



Stormi & Sebastian

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Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: What's a girl to do when her twin sister steals her fiancé? Make a scene at the family BBQ. Finding out that said family knew about the betrayal? That requires packing up and moving to the other side of the country, as far away as possible, and absolute radio silence on my part. When fame happens upon the book you wrote with vague details of the betrayal, they decide to out themselves, thinking they have an ace up their sleeve.

What they don't have is a leg to stand on. And they haven't met the new Stormi. I'm the wallflower they remember. And I have some of the best friends by my side.

Tropes and Triggers:

- Cheating
- OW Drama
- Betrayal
- Starting Over
- Friends to Lovers
- HEA

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O N E: All. Of. Them.

Stormi's Pov

When you're an identical twin, everyone seems to think that means you both do everything the same as each other. Which couldn't be further from the truth. And physically, we were pretty much the same. There were a few slight differences that you would notice if you looked hard enough. Story and I were completely identical, except for our hair length, and the fact that she was taller by an inch and a half. Our styles, personalities, and birthmarks were different, like complete opposites. Mine was on my left shoulder, in the shape of a butterfly, while hers is on her right hip, looking like a blob. Story was loud and very outgoing, the life of the party.

Meanwhile, I was always quieter and more reserved, choosing to get lost in a book or nature or whatever moment I was in, rather than trying to be the center of every moment. I preferred to sit on the sidelines while she grabbed the spotlight. She was also my mom's favorite. I had known it from a very young age. The things I had done, that I had accomplished, had not been recognized anywhere as enthusiastically as Story's achievements. The older we got, the more obvious it became, especially when I could hear the things Mom would whisper to her friends when she didn't think we were near.

So, I guess it should have come as no surprise that three fucking weeks after getting engaged to my college boyfriend, Jason, he was here breaking off the engagement. And why, of all things, did he tell me? The thing that blew my mind and had me questioning if I'd accidentally taken any hallucinogens was when he said that it wasn't his fault. He just 'fell for the wrong sister'. I froze. I was like a deer caught in

headlights. It felt like timestopped. He wouldn't look at me. He was looking everywhere else, but at me and the wreckage he'd just caused.

That was the hardest blow I think I'd ever been delivered. I had told him over and over, throughout my life, that Story had been sneaky, and always tried to steal everything I'd ever had, or that made me happy. He knew what she was like and swore up and down that I was all he wanted, all he loved, all he needed. We had been close and perfect until literally only a month ago! A month?! Was that how long it was? Was that all it took to tear apart our two-year relationship?

"You understand, right? I didn't mean to hurt you, Storm. Honest." He was trying to look me in the eyes as I let him see the damage he caused to my heart, to my soul. The utter destruction he'd just caused and set on fire.

"Why? How long?" I tried to ask as strongly and confidently as I could, but I knew I'd failed when my voice quivered, going up a few octaves at the end of my question. These were both something I did and did not want to know simultaneously. How long had he hated me? How long since he'd stopped loving me? How long since he'd been betraying me? How long had he been working towards shattering every piece of me?

"Does it matter?" I scoffed at his question, my emotions going from heartbreak to anger, and I felt my face looking offended at the stranger standing before me. What a bullshit, dismissive fucking response. How dare he! Does. It. Matter? Yes, Jason. It fucking matters!

"How. Long." I ground out, letting the anger take over. The audacity of this cheating-sister-fucking-asshole! He didn't want to answer? Why didn't he want to say? I could see he didn't want to answer, that was plain as day on his face, but Story came up and wrapped around him. She chimed right in, never one to miss a chance to get a dig at me.

“Since last Christmas, when you brought him home to meet us. He got my number and we started texting as friends. But it moved to more fairly quickly. You understand, right?” Her eyes, when she looked at me, were smug while she tried her best to look pitiful, pushing up on her toes, and her tits, to kiss his cheek. The poor, pitiful sister who had accidentally crossed that line that you’re never supposed to cross with your sister’s husband.

But it wasn’t over. No. Not by a long shot. The torture had just begun. The smugness of her body language told me I didn’t know the depths she was willing to go. I didn’t care, though. The one person I thought would have my back, ran and abandoned me, straight to the person who made my whole life hell. I let the light in my eyes die as I stared at the couple in front of me. I was barely gripping that last thread of sanity so as not to lash out at them.

The happy couple.

I was fucking furious, livid, ready to kill if needed. Him? Her? Both of them? Would I get a discount for both bodies? How did it work? I could feel my breath starting to get ragged, and I couldn’t handle it anymore. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get the fuck away from these two. They deserved each other.

This was happening at a family fucking cookout, no less! With my family and his! Wow. Could this be any more public and humiliating for me?! I nodded mindlessly, trying to keep my shoulders and spine straight and the tears at bay. No way would I let this vicious viper and the weak-willed cock, see me break. They would never see me cry. Not knowing what else to do. I just stood there, looking out over the rest of the party as my parents came over. Fake smiles plastered to their faces.

“Well?” My mom asked, looking at Story and Jason, her arm wrapped around his, looking like the picture-perfect couple. Like they hadn’t been cheating for over a year. Like they hadn’t just torn my fucking world apart. “Did you tell her yet?”

What? My eyes zeroed in on my mother, then my father. I looked between my parents, or the people who looked like my parents, but clearly weren't. There was no way they knew. Why was she asking that? Why did her voice sound so clipped? My mother looked at me with annoyance that I was falling apart. Oh...god! I was instantly flooded with disgust. She knew. I looked back at my dad. There's no...way...the steam evaporating from my sail as soon as I saw his face fall when my eyes landed on his.

He knew, too.

He knew and did nothing to protect me. No one did.

"Mom?" I asked because I needed to be wrong. They couldn't have known. Did they fucking know?! "How long?!" I could feel my breathing increasing, my heart rate elevating, my voice getting a little louder, and people starting to look.

"Oh, honey. Please. It was obvious."

"Obvious?!" I scoffed, "TO WHO?!" I shouted, my top blowing. And it was like a Pringles can. Once she popped, the fun wasn't about to stop.

"Keep your voice down!" She hissed at me like I was the fucking embarrassment of the family and not my whore of a sister.

"How long have you known this hussy of a sister was fucking my fiancé and did nothing about it?!" I am screaming, letting the hurt and anger pour, dripping, splashing from my every word like a slimy ooze coming out of me. The music and chatter had all stopped, and I could feel eyes on us, and I knew everyone was probably looking at us. I'd never met Jason's parents; he met my family first. Was this why?!

“Ah. You must be Story,” a couple came up to us, and I moved my gaze to the two traitors, “Our son has talked about you non-stop for over a year!”

“Over a year?! You’ve been cheating on me for over a year?!” The couple looked at me like I was some kind of wild animal or crazy person. I didn’t care.

“Well. Don’t worry, you don’t need the gift I got you. I was excited to tell you today that you were going to be a dad, as well as a husband. Looks like you don’t need to worry about this,” Handing him back his ring, as I snatched back the gift I was going to give him, “And you don’t need to ever see us again.” With that, I turned and stormed out. Once I was around the front of the house, I heard Jason screaming at me, trying to get me to stop, and my sister was screaming at him, and his parents were demanding answers from them both. I hopped in my car, not slowing down and not looking back once, before I peeled out of the driveway, as my nowex-fiancé ran for my car until he disappeared from the rearview.

I rushed back to the apartment we shared, hoping that taking the car would slow him down just a little bit so I could pack. Throwing the door open, and rushed to the guest room, pulling my luggage out from under the bed. I grabbed my phone off my nightstand after hauling the suitcases into the master bedroom, throwing them both open on the bed, tossing my items in there in no kind of order. I called my bestie, Raven.

“I need help,” my voice wobbly, barely holding it together, “I need to leave.Now.”

“What happened?”

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“Story. She’s been fucking Jason for a fucking year the fucking cunt! I need to disappear. Like, yesterday!”

