I say, feeling the fire of protectiveness light me up, “I’m sorry things didn’t go as you’d hoped, but Troy *is* professional. He had a prior engagement with a client, which he honored. If the situation had been reversed, I’m sure you would have appreciated his integrity.”

“I need someone who can do what I’ve hired them to do, and Troy didn’t do that. I’ve gotta go. I’ll see you around, Stephanie.” *Click.*

I pull the phone from my ear, feeling like I just got ambushed. My heart needs a few minutes to settle down and process things.

Rocco is upset because Troy chose Evelyn over him. From what I can tell, though, it sounds like Troy might’ve considered doing the opposite first. Until his conscience kicked in. That can’t have been an easy decision. He sacrificed a lot of money and future business for Evelyn. He sacrificed the future he’s been working toward.

And it doesn’t even surprise me. That’s Troy.

It’s not a miracle I didn’t mess things up by rejecting Troy years ago. It’s just Troy. *He’s* the miracle. He’s loyal and steady and reliable—and the best thing about my life.

Austin’s right. I’ve been thinking about things the wrong way. I can’t save a relationship on my own. Of course not. It takes two people to make a relationship work, and like Austin said, Troy has shown me time and again that he will put in that work. And so will I.

I BLOW a big breath through my lips and slump down into the swings at the elementary school near my house. It's been a really long day, but I'm not quite ready to go home yet. I haven't really had time to think through things, and there's a lot to process.

From where I stand, this is what I'm working with: I turned down the biggest career option of my life to help Evelyn get an apartment there are at least four other offers on. Meanwhile, Stevie is currently trying to figure out whether a relationship with me is truly something she wants.

If Evelyn doesn't get this property, I don't even know how I'll handle it. At the same time, I know it was the right choice. The most expensive right choice in history.

I check my watch, which tells me it's 8:50. The listing agent for Evelyn's dream apartment told me she'd have news for me at nine sharp, so I pull out my phone. In the chaos of the morning, I forgot my car charger, which means my phone is almost out of juice, which is why I've had it turned off the last couple hours.

A text from an unsaved number comes in as soon as it's fully powered on.

UNKNOWN

Hi Troy, it's Janine. Just wanted to let you know unofficially that your client got the apartment. Her offer was selected. I'm working on the acceptance letter right now.

I clench my fist and breathe, “Yes!”

TROY

Thank you! She'll be ecstatic. I appreciate your client seriously considering her offer.

UNKNOWN

The cookies didn't hurt ;)

I laugh and dial up Evelyn as fast as I can to tell her the news.

I have to pull the phone away from my ear as she cheers and screams with joy, but I can't help grinning ear to ear. This feeling? It makes the sacrifice worth it. Rocco might've gotten that \$20 million property in Malibu without sounding anywhere near this happy.

“You deserve it, Evelyn,” I say. “Your cookies were definitely part of the equation, but I could tell how much the agent loved you. Just think. In a little over a month, you'll be in your very own home.”

She squeals like a little girl. “You and Stevie will be the first people I invite for dinner.”

My smile wavers slightly. “I sure hope so.” I mean it more than she knows. I have no idea what, if anything, will be happening between Stevie and me in a month. “I'll send over the signed contract when I have it, okay? We'll talk more tomorrow.”

We say our goodbyes, and I end the call with a smile.

It feels right. A choice that lets me live with myself. That counts for something, right? I don't want to be the kind of person who thinks about my clients as dollar signs rather than people, just like I don't want my clients to think of me as a servant who should only keep my word when it serves them.

I glance at my 1% battery as a text comes in. My heart revs at the sight of Stevie's name.

STEVIE

Hey, haven't heard from you today. Just wondering where you are and if you're okay.

That's what I've been wondering about her all day too. Not where she is but *how* she is and ... whether she's had any epiphanies that might clarify what the rest of my life is going to look like.

I haven't wanted to intrude on her reflective time. She needs to figure things out without me popping in every five minutes to check her temperature. Besides, it's been less than twenty-four hours. If my concern is that it hasn't been long enough for her to really know what she wants, one day isn't going to change that.

TROY

I'm just hanging out on the swings for a bit. My phone is about to die.

STEVIE

The swings we went to? Can I join you? Maybe we can talk.