“Breathe. On my way.” The line went dead as I stormed down the hall to the office. I aimlessly grabbed all my important documents, putting them into my briefcase, along with my laptop, charging cords, and whatever else I could grab from my desk. I was in a mad dash to get out of there before he could even get here. I was packing all my tech into my case when I heard a shout from the front door.

“Storm? Where are you, babe?” and breathed a sigh of relief once I knew that it was Raven who was there. And not Jason.

“Office!” She came down the hall. I looked behind her to see if her son, Ryder, was with her. I was barely holding back tears, but that was not something I wanted her son to see. They still had a halfway decent home life. I didn’t want to traumatize him with my meltdown.

“Ryder’s at a friend’s house tonight. What do you need?” She said, upon seeing my face and knowing what I was thinking, without having to say a thing.

“Pack my clothes? I’m almost done in here.” She nodded and headed to our—his—bedroom. It was no longer mine, and I wasn’t sure when that had changed in the last year. I was still trying to understand how I had no fucking idea this had been going on, especially since it had been going on for so long and I was apparently the last fucking person to know. I heard suitcases unzipping and hangers clattering while I finished putting the last of my stuff from the shared office into my bag. Moving to the bedroom, I grabbed a smaller suitcase, and moving to the bathroom, I started tossing

all my stuff from there into my suitcase. As long as it wasn't liquid. I don't want it spilling. I had half a suitcase left when I started throwing in the towels I bought.

Suddenly, an idea hit me. It was petty. It was childish as. But I didn't care!

"Rave! Pack every single fucking thing I ever bought! I want it all! Even if it doesn't fit in the car, I'll hire movers! You want the couch?"

"I'd leave the furniture, sis," she said, popping her head in the bathroom as I was zipping the suitcase shut. Mostly shut. "Might be...dirty. If you...ya know. Catch my drift."

A mental image flashed in my mind of them on the couch, our bed. No! A shiver ran through me, and I wanted to puke.

"Eww. Don't make me puke." I said, grateful that the toilet was right next to me.

"So, how'd you manage to get away without everyone following you back here?" She called the bedroom as I heard drawers being ripped open, the shuffle of feet, a soft thud, and then more shuffling and a drawer closing, another opening. Rinse and repeat until finished.

I chuckled bitterly at her question. I knew this was also cruel, but we hadn't been using protection as the wedding got closer because we wanted to try for a honeymoon baby. Now though? I was happy that it hadn't worked. As far as I knew, anyway.

"I took back the little box that had the watch he'd been eyeing for months. May or may not have told him it was a cutaway for me to tell him I was pregnant. You know he had always wanted a big family, you know we weren't being safe the last month."

"So...you're not?"

“No! Not that I know of. I still haven’t had my period this month. But that’s not due for another couple of weeks,” I said, moving to the closet and taking a duffle from the back of my side, and started putting my shoes in it. I wasn’t leaving a single thing for him to try to remember me by. He had my twin. What did he need me for anymore?

“That’s low. But no lower than what he did to you,” she was done with the dresser and zipped up the suitcases. Getting ready to move them to the living room to be taken to my car as soon as we were ready to leave.

“Exactly,” my voice shaky, knowing the tears were trying to fall. I blinked them back rapidly, because I wasn’t going to cry. Not yet. Raven grabbed my shoulders, making me face her.

“No,” she looked me dead in the eye, “Not yet, Queen. Wait til we get to the hotel. You guys never merged your finances, right?” I nodded, not trusting I wouldn’t cry if I had to try to use words again.

“Good. You run this out to the cars, and I’ll start in the kitchen. You want all those beautiful gadgets, right?” She smirked. “And the black and white kitchen set you just bought?”

“Duh! He doesn’t even know how to use them.” I managed to laugh out. Thank God for putting this true sister in my path. She was the big sister I’d always wanted, the family who loved me. She nodded, grabbing another suitcase and a duffle, passing them to me before she turned to head to the kitchen. We tore through the rest of the apartment, making sure I left nothing that wouldn’t have been...used...by them. With the vehicles loaded down with as much as they would haul, we headed out for a hotel at least two towns over. No chance of running into them, or him.

Halfway through packing, though, I had to shut my phone off because it kept going off with either a text from someone or a call that I knew I wouldn’t be answering. I

didn't want to talk to any of them. I didn't want them to know where I was or where I was going. Fuck them.

All. Of. Them.

They would never see or hear from me again. After checking in and bringing in a bag that had a few days' worth of clothes in it, Raven took me to get a new phone. We just asked for a whole new one, wanting nothing off of the one I'd had with Jason for the last year. Now it felt dirty. Most of the pics I wanted were on social media. And, most of the ones in that phone were a lie anyway. The whole thing was a lie.

Thankfully, I got a little bit of credit from 'trading in' that phone for a new one. Raven's number was added to my new phone and my boss, Emily's, number. That was it. Just those two. I had no one else. No family that wouldn't be on their side. Friends were very limited, and I hadn't heard from a lot of them recently. Most likely due to the fact that I appeared to be the only blind fool in the room.

Back at the hotel, I needed a shower and a good cry.

"I'll order room service. Then block everyone on your socials for you. You shower or take a bath, whichever will help you relax more, and if you need a bath bomb or whatever, let me know. I'll get some from the front desk. We'll do a spa day tomorrow if you want to." I almost laughed. I felt a smile trying to tug at my mouth.

"You need and deserve a chance to unwind." She reached forward, hugging me hard, and I let go; of absolutely fucking everything. My knees buckled, and she held me all the way down to the tile floor of the bathroom while I sobbed like a child in her arms. She held me as I asked 'why me' over and over.

Not just because she stole him, but because she stole everything. Story had always been the favorite, but I thought, even if my parents knew she was royally

fucking me over, they'd have the moral compass to see how wrong that was and do something about it.

I didn't understand why I wasn't worthy of them doing that simple fucking thing. Why?! Why couldn't they support me? Why couldn't they see how badly she was hurting me? Why am I not worthy of my family's love? Of Jason's love and fidelity? I cried and wailed like I was grieving a lifetime of betrayal, disappointment, and neglect.

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I think I might have.

Raven whispered in my ear, “Gaining your new life is going to cost you your old. That’s why this hurts so bad, babe.” She hugged me like she knew what I was going through. When I looked at her, she started crying too, and we both just sobbed with each other. When we started to calm down, she drew a warm bath and left to call room service. It was getting late and she didn’t want to piss them off as they try to close the kitchen.

Undressing, I slowly got into the bath. I just laid there in the warm water as I replayed the events from the day over and over again in my mind. I replayed moments of my relationship that now made more sense, and I saw the red flags waving at me.

Right in my face.

I knew I needed to leave. I knew I needed to start over. Holding my breath, I slipped under the water and screamed out all the pain, until I needed to come up for air. I felt a little better.

Angry.

And ready.

Let’s do this.

T W O: Making Calls

Stormi's POV

It had been a week. From absolute liberating hell. It was the weirdest I had felt in a while. I had been driving across the country, checking in with Raven and Emily, every time I stopped. Emily had been an absolute godsend, stepping into the role of Mom so effortlessly, like she had always been my mom. I called her the night everything happened with the traitors and told her I needed to be fully remote, or transferred to a branch of the company across the country. She said I was up for a promotion anyway and gave it to me since no one else was in the running. Luckily, it was a position that could be fully remote. Web designing was great like that! There might be some meetings, but I could always fly in for those. Emily was willing to work with me because 'losing a wonderful and talented person like you would only hurt us. I'm also not one to let the competition have the upper hand if I can help it. Plus, I've been following your work for the last eight years.'

Did I mention what a godsend she was?

I was almost to the state of Washington. I had driven from my cozy little coastal hometown in North Carolina across the country to the state of Washington. I was not stopping until I hit the Pacific Ocean. I had been in the Atlantic, but I wanted to know what the Pacific felt like.

I had enough in savings to buy some land and put a tiny home on it. I didn't need a big house or apartment when it was just me. I would need to find something temporary, something for now. It was spring, but it was still cold out. Maybe I would rent a cabin or a room at a motel near the coast. I had been traveling and exploring like I had always dreamed of when I was a kid, planning different routes I could take so I could see all the things I wanted. Thankfully, being a nerd and the 'weird one' at school allowed me time to work on my web design from an early age. I was self-taught in most of it, but I did excel when I went for it as my major. I'd been working and making money, though, since I was fourteen.

Grandma helped me open up my checking account, keeping all the information about it at her house for safekeeping. She knew. She could see how Mom and Dad disliked me. I didn't think she could have imagined it to be at this level when she passed two years ago, but I'm so thankful she loved me and helped me better myself.

I'd be screwed if I'd waited to start working like most kids.

Pulling into a little motel that looked like something out of the sixties, with bright yellow paint on the building, with loud, cartoonish flowers painted over the top. I parked, loving the vibe of the place already, and went into the little lobby, asking for a room that was on the first floor, but closest to the office. The older lady handed me a key and told me it was number nine.

"Go out and make a right. It's right next door." She gave me a nod, her thumb hooked out like a hitch-hiker's as she pointed to the room next door. I pulled out my little duffle that has my few days' worth of clothes in it. I had been washing them as soon as I stopped somewhere, so I didn't have to try to unpack everything every time I stopped. Though I was thinking this was it. I thought this was where I was landing and putting down roots. It was somewhere no one would even think to look for me. I started lugging all of my luggage into the small room with two beds, a small table, chairs, and a shower that had a slow drip.

Pulling my last bag in, I yanked open the curtains and set up my laptop on the table just as the skies opened and a downpour came. It felt cleansing somehow. Like this was where I was meant to be, and this was making me somehow less...bitter? Angry? Hurt? Just less for now? That's what I was going with. I couldn't get too deep in the feels yet. I had to take a few steps before going into my emotions too deeply.

Last time was a disaster.

Logging into my hotspot, I searched for any smaller homes for sale, and three caught

my eye. One was an actual tiny home, but it was on wheels. I would check it out, but it was last on the list. Then there was an A-frame that I loved. Maybe add a patio on top where the loft was. If you didn't count the loft as a bedroom, it was a one-bedroom. I could totally use that lost space, once remodeled and updated, as an office space. A huge glass door would overlook a forest and a river about a mile from the house, which was visible from where it sat on the property, according to the photos attached. The last house that caught my eye was a cabin. Two-bedroom, one stand-up shower room, because there was no bathtub.

Oof.

That might move this one to dead last. I need a tub.

Okay. Time to make some calls.

Let's do this.

T H R E E: Publishing

Stormi's POV

It had been almost a month since I left and ghosted my whole family, and about two weeks, a little more, since I put in an offer on the A-frame after checking that I could, in fact, renovate and add the porch onto the loft area. We had a host of people coming out to look at the house, to make sure that it could happen. A reputable construction crew and getting an inspector to come to inspect the home were the first things I needed to find after we toured the home. I asked the older lady who worked at the motel which crew and inspector she liked best. So, I called them. They said yes, so the next call was to zoning to make sure it wouldn't be an issue for any reason.

Once zoning was approved for the upstairs porch, which took another week and a

half, I checked about adding solar panels too. They said because it was so cloudy here, it might not work, and I might want to keep the electric company on as a backup, so I scrapped that idea. I would stick with the electric company. If the weather improved for more than a few months, I would invest in solar. Not right now, though.

I put in a cash offer on the house, and the seller accepted almost right away. Once the offer was accepted and the keys were in my hands, as of yesterday at eight in the morning they were, I called everyone to go ahead and start on the construction. It shouldn't take long at all. A week, to possibly two weeks tops. Then I could start working in total peace. Unlike the motel I was staying at. Not that I didn't work well here, but the walls are everythin, and let us just say that...some of the things I've heard will give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

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They started that night.

As I sat in a local coffee shop, working away on my laptop, my phone rang, bringing me out of the creative groove I had been in for about two hours now, since first sipping my hot bean water that fed my soul. I saw it was Emily, my amazing boss and maternal figure, since all this nonsense started.

“Hi, Emily. What’s going on?” I heard her sigh on the other end.

“It’s not good, Storm. Your ex has been showing up here for a week and a half, demanding to know where you are, if we knew where you were. Raven’s here with me.” What the hell?

“Hey, girl.” I heard her, a little further away from the receiver. What the hell was going on there?

“Seems he’s been showing up at her house also. He’s desperate to find you,” Emily continued to fill me in on my crazy ex. Why on earth could he not just be happy with my twin? She was the perfect one, wasn’t she? That’s why he did what he did. I let out a bitter laugh. Where was this attention when he was fucking my sister? Where was this commitment to talk to me about things then? I knew I’d never get an answer, I believed, even if it was the truth. There was no trust left in him. And I knew there was definitely no trust when it comes to Story.

She was dead to me.

“Tell him I left the state. Tell him you contacted me through my work email, and

since I'm working 100% remotely, you're not sure of my exact location." I offered up as suggestions.

"He's worried about you and the baby." I heard Raven chip in, oh, so helpfully. I rolled my eyes so hard I think I saw a glimpse of my brain.

"Rave, tell him you spoke to me and I've lost the baby due to the stress of finding out about him and my slut of a sister. I'm sorry for putting this on you both." I sighed, feeling genuinely bad about leaving my friends to handle him and his increasingly desperate pleas of forgiveness, and needing to find myself. I thought she was what he wanted. Or does he just want someone to give him a baby? Has she cheated on him already? I couldn't help but feel a massive headache coming on.

"I'm sorry, you guys, I'm at a little café here, and all this talk of him is giving me a headache. I'm trying to hammer out these two designs that are due by next week. I just...Could you..."

"I know," Emily's voice came across the line, calm, understanding. "I just wanted to make you aware of it and see what you'd like to do. We're on your side in this. If you don't want to talk about him, we won't. We'll take care of any more issues we have with him here. You just focus on putting out amazing designs."

The porch add-on took only a week and a half to finish, and was ready to decorate. It was mainly a waiting game for the French doors to be delivered and material to put on a new black tin roof. In the time it took for the doors to get delivered, I found someone who could paint the entire outside of the house black to match the roof, completed three orders from customers, and found a new coffee house to get my brew from.

The house was looking awesome, and now that it was finished, I was finally able to move in and get out of the motel. I wasn't sure how much longer I could listen to

Ethel getting railed by the night janitor. I started looking at thrift shops to find furniture, ordered a bed online, and hit the fabric store for pillows and blanket materials. Projects, learning new things, that was what was going to keep me sane.

In what felt like no time at all, I had managed to furnish my home with pieces that felt very bohemian and cozy. I even managed to find an outdoor patio set to put on my covered porch off the loft area I'd turned into my little workspace. It was cozy with a chaise, lots of pillows, and blankets, all homemade, and some did not look too pretty.

I checked auction sites and apps for rugs and anything else I may have needed for the house. I knew Christmas was coming soon, and though I didn't feel like celebrating, it was my favorite holiday. I found a tree at a secondhand store, bought some all-white lights, and black-and-white decorations. I realized I had a lot more time on my hands lately, so I started writing on my laptop, just for shits and giggles at first.

I wrote under a pen name, not wanting anyone to know my actual name as a writer. Not with the family I had. I didn't want them to be any part of that. I'd also decided that, while I changed the names of the people who betrayed me to try to keep as much anonymity as possible, I tried to change some of the situations so they didn't scream, "This was my family" because I knew if my family read my self-discovery book I was working on, which I was passionate about. They would know it was me writing it.

I chose the pen name 'Artemis Jones' and tried to keep as many situations vague so as not to draw them specifically to the conclusion that it was loosely based on my life.