I suck in a breath. Those words are a nondescript cardboard box, and inside could be the best gift I've ever received or one of those spring-mounted boxing gloves to jab me in the face and break my nose. If she's already come to a conclusion this soon, the latter looks more likely.

TROY

I can come there. It's kind of complicated for you to come here.

STEVIE

Pssh. I've got this *flex emoji*

My phone dies. With an annoyed sigh, I toss it into the nearby grass and wrap my hands around the cold metal of the swings.

How do you emotionally prepare yourself for a second rejection from the only woman you've ever loved? That's what I need to be doing right now, but instead, I'm thinking back on our kiss and how it felt to hold Stevie like that.

It's barely been five minutes when movement catches my eye. A figure in a black hoodie and sweats is jogging toward me. Stevie glances behind her, then pulls off her hood as she approaches.

"Hey," she says breathlessly.

"Hey," I say as she takes a seat in the swing next to me.

"Sounds like you've had a day," she says.

I sigh and let my head fall back to look up at the night sky. "A little bit, yeah."

"I heard about Rocco."

I glance at her, frowning. "How did you—" I chuckle and look at the ground. "He told you."

"He did. Had a little tantrum and everything."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for him to bring you into it—or to make you look bad when you're the one who referred me to him."

She laughs. "*I'm* the one who should be apologizing. I knew he was a diva, but my gosh. He couldn't stand you choosing another client over him." She looks at me. "That's what happened, right?"

"Not at first," I say. "Initially, I did choose him. I chose him because ..." I shake my head and turn it away, deciding not to go there. What does it matter?

"Because of what?" she prompts me. "Because he threatened you?"

"Because I wanted to be good enough for you." I meet her gaze.

Her brows pull together. “What?”

I nod. “Did you read what that article said today? The one with the picture of you and Austin?”

She shakes her head.

“The obvious choice for Stephanie is Austin.” I turn away and clear my throat. It’s amazing what saying your deepest fear aloud can do to you. “It was true when I told you how I felt after high school, and it’s truer than ever now.” I face her again and shrug. “I just wanted the choice to be less obvious.”

Stevie stands up and walks over to me. She nudges my knees apart so she’s standing between my legs, then wraps her hands around the chains just above mine and looks me in the eye.

“You think I care what the tabloids say? You think having a client like Rocco—or a hundred clients like Rocco—would change a single thing I think about you?” She searches my eyes like she’s expecting an answer. “You choosing to go to that showing with Evelyn represents everything I love about you, Troy. You’re dependable, loyal, and loving. You’d do anything for the people you care about, and I’ve had the completely undeserved opportunity to be one of those people for the last fifteen years.” She looks at our hands on the chains, then moves hers to cover mine. Her gaze moves back to me. “I hope more than anything that you’ll let me be one for the next fifteen. And the fifteen after that. And the fifteen after that.”

I swallow. “Stevie ...”

“I know you’re worried I haven’t had long enough to know what I want or to be sure of my feelings,” she says. “But I *do* know what I want, and I *am* sure, Troy. I’d marry you right now if you’d let me. My only hesitation has been the fear of losing you, of doing everything I can to make things work and to still have things fail. But you know what I realized?” She puts her hand on my cheek, and I shut my eyes and lean into it, hanging onto every word.

“With you, it’s *not* just up to me. I would never be the only one trying to make things work. If you want this as much as I do, we *won’t* fail.” She slides her hand down to my chin and guides it up so our gazes meet. “I’m so sorry it took me this long to see things clearly. I hate that I ever made you feel less than the incredible person you are, but I promise you I’m ready for this.” She swallows. “*If* you’ll have me.” There’s genuine uncertainty in her eyes.

I can’t even fathom she’d ever question what my response would be. Does she realize I’ve dreamed about this moment for fifteen years?

I pull her down to my lap and take her face between my hands. “I’ll have you as long as you’ll let me have you, Stevie. You’re all I’ve ever wanted, and I swear I will never, *ever* give up on us.” I smile wryly. “I haven’t been able to, even when I’ve tried.”

She smiles warmly at me and touches a hand to my bare head. “Thank heaven for that.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me toward her until our mouths press together in the kiss I’ve spent a lifetime waiting for. It’s apology and deep commitment and heat, the embodiment of everything we’ve just said. It’s full of a brand-new realization: my feelings for Stevie weren’t the villain that wouldn’t die; they’re the hero that never gave up.