Once I'd written the novel, which took about four months, I decided I wanted to publish it and see if I could gain any traction from it. The first novel I self-published on Amazon was a smut novel. The second one I had been working on and completed was an MC romance, and the third was going to be this book I had just finished. It

was just after the holidays, was part one of my journey of self-discovery and healing after the trauma and betrayal I experienced. I touched on therapy and using writing as a tool. Plus, I surrounded myself in nature, letting myself be inspired by what I saw out my windows every day. I took photos on my old camera, and by old, I mean one that wasn't digital. Turns out, I have a knack for photography.

I'd sent out the first two chapters to publishing houses all over the country, wanting to make sure that I was fully covered just in case my family did think it was a book about them. I got two calls back almost immediately. One, from Ready-To-Go Publishing. The man seemed to think it was beneath him, but he'd called because the editor who read it really liked it and insisted he give me a call. I could tell he lacked interest as it was the female editor asking all the questions. He was not someone I wanted to work with on this.

The second call I got was from ReadItAndWeep Publishing. The man introduced himself as Sebastian Stone, owner and editor of the publishing house. I had never heard of it, but he said it was a local publishing house. I liked that fact. Over the phone, he asked questions, seeming very eager to read more and possibly publish parts one and two when they came out.

"This is just brilliant writing. Especially the parts that encourage people to seek help from a professional when they're struggling mentally after such a betrayal. And the ways you went about discovering who you are, they're affordable for the average person, and not just, 'I moved across the country and then traveled around the world. Not that that book wasn't amazing in its own right, but not everyone can do that.'"

"I totally understand that. While I have a little in savings, it's all that I saved when I was younger and working. I wanted to connect with nature and try things in my own little community that I knew I had an interest in, but never tried. I found some of the things I thought I'd really like, I didn't, and some of the things I wasn't sure about, I ended up loving. Like photography. I'd been told it would never go anywhere, same

with my writing.” I smiled. He was a conversationalist, even over the phone.

“Well, whoever said that obviously was just jealous of the raw talent you possess. I’d love to meet you for coffee. This week, if you’re available?”

“I’d love to. What day works for you?” I asked, pulling out my planner.

“How does Wednesday at eleven sound? At ‘Bean Thinking’ downtown?” I smiled. This man was actually interested in my book.

“That sounds great. See you then.” I looked at his picture on his company’s website, and let’s just say...

Wednesday couldn’t come fast enough.

Let’s do this.

F O U R: Wednesday

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Sebastian's POV

After reading the first three chapters of Artemis' book, 'How I Survived,' I was floored. This woman worked hard after learning the depths of the betrayal by her family and fiancé. Self-help books, yoga, pottery classes, cooking classes, hiking, she did everything. I honestly didn't know how she still had such a zest for life. It was similar to the famous book that made its rounds a few years ago, but this one was more of a 'this is what I did to keep myself going while on a budget, because everything is more expensive.' Which I loved.

Most of my readers were average, everyday people who needed to know that while things could be hard, you didn't have to travel the world to find beauty in life and things to help you discover your true self. I couldn't wait for Wednesday's meeting. I was complying with a list of questions about the book, how long it was, how many different things she planned to try along her journey, or if there'd be a part two, and what we could expect from that.

Part of me wished I'd thought to do something like this after losing my fiancé in the accident, but a part of me was so consumed by guilt and grief that I couldn't find my way out. Not until I came across her plans for this publishing house. She wanted to help lesser-known authors get recognition, but also in a way that could help the readers of the books published. When she died, she'd left everything to me. We were due to be married a week before the accident. Instead of our wedding, it became her funeral. I buried her in her wedding dress. I read her plans when I was going through her desk a year later, and decided that was what I was going to use the money she left to me to fulfill her dream. It was how she'd live on, through the story of this publishing house, ReadItAndWeep.

Wednesday came, and I was so excited to meet this woman, to talk about her book, and hopefully get it published through us, and out for distribution within the next few months. I walked in, contracts and laptop in my bag. I glanced around the coffee shop, not seeing who I was looking for. She said she'd be wearing all black, dressed casually. I dressed as casually as I could as the senior editor and owner of the publishing house. I wore trousers, loafers, and a long-sleeved button-up.

I ordered a coffee, black, and found a table with two comfortable chairs. I set the paperwork out on the table, rolling my sleeves up before leaning over it again, to make sure that there were no changes that needed to be made. Every time the bell rang above the door when someone walked in, I would look up to see if it was Artemis.

At five till eleven, the bell rang, and when I looked up, the world seemed to slow down, like that cheesy moment in the romcoms when the main guy meets his main girl, their meet-cute. I was trapped in one of those movies as the woman walked into the little coffee shop. I couldn't help but think that it wasn't even like this with Amelia, my late fiancé. Time never slowed down with her, but this woman...

She was stunning with her jet black hair, bright deep green eyes, and a slim figure. She was wearing a black V-neck shirt with black jeans, ripped in the knees, and black boots with cream colored, thick socks pulled over the tops. She had an olive-colored, army-style jacket over top. She looked like a goddess storming in to take over, over throwing the ownership of the shop or my heart because it was beating funny. I stood up, wiping my hands down my pants, then swiping my hair back, hoping I was not making a fool of myself. She looked around the café and saw me standing, staring at her. She walked over to me, cautiously.

"Mr. Stone?" She asked, and her voice was so soft, it sounded like a melody to a song I'd never heard but could easily become my favorite. It was soft like a baby's freshly washed and sun-dried blanket. I didn't know how someone this perfect could exist,

but holy hell, did I want to work with her. I'd do whatever was needed to get this publication.

"Yes," I said, swiping my hair back again, "Artemis Jones?"

She giggled. That was an even more beautiful sound than her speaking.

"Artemis Jones is my pen name. My real name is Stormi Buchcannan."

"Buchcannan? Any relation to the president?" She laughed again.

"No. His last name is spelled differently. My family came from France in my great-great-grandparents' generation. They were on my dad's side of the family. But, mygrand-mère passed when I was in college a few years ago."

"How old are you?" I was just being nosy now.

"I'll be twenty-three next month. I graduated from NYU last May, but this is my first self-help book that I'm looking to publish." I just stared at her for a few moments. This woman wasamazing.

"Can I get you a coffee? Tea? Something to munch on? Have you published other books before? What did you get a degree in?"

"I was just about to order an iced coffee and lemon pound cake. It's my weakness," she blushed slightly as if she was telling a secret that wasn't meant to be shared, "They have the best desserts in the area." She raved, slipping her coat off her delicate shoulders, allowing me to see the rest of her body without the bulky coat covering her. She had on a fitted t-shirt that revealed a half-sleeve on her left arm of what looked like book spines, and different styles of pens throughout the years. It was beautiful, dark, and colorful all at the same time. Watching her as she moved across

the front of the counter, graceful like a ballerina, my eyes couldn't help but follow her every move.

She was captivating.

The rest of the conversation flowed as naturally as the Mississippi River between us. I filled her in on everything we could offer her here at ReadItAndWeep Publishing. She signed the contract for this book and the next one, part two, she was hoping would be able to after she was healed, and where life was going from that point. We talked with my lawyer, who assured us that since their legal names were not used, and the situations were vague, and we didn't specify a certain location where this happened, we could get away with talking about it, and how she was recovering and growing. Plus, with the pen name, no one would know it was Stormi unless we wanted it to be known.

Then, we'd have to discuss the legality of it all.

"I'll be your editor for this book and the next. I'm hoping to have it completed and out within the next three to four months if that works for you." She nodded, swallowing a sip of her cinnamon coffee.

"Great. How far along in it are you?" I asked, putting the paperwork in all of the correct folders, stuffing them back in my briefcase once I was done.

"Done." I looked at her, confused. She was done? With the whole thing?

"Really?" I asked, partly impressed, partly still unbelieving that the whole thing was done.

"Yeah. If you'd like to come over, you can see it for yourself. I have it saved on my laptop in my home office."

“I can’t today. I’m swamped at the office, but how does” I pulled out my phone to check my calendar, “Next Friday at five sound? I can bring takeout?”

“Chinese?” She suggested, eyebrows raised, looking so hopeful.