I’m so glad they hung on all these years.

The kiss calms and finally shifts to a hug.

“I love you, Troy,” she whispers.

“I’ve always loved you, Stevie,” I respond, cradling the back of her head and breathing her in.

“Do I still smell like graham crackers?”

I still. “What?”

“Is my hair as soft as buttered toast even though it’s short and black?”

I pull back and stare at her, my eyes wide.

She's doing everything she can not to smile, but she's failing miserably.

"Austin," I say without a shred of doubt. "He did this, didn't he?"

She plays with the buttons on my shirt, her fingers grazing my collarbone and lighting me and everywhere within a ten-foot radius on fire. "He's asked that we spread his ashes over the Pacific. Hawaii or Cabo, specifically."

"He'll be lucky if I spread his ashes on the closest manure pile. He really showed it to you?"

She nods. "And I will forever be grateful to him."

I drop my head into my free hand, keeping the other snug around her waist. "I get it now. This is a pity relationship. You can't bear to see me so pathetically in love with you for so many years."

She laughs and pulls my hand from my face. "I have sixty-three virtual pets, Troy. *Had* sixty-three virtual pets." She plays with my hand. "That video was adorable. It actually made me cry. I've watched it sixteen times."

"*Sixteen times?*" My horror knows no bounds.

She nods. "Besides, you were on drugs."

"Yeah, also known as *without a filter*, which is why you know I meant every word. I still love graham crackers and buttered toast."

"I know you do," she says with a growing smile. "Those comparisons really drove home your point. Almost as well as shouting you loved me out the window."

"I like to be thorough," I say.

She cocks a brow. "Oh yeah?" Her gaze drops to my lips and turns mischievous.

My mouth pulls up at the side in a half-smile. "Yeah."

"I'll be the judge of that."

The provocation is so blatant, I can't be blamed for taking up the challenge. I gently move her from my lap, stand up, and shake out my arms while she watches in confusion.

Then I take her in my arms and show her just how thorough I am.

"Sheesh, Troy," she says breathlessly when we pull apart. "You tried *telling* me we should be together when we were eighteen. Did it never cross your mind to try another method? I'm positive kissing me like that would have knocked off the friend goggles."

"Or ended in a lawsuit," I say.

She laughs, and her gaze softens. "Thank you."

"For what? Kissing you thoroughly? You know, I'm pretty sure that wasn't my best work, but I'm willing to try again."

"I'm counting on it." Her amusement gives way again to a more intent expression. "Thank you for waiting for me."

I meet her gaze, thinking on all the years I'd lost hope. As many times as I imagined kissing Stevie or hearing her say she wanted more, I never believed it would really happen. "I fought it hard, Stevie. Really hard. But I'd do it all over again." I run my thumb along her cheek, marveling that I'm allowed to do this sort of stuff now. I don't have to imagine what it feels like anymore, and it'll take a while to get used to that.

I press my forehead to hers. "I think my soul was made to love yours," I say softly.

She wraps her arms around me more tightly. "I know exactly what you mean. Nothing has ever felt as right as this feels."

We stay like that, quiet, together, taking each other in, until our breathing slows and lying on the grass starts to look tempting.

"Should we go home?" I ask.

She nods, slips her hand into mine, and we head for the car. I can't bring myself to let her hand go, and my awkward

attempts to put the key in the ignition with my free left hand make her laugh. Instead of letting go, though, she helps me, just as awkwardly, with *her* free hand. The fact that she doesn't want to let go, either, has my heart smiling in a way it never has.

When we near the house, there are five or six paparazzi hanging out on the sidewalk. I've accepted that my street has become the "it" place in LA County for paparazzi networking. It's a physical representation of LinkedIn for celebrity stalkers. They're all chatting, and it looks like one just bought everyone coffee.

"Hold on a second," Stevie says. "Slow down a bit."

I furrow my brow but obediently put on the brakes until we're creeping right where I'd normally speed up. The paparazzi scramble to set down their coffees, taking up their cameras and pointing them at us. Flashes fill the dark, and I understand why celebrities wear sunglasses at all hours of day.