“Sure. Any favorites?” I gave a small smile, trying to stop the excitement building inside of me at the thought of spending more time with her.

“Anything, just not too spicy, and at least two egg rolls.” She said, holding two fingers up, and a blush and a smile graced her face. I smiled. A woman after my own heart. I nodded as we packed everything up, getting ready to leave the café with signed contracts and a planned meet-up for next Friday. I couldn’t wait, and the fluttering in my chest was just the excitement at having Chinese for dinner.

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Not the woman who blew my mind when she walked into the café earlier.

Let's do this.

F I V E: Friends

Stormi's POV

Sebastian and I had grown closer to each other while working on my book together over the last three months. He would come over and we would work two days a week up in the loft office, or at the coffee shop in town. We would talk, and not just about the book. We would talk about our lives, our past, and our dreams for the future, the types of things I was thinking about doing for book two, and making lists so I could start book two while he was editing book one. He even asked if he could join me on a few of my adventures. He had slowly started becoming a good friend, someone I could talk to with ease, no judgment, no hate, nothing.

I still had walls up after being so betrayed by all my family and Jason, but I was slowly getting better. I found a therapist, some self-help books of my own, and switched from coffee to tea. I was trying to stay calm and work on getting through my breakdowns and anxiety without the use of meds. I didn't want to take them unless I had to. I was still managing six different clients at work, and was in the middle of a large project for one of the bigger companies. It had been close to nine months since I had gone no contact with my family and Jason.

My therapist and I talked about how nervous I was about the book release that was coming up this Friday. We decided to use my pen name and keep my photo out of the

book. We also cited all the photos in the book as being taken by my pen name, again, not wanting to draw any kind of attention towards me. I felt this could be a huge relief for me to get it out in the open and to help others who'd been wronged by their families. This was a healing journey for me, also. Not just going to therapy, but writing, cooking classes, photography classes, poetry readings, traveling, everything I had done so far, and would continue to do.

My therapist helped me see that I was doing this for myself, setting the boundaries and cutting contact. I was finally standing up for myself. Giving myself a voice. Finally working through all the anger I have towards Story and my parents. The anger towards my parents for always putting Story first. For not being there for me because 'Story needs us' or 'Story needed this, can't you understand?' The anger towards Story because she was just a bitch her whole life, bullying me, taking things she knew I loved or wanted, such as friends, boys I liked, my fiancé, clothes from my closet, etc. She could never just let me be happy or have something, including attention.

Overcoming this mountain of shit was hard when you had been conditioned to think one way for so long. It took a lot of mental fortitude to work on changing your thought process, convincing yourself that you're worth it and deserve people's time, affections, and attention. I was hoping the tips and tricks my therapist had taught me, and also the affordable things I tried, would help someone else if they were in a similar situation as this.

Friday rolled around quicker than I was prepared for. Time seemed to slip through my fingers faster than I could keep track of when I was working on work and the book. I was sitting on the loft's covered porch, in one of the oversized hanging egg chairs with a blanket wrapped around me, drinking a cup of ginger honey tea, as a cool summer rain came pouring down around me. I saw a few critters running to get back to their burrows as the rain came down heavily. I barely heard the crunch of the gravel under tires over the rain as I caught a glimpse of Sebastian's car pulling into my driveway. I stood, going to the railing, and saw an umbrella pop out of the car, and

he came up to the front door. He tilted the umbrella to see me standing there watching him. I waved him up, knowing the doors were unlocked, and he hurried inside. I moved over to the little couch in the corner that I was lucky enough to find at a discounted price at the thrift store last month, and tucked up against the house, away from the heavy drops that fell from the sky. He came out and joined me.

“It’s already available,” he said softly and my breath hitched in my throat, “It went on sale at midnight, and it’s being advertised to everyone who’s searched self-help or ‘how-to’ books,” he handed me a slice of lemon pound cake I hadn’t seen him bring out. He waited until I took a bite of it before dropping the biggest bomb of all.

“It’s only eleven in the morning, and you’ve already sold three hundred copies. Only eleven hours of being live as an e-book and a paperback. The hardback copies go live tomorrow, and the audiobook will be coming out next month.” He said, and I tried not to choke on my pound cake as I processed the information. I honestly couldn’t believe it. That was...huge. Much bigger than I thought I would be, and it was only the beginning.

I thought I'd reach a handful of people, but nothing like this.

He smiled at me. You know that smile that a guy gives you when he’s proud of something you accomplished? That smile. It absolutely made my heart melt a little more each time I saw it. Each time I got that smile, I knew instinctively that he saved that smile, just for me. I had noticed once when we were at the café, if someone called him, he would have a very stern expression on. If a woman approached him, he kept a respectable distance from them, not giving away many expressions.

I could admit it. Sebastian was a very attractive man. He was tall, probably six-foot-three, maybe six-four, with long blonde hair that came down past his shoulders, though when he was working, he kept it pulled up into a bun on top of his head, but when he wasn’t, he left it down, and my god, he looked like Thor. If we were taking a

class together, purely for the sake of my book, he usually pulled his hair up into a higher ponytail. And he wore these wire-framed, round glasses when he did his editing or computer work. He explained that the first time I froze and looked confused when I saw him in them that they had blue lenses to protect his eyes if you stared at a screen a lot. Which we did, but I think they just make him look sexy. Like, a hot, muscular man in a library with an old book, sexy.

I'd never tell him that, though. We were professionals and friends, and I didn't know that I could fully trust him yet. It had only been three months of knowing him. I'd been with Jason for two years, and he'd been betraying me for half that time with my sister. My whole family knew. How did I trust my own judgement again? All the self-doubt aside, he smiled at me.

Or when his parents and little brother called.

"I think this book of yours is going to blow up. I think it's going to be insanely popular with all kinds of people, mainly because it's not written in clinical terms and things that people don't understand. Plus, all the things people can try once they get themselves going, or if they just need to stay busy? You were on to something. We might even get requests for interviews, which could be difficult since we're using a pen name." He watched me as I watched him. I could still feel his eyes on me as I looked back out to the landscape in front of us, listening to the rain coming down on the tin roof above us.

I needed a break from his handsome face and relaxed attire. I had just gotten my eyes and mind used to him in trousers and a button-down shirt, looking every bit the dressed-down Pinkerton, but now I had to try to process seeing him in this look. This...summer lumberjack look. My heart wasn't sure I could handle it. He graced my presence with boot-cut jeans, work boots, and a cream-colored Henley shirt that hugged every muscle on his torso. His jeans hugged his thighs like they weren't tree trunks themselves. I wasn't sure my heart could handle it. He looked so good. I took a

sip of my tea, trying to calm my racing heart.

Racing only from the sales I'd gotten so far.

And the thought of possibly doing interviews.

"What does Alex think of doing interviews?" I asked, needing to get my mind as far off the thoughts swirling in my head about how that shirt was almost more erotic than seeing him shirtless might be.

"He said as long as we use your pen name, it shouldn't be a problem." I nodded thoughtfully, trying to figure out how we could do interviews without showing my face. Maybe a mask? Hair in the way like Sia?

Alex was his lawyer and also his best friend. They'd gone to college together, where they met and became semi-friends. Sebastian said it wasn't until sophomore year and they were living off campus, as roommates again, that they became good friends. He was very nice, friendly in a detached sort of way, and Alex is very protective of Sebastian. I think it's because of what he went through with his late fiancée. The first time I met Alex, he kept giving me the stink eye like I was some kind of leech looking to make a profit off Sebastian. Which, I guess, technically I was, but I just wanted him to publish my books.

I wasn't trying, or hoping, for anything else. I knew I was in absolutely no condition, mentally, to try anything with anyone. It had only been nine months. I was still too raw.

Maybe one day.

One day, I would meet the right guy, and I would be able to have my happily ever after. But, first things first, I needed to make this book and the next successes. I knew

I'd drifted from whatever he was saying, getting lost in my head and the steady thumb of the rain on the roof and falling on the leaves on the forest floor.