Stevie rolls down her window and sticks her head out. "I LOVE TROY SHEPPARD!"

My eyebrows shoot up as she shouts it again, as loud as she can, like some drunken bridesmaid out of the bachelorette party limo.

She rolls up the window, a huge grin on her face as I pull into the driveway.

I say nothing, putting the car in park with my left hand. Then I turn to her. "Um, wow."

She smiles even bigger, then leans toward me and touches a hand to my head, which feels like sandpaper now. "I still can't believe you shaved off your hair for me."

"That hair is the only reason I have you in my life. It was sacrificed in a good cause."

She leans in closer until our lips brush. "The best cause."

EPILOGUE

STEVIE

“CONGRATULATIONS, MISS JACOBS,” says the seller’s agent, holding a keyring out to me.

“Thank you.” I take the keys and make a fist around the cold metal. They’re so small, but at the same time so huge for me.

I look up at Troy beside me. His arm is around my waist, and he pulls me closer. “Congratulations, Stevie.” He presses his lips to mine, and I feel a flutter of anticipation. Looking at houses with him over the past few months has been more fun than it should have been. A big part of that was going into each house imagining sharing it with him.

“What do you say I take you home now?” he whispers in my ear.

My lips spread in a huge smile. “Yes, please.”

I could have brought my own car—a dazzling black Toyota Corolla I’ve fallen in love with almost as deeply as I love Troy—but Troy loves taking me to and from work, so he picked me up and brought me to the closing himself.

“How are the little furballs doing?” he asks, threading his fingers through mine once we’re out of the parking lot. His hair has grown back fully, making him as handsome as ever. I’ll always have a soft spot for his bald head, though.

“So good,” I say. “We got a new one today—Carla texted me after we left to let me know.”

“No way,” he says. “That’s amazing!”

“I’ll show you,” I say, pulling out my phone. I navigate to the app with the cameras that monitor the nine animals currently housed at Silverbook Animal Rescue.

After a few visits to Harmony Haven, I decided taking care of virtual pets hadn’t just been a way to pass time for me. It’s something I really love. Rather than spending millions of dollars on an enormous home I’d feel lost in, I’ve been putting money I got after the divorce into starting up my own animal sanctuary—soon (based on IRS definitions of “soon”) to gain official non-profit status.

We’re just small potatoes for now, and I kind of like it that way. Sixty-three virtual animals was a lot, and I love being able to give each animal the attention it deserves.

I use the remote controls to move the camera in the direction of our brand-new addition. It’s staring through its cage with wide, alert eyes, and I show the screen to Troy when we stop at a red light.

He narrows his eyes, then looks at me. “A guinea pig? I love guinea pigs.”

I tip my head to the side as I admire the critter. “I can’t wait to see him tomorrow. Carla says he’s very vocal.”

“I’m definitely coming in with you in the morning. You haven’t named him yet, right?”

I look at him with mock-offense. “I’d never take that step without you.”

“Whew! We were about to have our first fight. Knowing you, he’d end up with a name like Piggy or Big-Teeth.”

“You just wait until we’re on pet number sixty. *Then* we’ll see how creative you are.”

He laughs and brings my knuckles to his mouth for a kiss.

Troy’s flexible schedule means he spends a lot of time at Silverbrook, hanging out with me and the animals between calls and paperwork. I’m completely in love with the life we’re building.

I'm tempted to shift the camera to a different cage for a quick peek, but I suppress the urge. I haven't told Troy yet, but I'm hoping to adopt one of the pets for my own—specifically, the mixed-breed dog we've had for weeks now, named Mochi. She's not cute enough or young enough for the families that come through looking for pets. Yesterday, a mom and her toddler came, and I was on pins and needles thinking they might take her, but they didn't. I didn't feel like I could take in a pet when I was staying in Austin's apartment, but now that I have a house of my own....

Fifteen minutes later, we turn onto my street, a quiet cul-de-sac in the hills. After months of looking, this place came on the market three weeks ago. Both of us knew it was perfect for me: away from the bustle, modest in size, and less than fifteen minutes from the animal rescue. It's big enough for us to grow into and open enough to host a small group of friends, which is exactly what I hope our future will look like.

"Welcome home, Stevie," Troy says as we pull up in front of the house.