"When do you want to start on book two?" I jumped slightly, caught off guard by his voice, but quickly recovered, hoping he hadn't noticed at all how awkward I was just then.

"I've already started a list of things I want to try. Things to help me keep finding me, the me now. Because there are two me's. The one from before, and the one now, in the after. And I'm different than who I was. I think the biggest thing that's helped me start to move past the trauma was forcing myself back out there, in a new place, trying everything. I want to do everything at least once. It's the only way I can see to help me move past the betrayal. Because I want to feel semi-normal again. I want to trust people again. I want to feel like there is someone else in this world other than my best friends, who are like the sister and mother I always wanted, in this world, who I can trust, and lean on, and talk to, and hang out with." I don't know why all of that poured out of me, but I can't exactly take it back and make him unhear the ranting I just did. I just...think I'm trying to trust him with this little bit. If he can handle that tiny bit, maybe he'd be open to more. Is that my thought process? I made such good progress.

"Let's hear this list," he said, with a smile on his face, sounding way too chipper for eleven in the morning. Getting up, I reach just inside the door to my desk, grabbing a composition notebook off the top of the stack. There were at least five there. One for short stories, one for smutty stories, a blank one, and two for my 'Finding Myself' ideas.

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“Let’s see,” I opened the most recent one, “I have been hiking in Oregon recently and found a waterfall on my last trip. Some things I haven’t done, are going whale watching, getting a piercing, zip lining, horseback riding, take a cruise, go on a date,” I’m cut off by his snickering, “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Sorry, continue,” I gave him a little pout, but went back to reading, “I want to go to a Renaissance fair.” That had him snickering again, so I slammed my notebook shut and stood quickly.

“I’m done!” I stormed inside, irritated because he was laughing at my dreams and goals, and things I wanted to try. I wanted to try everything at least once. I just wanted to be able to say I’d done it. That I had done everything I wanted, even if I was having to put certain dreams on hold. I knew I was being irrational as I stormed downstairs, putting my cup in the dishwasher and storming to my room, slamming the door. I was leaning up against the door, trying to keep the stupid tears at bay because now I was embarrassed, and couldn’t believe I’d acted so immature.

“I can’t see you at a renaissance fair,” he tried to keep a soft, but firm voice as he talked to me through the door, but I still heard him stifling his laughter again, “milady.” He started belly laughing behind the door. It was a beautiful sound, and I could imagine him with his head tossed back. A man who was always composed, losing himself in laughter. I smiled at the thought of him doing that as I dried my tears, then laughed at myself. I imagined us dressed up in proper period clothing for a fair and using the old-timey language that I was not confident in at all. I started laughing harder, sliding down the door. I picture Sebastian dressed up in the puffy shirts or the tights and high heels. That thought just made me laugh harder, practically wheezing, I was laughing so hard at this point.

“Now,” I tried to get out through the laughter, “now we have to do it! I need to see if you look as ridiculous in tights and high heels as I think you would.” We both laughed at that as I opened my room. He was sitting on the floor, right where I was. We sat back down and leaned our backs against each other, just enjoying spending time together and making plans.

As friends.

Let’s do this.

S I X: Two Years Later.

Sebastian’s POV

Two years had passed since I first met Stormi at the café in town. Something I knew was happening, something I wanted, was that I’ve fallen completely in love with her. Her smile, her laugh, being within her orbit became a drug for me. It was something that I couldn’t escape. She pulled me in, so steadily, so surely. She was a constant in my life while we worked on these books. We were spending more and more time with each other, not just as writer and editor, too.

We were hanging out as friends. I met the two women she considered family. Both over FaceTime calls, but she was private with them, keeping them close, tucked away, until about eight months ago. That was when she answered the door, on a call with them, and introduced me to them. I wasn’t prepared, but they told me they’d heard stories about me. About helping her with her list.

I blushed, harder than I think I’d ever blushed when the woman, Emily, the woman Stormi called Mom affectionately, teased me.

I was the one who helped her check things off her list, and with writing book two,

‘Figuring Out Myself’. We had checked off everything from that first list in no time, except for a few things, but she kept adding more. More things she was comfortable with, or ‘as ready as I’ll ever be’, things she wanted to do. She never did go on that date that was on her list. When I asked her why one time, she said she was holding onto that until she was ready and found someone worthy of being that first date after.

She said she was thinking of turning that into its own book called ‘Dating after Betrayal’. She had been thinking of date ideas and turned that into its own section in the Bucket List Book. We were discussing some of those ideas, and she randomly said, “There’s someone I have in mind, but I’m not sure if I could ever ask him. Does that make me a coward?” She was looking out over the waterfall in front of us after we’d just hiked up here. I wasn’t expecting that. I also wasn’t sure who the guy was, but I didn’t like the idea of her dating someone...other than me. I didn’t like the idea of someone else holding her hand, walking her to her door at the end of the night, kissing her, maybe walking inside and...that’s where I had to stop my thoughts because if not, I’d start punching trees like a fucking jealous moron. It made me want to punch that guy, whoever the fuck he was. I wanted her to be mine, not with anyone else, but now with this? Having a guy in mind? I was worried and almost positive that I had waited too long.

Now I was condemned to the friend zone.

It was two days later, and I was still thinking about it, trying to figure out who it would be. Maybe Marty from the softball team? Or was it Tim from pottery class? I couldn’t think of a single guy we knew from any of the numerous classes or clubs, or teams we had joined, who didn’t think we were already together.

Fuck!

Who was he?!

I was on my way to her house with Alex, not fully able to listen to what he had been trying to tell me for the last thirty minutes we'd been in the car. I couldn't stop running through the possible guys it could be. Who was it?! Trying to shift my focus, I tried to remember the reason we were on our way to see her.

We had seen a campaign over the last few weeks of largely negative reviews on both of her self-help books that we published. We hired a cyber specialist to trace back where the reviews were coming from, and a PI to see if they had any sort of luck. Twenty of the reviews came from her family. Namely, her mother's and her sister's computers. I was sure the others were from people they knew or had talked to about the books and how they had to be hers. Or they were crazy enough to go to an internet café and make more.

Alex was here to discuss what we could do about it. We had a journalist reach out to us yesterday for a comment, and I knew I couldn't keep this from her any longer. Not when I was getting questions like, 'Why is your author writing about private family matters that are completely unfounded? Do you know about the family claiming they're hiring a lawyer to sue for slander and defamation?'

I was flabbergasted because that was not Stormi. She wouldn't publish something like that, where worst case scenario was someone found out Artemis was her, that insinuated a lot of people looked really fucking shitty without some kind of proof. As her friend, and more importantly, the man who loved her more and more each day, I couldn't keep this from her. It wouldn't be right. It would hurt her trust in me, and that would be the worst possible outcome. We had come so far, and she deserved to be able to face this head-on. She deserved to know as soon as I did two hours ago when I called Alex for backup.

I was going to throw my weight behind her. It wasn't a lot of weight in the publishing industry, but I knew I was on friendly terms with the right people.

Pulling up her drive, I saw her SUV in the driveway. The chimney had smoke coming out of it, indicating she was here and probably cuddled up on the couch, eating her comfort food, or grilled cheese and tomato soup with so many saltine crackers that it became mush.

Getting out with my umbrella, I made my way to her door, giving it a quick knock before it was barely popped out. Peeking her head out like someone might bite her cracked something in me, and I wanted to pull her into my arms and never let her leave. She closed the door again, and I heard the chain being slid from its place on the door. It was serious if she was using the chain. She hadn't used that in eighteen months. She opened the door all the way, waving us in. Her eyes are red-rimmed. She had been crying. Alex walked in and headed to the stools at her kitchen island. I stood in front of her, my voice low.

"Stormi, what's wrong?" She didn't look up at me, just sniffled. I put my hand under her chin, tipping her head up to look at me. Tears brimmed in her eyes. And I hated how beautiful I thought she was. Tragically beautiful.