My eyes are fixed on the lawn, where a bunch of people are standing. Mr. and Mrs. Sheppard, Siena and Jack, Tori, Maggie, and Evelyn are all smiling and clapping as we pull into the driveway.

I look over at Troy, who parks the car and looks at me. "We wanted to throw you a little housewarming party."

"And make me cry, apparently." I throw my arms around him. How is he so perfect?

We pull back, and he smiles at me, then puts his hand to his fake ear mic. "Monkey Lover is in the building."

The car is accosted and our doors opened by Siena and Tori, and we step out to a very unsynchronized chorus of voices welcoming me home. Evelyn is holding a massive platter of cookies, from which Troy snags a handful immediately.

"Wow, Evelyn!" I exclaim. "How many dozen is that? Let's get inside so you can set it down before your arms

break.”

Everyone follows behind me to the front door, erupting in cheers once I’ve unlocked it and pulled it wide open.

“Let me get that for you,” Maggie says, taking my place to keep the door open. “You should be the first one to step inside your own new house.”

I give her a grateful hug. Over these past few months, Maggie has not only become a regular weekend volunteer at Silverbrook but my closest friend.

I take Troy’s hand and pull him along with me into the house, then turn toward everyone. “Welcome to my humble abode, everyone,” I say, putting out my hands to display the entry way. It opens up on one side to a living room and on the other to a dining area. Up ahead is the kitchen.

“Who wants a tour?” Troy asks.

Everyone raises their hands.

“Follow me,” I say.

I do a quick showing of the front rooms, then lead the way to the kitchen area, taking all I’ve learned from months of showings to point out the main features, while Troy smiles at me proudly. After that, it’s the bedrooms and backyard before we head back to the kitchen.

“It’s beautiful, Stevie,” Siena says. Jack’s got his arm around her shoulders, and hers is wrapped around his waist. They just got back from their honeymoon and are enveloped in a haze of newlywed bliss. It’s the cutest thing.

“I think you forgot an essential feature in the living room,” Maggie says from down the hallway.

I frown and turn around. “Really?”

“Definitely,” Troy says next to me.

The living room is not a complicated part of the house, especially since it’s not furnished yet, but I head back that direction anyway. I stop short on the threshold.

Austin is there, looking at me with a smile, and standing by his side, tongue hanging out of her panting mouth, is Mochi.

Troy grabs my hand, and I look up at him.

“I’ve seen the way you look at her,” he says teasingly. “Consider her my housewarming gift.”

I throw my arms around him as Austin lets go of the leash. Mochi darts over to me, dancing around our legs with impatient delight. I let her do her thing for a few seconds, feeling overwhelmed with appreciation for Troy and how in-tune he is with me. It was cute how I thought he wouldn’t know my plan for Mochi.

I pull away and crouch down to receive her sniffs and licks while Troy asks the others to grab the food and drinks he has in his trunk.

“You guys pulled this off together?” I ask Troy and Austin.

“Yeah, but I was worried the surprise would be ruined when you showed me the guinea pig. I thought you might notice Mochi was gone.”

“It’s pure luck I didn’t,” I say. “I didn’t even know you were in town, Austin.” His schedule seems to get busier and busier, which is the only reason I was able to stay in his apartment the last few months.

“I’ll be in town for a while, actually,” he replies, coming over to pet Mochi.

“Really?” Troy asks, a hint of concern in his voice. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, actually better than okay.”

Troy and I look at him, waiting for him to expound. He doesn’t.

“Really?” Troy says. “You’re going to leave us hanging like that? Did you find Miss Right or something?”

Austin snorts. “Like I need that sort of distraction right now. I have bigger fish to fry.” There’s a quick pause. “If you

tell anybody this, I'll have to kill you, okay?"

We both nod, and even Mochi stops her panting for a moment.

"My label is open to me headlining my own tour next year."

"What?" Troy and I say at the same time.

"That's incredible, Austin!" I say while Troy wraps him in a huge hug.

"Enough of that, though," Austin says as the front door opens and everyone marches in with bags of food and drinks. "Let's go celebrate your house, Stevie!"

The house is empty of furniture, but it's full of happiness and conversation for the next two hours and already starting to feel like home now that it's hosted so many people I care so much about.

People start taking off after dinner, leaving Troy, Mochi, and me by ourselves. After a couple of hours of non-stop attention, Mochi zonks out in the corner of the living room.

"Well," I say, looking around, "now what?"

"Now, we buy some furniture," Troy says.

I love that he says *we*. I definitely think of this as our house, and I can't wait to get it all set up and decorated and then fill it with memories.

"But, until then," he says cryptically.

I raise my brows, he gives me a quick kiss on the lips, then disappears through the front door.

Ten seconds later, he reemerges, holding up two sleeping bags and a grocery bag.

"What do you say we break this house in?"

"Yes!" I yell enthusiastically—enough to rouse Mochi. "You really thought of everything, didn't you?"

"I did," he says proudly, setting down the bags. "Even brought stuff for breakfast." He reaches into the grocery bag

and pulls out a canister of freeze-dried eggs.

“Oh. My. Gosh.”

He grins. “I told you I was saving them for a special occasion.” He reaches into the bag again and pulls out a bottle of hot sauce, a loaf of bread, a stick of butter, and a box of graham crackers, setting them all on the carpet. He drops the bag and dusts off his hands. “I think that covers the essentials.”

I step over to him and wrap my arms around his neck, looking up into his blue eyes. “I love you, Troy. So much that I will eat those freeze-dried eggs with you. And maybe even enjoy it.”

He pulls me up against him as Mochi comes over and starts sniffing the canister of eggs.

“We may have to fight her for them,” I say, brushing my lips against Troy’s as Mochi’s sniffing intensifies.

“Meh,” he says. “Let her have ‘em.” He takes my lips with his and kisses me in our new house for the first time of thousands to come.

THE END

SHEPPARDS IN LOVE BOOK 3

Selling Out

MARTHA KEYES

Get the next book in the series, [Selling Out](#).

OTHER TITLES BY MARTHA KEYES

Sheppards in Love

[Kissing for Keeps](#) (Book 1)

[Just Friends Forever](#) (Book 2)

[Selling Out](#) (Book 3)

The Donovans

[Unrequited](#) (Book .5)

[The Art of Victory](#) (Book 1)

[A Confirmed Rake](#) (Book 2)

[Battling the Bluestocking](#) (Book 3)

Tales from the Highlands Series

[The Widow and the Highlander](#) (Book 1)

[The Enemy and Miss Innes](#) (Book 2)

[The Innkeeper and the Fugitive](#) (Book 3)

[The Gentleman and the Maid](#) (Book 4)

Families of Dorset Series

[Wyndcross: A Regency Romance](#) (Book 1)

[Isabel: A Regency Romance](#) (Book 2)

[Cecilia: A Regency Romance](#) (Book 3)

[Hazelhurst: A Regency Romance](#) (Book 4)

Romance Retold Series

[Redeeming Miss Marcotte](#) (Book 1)

[A Conspiratorial Courting](#) (Book 2)

[A Matchmaking Mismatch](#) (Book 3)

Standalone Titles

[Host for the Holidays](#) (Christmas Escape Series)

[A Suitable Arrangement](#) (Castles & Courtship Series)

[Goodwill for the Gentleman](#) (Belles of Christmas Book 2)

[The Christmas Foundling](#) (Belles of Christmas: Frost Fair Book 5)

[The Highwayman's Letter](#) (Sons of Somerset Book 5)

[Of Lands High and Low](#)

[Mishaps and Memories](#) (Timeless Regency Collection)

[The Road through Rushbury](#) (Seasons of Change Book 1)

[Eleanor: A Regency Romance](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I have so many people to thank for helping this book come to life!

My husband came in even more handy than usual with his hard-earned real estate expertise. He never complains about my constant insistence on talking character and plot with him. He's a true keeper.

I'm fortunate enough to be part of two amazing critique groups whose help—both with craft and navigating the author experience—I am forever grateful for. Kasey, Jess, Deborah, Kortney, and Ashley, thank you, my wonderful friends!

Thank you to all my beta readers for helping me hone things and for giving me boosts. Thank you in particular to Brooke, who helps me and cheers me on at the drop of a hat.

Thank you to my editors, who made the book shine.

Most of all, I give thanks to God, who provides me with all I have.

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.