"What happened, beautiful girl?" My voice came out slightly strangled and pleading. I hated seeing her like this. I hated seeing the pain in her eyes.

"I got an email. My sister and mother know I'm the one who wrote the book," Tears were streaming down her face. "They said they're going to sue for defamation."

"Do you have proof that they cheated? That everything in the book true?" She paused for just a split second before rushing up into the loft. I heard her printer working as I walked over to where Alex was standing in the kitchen.

"Take it, she found out?" Alex said as he looked through the cupboards for a glass.

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“Her family emailed her, threatening to sue her for defamation,” I said with my eyes closed, trying to breathe deeply because I was about to reach my limit with these people.

“She has proof?” I inclined my head towards the loft.

“I think that’s what she’s printing now.” I was about to cross my arms when I heard her feet coming down the stairs. I kept my arms at my sides in case she needed a hug.

“Here!” She came downstairs, looking much more confident and determined with two thick folders in her hands. “I have emails from Jason admitting to the affair. I also have my old phone that I’ve never turned back on. I just got a new number and phone. I traded in an even older phone when I got the one I have now. I’ll plug this into see if I have anything good on it.” She plugged the phone in as Alex read through the emails from her sister, Jason, and his parents. And all of the other printed evidence she’d gathered. There were photos on social media, messenger apps, and screenshots of everything.

“They had to get a restraining order against him? Why?”

“He wouldn’t leave my boss or friend alone. He showed up at my job demanding to know where I was multiple times. He kept going to Raven’s house, convinced they knew where I was. Eventually, they told him that I was somewhere they didn’t know, they just knew I left the state. Everything went through a lawyer, even the bit about there being no baby.” She mumbled the last part.

“What now?” Alex asked, and I was curious too. What baby? She did say, baby,

didn't she? She heaved a sigh before explaining.

"When the confrontation was happening, in front of my family, my parents' friends, and his family, he hurt me by telling me he picked the wrong sister." Her eyes looked dead as she recounted the story, "Being hurt, I wanted to hurt him back. I told him I was pregnant. I wasn't sure if I was at the time because my period was two to three weeks off, and we hadn't exactly been careful because the wedding was right around the corner, and we had talked about a honeymoon baby. So, I told him I was and left, ghosting him. But I would have told him if I were, I'm not a total monster. It was two months later that I told Emily and Raven to tell him there was no baby." Her cheeks flamed red. She was embarrassed, "He wouldn't leave them alone. Finally, they had no choice but to pursue. It wasn't my finest hour."

"That won't look good in court, but we could always say you got a false positive, and due to the stress and emotional pain you were in, you weren't thinking clearly when you told him. And then again, when you didn't tell him right away, there was no baby." Alex said, matter-of-factly, "Let's power up that phone. If there's evidence on there, I want to use that instead of the emails."

Powering on the phone, we didn't have to wait long before it began buzzing with unread text messages, voicemails, and notifications on her socials. I grabbed it before she could, taking the chance to see everything first from her. I didn't want her exposed to that anymore.

"I'd like to read it, that way if it's hurtful," she shook her head.

"I need to see this, Sebastian."

"We all do," Alex reminded us. Nodding, we crowded around the phone, flat on the countertop.

“Voicemails first. If we have their voices, it’ll be pretty damning. Text messages next.” She nodded at Alex’s words. Clicking the first voicemail and putting it on speaker, a woman’s voice filled the air.

“Straight to voicemail?! AGAIN?! You better answer the next time we call you, Stormi Selene Buchcannan! You cannot embarrass your sister like that and walk out on this family! I’m sorry you’re hurt that Jason chose her over you, but honestly, what did you expect?!” A scoff was heard, “Get over yourself. A year is nothing. And you’d only invested eighteen months with him when you found out about them. Get over it. Call us back, you brat!”

Clicking the next one, putting that on speaker also, a man’s voice rang out, “Listen, pumpkin, I know you’re upset at your sister and mother. I am, too. I didn’t know anything about that or what was happening. Maybe I was just choosing not to notice. I don’t know. But I do know that you can do better than him if he’s willing to be with family.” There was a long pause, and then, in a softer, more strangled voice, you heard who I assumed was her father speak again.

“I’m genuinely sorry about her sleeping with your boyfriend, my Stormi girl. Please, call me. I’m worried about you. I love you, pumpkin cake.”

She gasped, hearing, who I assume was her dad, telling her he didn’t know and he loved her. Tears filled her eyes, “Daddy,” she whispered.

The next seventeen voicemails were pretty much more of the same nonsense. More blaming her, telling her to be understanding, that family needs to come first, calling her selfish. Blaming her for tearing the family apart. That one made me bark out a humorless laugh. The nerve of these nincompoops. Her mother and sister are absolutely horrible to her, and her dad is begging her to call him. There were a few from her ex, admitting to sleeping with her sister, sounding all arrogant to calls where he’s apologizing profusely, begging her to call and talk it out with him.

The text messages were basically the same, but in text form, just more and from extended family, also. Cousins and aunts and even uncles. Even ones from months after the confrontation, with pictures her sister sent, with dates they were taken, and mocking her for being so naïve, and continuing to rub her relationship with her ex in her face. Her sister even sent photos of what looked like their wedding night.

“This is more than enough to destroy them, and any claims they’ve made,” Alex said with a positively evil smirk on his face. I knew this was a lawyer’s wet dream, but he didn’t need to make it so obvious. “I cannot wait for the judge to hear these. We could either wait until they serve us...or...we could take this to the media. If this movement they’re pushing gets any bigger, ya know?”

“How much bigger are we talking? Because they’re already leaving horrible reviews on the book for sale on Amazon, the socials I have set up for the Artemis penname, Goodreads. It’s a nightmare. I’d rather not have this get too much bigger if possible.”

Alex nodded, and I was already thinking of putting together an interview with a couple of the smaller news outlets, and maybe a statement from Artemis that we put out there to her fan base on the socials. Trying to get a handle on the chaos.

“I’ve got a plan. But...it might involve putting your face out there, if you’re ready?” I asked, hesitantly, because I knew the pen name was to try to minimize blowback from her family, to keep her life separate from her writing. But that was out the window now, since they knew, since they were calling her out for ‘false claims’.

“Let’s do this.”

S E V E N: Standing Up for Myself.

Stormi’s POV

Within the two weeks since Alex and Sebastian came over to talk strategy, when the insanely negative reviews first started, attacking not just my book but myself as an author, we had started our countermeasures against my family. Our first move was apologizing to my fans for all of the drama, and promising that it would all be cleared up soon, posting it directly on my author page on Amazon. Then another on my socials, letting them know that I would be doing an interview, and posting a link for them to watch and share.

That interview was yesterday, with a local news station, and Sebastian had another one scheduled for tomorrow for me over Zoom with a morning show in New York since my book was listed in the top ten self-help books, and was on its way to becoming a best seller. I couldn't wait for people to watch these, and hopefully, it would put the stories to rest about all of this being 'fake', that I'm 'looking for clout'.

I spent the day holed up in my office, working on a smutty romance novel, a sweet one that ended happily with lots of orgasms for the main couple after some serious drama. That's all I wanted. I wanted to get to that point in my own book where it was peaceful, the drama had passed, and we could just live that easy, steady, mundane life. There was definitely no way I could go on that first date any time soon. Not until all of this crap was over. There was no way I'd get any kind of sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:33 am

I didn't sleep much last night, and Sebastian offered to stay with me as I was having some serious anxiety about this interview. I knew the questions would be more personal, more probing, looking for all of the juicy, dirty, salacious details, and thus would be harder to answer. The alarm went off early, pulling me from replaying the fun little game of 'What Possible Questions and Answers in My Mind'. I had to take a deep breath before I felt like I could get up and hop in the shower quickly, just to help myself feel fresh, a little more awake. As I stood under the shower, the heat of the water warmed something inside of me that was begging to die as the nightmares of what my family brought with them assaulted me over the last few days. The drama, the blame, guilt tripping, shaming. I was hoping the water would wash my nerves away. I heard a knock at my door, and Sebastian called out, "I left an outfit for you on your bed. After the interview, can I take you out for a breakfast date?"

I stood there, the cooling water rushing over me. This could go one way or the other. Either I came out on top, armor intact, or they crushed me again. And...if I got clobbered? I knew I'd be down for a long while. I had to take a steadying breath before cracking the shower door and shouting back, "Sure. I could eat, but I'm not too sure about after the interview. Depends on how it goes."

There was silence for a moment, only the sound of the cold water splashing onto me and the shower could be heard.

"No problem. I have coffee ready, and everything set up for the call in the living room." His voice calmed something ever so slightly in my chest. I gently closed the shower door, hurrying up, so I could try to get myself as together as possible. I got out of the shower and rushed through my morning routine, throwing on the 'no make-up, make-up' to give me that 'fresh and natural' look. I saw a really pretty white off-

the-shoulder top with eyelet material over the top. It was beautiful. I put that on, with my black, ripped jeggings. I went into the kitchen, checking the clock, and seeing I only had about fifteen minutes before we had to be on time for the interview. Rushing back to my bathroom, I grabbed some mouse, hair spray, and a hand towel. I rushed back to the kitchen, taking a sip of coffee before styling my hair in the scrunched style that was oh so popular in the early two-thousands. I grabbed my cup and headed to the couch where Sebastian was sitting, looking like he belonged there. His legs were stretched out, and one arm was casually tossed over the back. He looked so good in his cream-colored Henley and ripped dark jeans, his long blonde hair tied up in a bun. He was talking with the producers before the interview. As I set my coffee cup down and smoothed my shirt, I caught the tail end of what the producer was saying.

“They insisted. They claim to have proof that everything she’s claiming in her book is a lie.” I turned to look at the screen, then Sebastian, a confused and questioning look on my face, unable to say anything. Sebastian had the bridge of his nose pinched between his fingers before he looked up and saw me. I couldn’t help the pain that flashed across my face.

I was going to have to face them. He looked stricken, then pissed as he turned his attention back toward the screen. He seemed reinvigorated.

“So, Jack, you’re telling me ten minutes before we go live that the family is on with your guy?! And now it’s changed from a calm interview to what? A ‘confrontation’? All because they claimed to have ‘real proof’?” He glared at the screen while I froze at his words. Memories of their treatment danced through my mind as I shut down.

My family was going to be on this with me. I had this sinking feeling in my stomach as I sank onto the couch next to him. He turned to look at me, I could feel his gaze on me, but I wasn’t able to focus on anything. I wasn’t ready. I hadn’t prepared to confront them. To confront her! Them! Was this a setup from the very beginning?

Sebastian, noticing my state, lowered the computer's lid so it wasn't showing our faces, giving me some privacy as he grabbed my hand.

"I'll be right back," he said toward the computer, before he turned to sit on the coffee table in front of me, "I'm calling Alex. We'll take care of this. You don't have to do this." He cupped my face, running his thumb so soothingly over my cheek before he stood up and walked to the corner of the room, talking quietly into his phone, while the producer tried to introduce himself to me, explaining my family had heard about the upcoming interview. He said that they insisted I knew about the alleged affair and that I was being dramatic to make some fast money because I didn't have much going for myself. I felt my jaw physically fall on the floor. Sebastian came back to where he left me sitting on the couch after his phone call and got a refill for his coffee cup.

Before I could ask what the fuck was going on, we heard someone shouting out about going live and the countdown. Sebastian sat right next to me on the couch, zero space between us, and lifted the computer lid back up so we were ready to go. The host of the show popped up on our screen with all of the people I'd hoped to never see in my life again sitting on furniture right on the screen.

"And over Zoom, we have Sebastian Stone, Editor and CEO of ReadItAndWeep Publishing, with Stormi Buchcannan, a famous 'self-help' author, more commonly known as Artemis Jones, her pen name. Welcome!" He smiled, looking like a viper, like he was planning on burying me alive. He looked like he wanted to fuck my sister so he was willing to believe whatever nutty squirrel shit came out of her mouth, "Tell us, Stormi, that's a very unique name. Why did you use a pen name when you started writing? Why not come right out and use your name?"

I took a deep breath, letting all the rage I'd had for years, channel into the politest 'fuck you' conversation I could have, "I used a pen name because, as a child, I was always told not to ruin the family name, to not embarrass or outshine Story in any way. I figured the romance novels I started writing in high school weren't very

appropriate for a lady to be writing, so I came up with the pen name. It's been the same since I started my career at fifteen." I smiled at the end of my answer.

The host looked somewhere between shocked and rattled as his head swiveled from the screen and my family, waiting for someone to say something. When no one did, he started his probing again.

"So you're saying you didn't want to disgrace your family name, which is why you opted to use a pen name, yet you still aired all kinds of dirty laundry very publicly. What do you say to that?" Story looked like a cat watching a mouse, thinking it was caught and couldn't fight back. I kept my face neutral, trying not to completely dissociate from the moment.

"I did what I could not to embarrass them. I used a pen name," I counted out on my fingers. "I used fake names for the people in my book, and I also never disclosed locations or anything other discerning information that could draw conclusions unless you read into it. My sister and mother are the ones who outed themselves, claiming to be the family of the author. The same family who made similar actions in the book that I had to work to overcome." Another smile, like nothing was wrong, and I was happy. Sebastian grabbed my hand, showing his silent support. Letting me know he was there if I needed him, but he was there to support me however he could.

My heart fluttered momentarily, but I masked it just as quickly. Not on camera. Not with them watching. They don't get to see what makes me happy, what puts me at peace.

The host looked momentarily thrown off before looking annoyed that I'd been able to be so polite this whole time.

"Your family here claims to have proof that what you wrote in your books was false. Your mother said it's a complete and utter fabrication from the delusions of a child

who always had to try to be the center of attention. So I ask, what proof do you have that anything you wrote was indeed fact? They have printouts of screenshots and emails between them and what they claim is your email.” He seemed so proud, so high and mighty. Taking another deep breath, I looked right into the camera, and I said my peace with a confidence I didn’t fully believe in myself, but it looked like I was coming across as very assured of myself.

“Because I still have my old phone, with all of the voicemails still on it. I have saved them in various other places, just in case I ever lost that old phone. I just so happen to have that phone all charged up, and I could play some of the voicemails for you if you don’t believe me.”

Smile gently. I had to keep reminding myself.

It was the best fuck you there ever was. A calm, gentle, demure fuck you, was ten times more effective than one that was screaming it in your face. I took joy as I saw my family visibly pale, the host looking more uncertain about their stance, by the second. Story scoffed, looking like she didn’t believe a word I said, and I wasn’t sure if this was confidence or stupidity.

“Play them if you really have them, you little liar! You’re just trying to be the center of attention again, and not for good reasons. As always!” Story spat, holding Jason’s hand firmly in her lap like he’d jump up and run if she let go. He looked guilty, like he didn’t want to be there. Dad had the same look on his face, like even getting his eyebrows waxed was more fun than sitting there. He kept his eyes down, not looking at or acknowledging my sister or mother. I was going to play the messages from my dad, showing he truly did want to be in my life, and I’d play the ones that would ruin the others. Everyone could burn, but I’d spare my dad.

This was his final chance, on my terms.

“Alright. Which do you want first, Story? Yours? Or Mom’s?” They both looked like startled dogs as they heard Story’s voice come out from my old phone, across the microphone, and played over the studio’s speakers. I watched as their faces continued to pale as they played.

‘I’m glad he’s not with you! Didn’t you think it was weird when you never met his parents? He told them about me, though. Thanks for finally doing something right, for once in your pathetic life, you, worthless piece of’, I ended the voicemail before I could get in trouble with the feds for swearing on live TV. Then I pressed my mom’s voicemail. Her most vicious one she ever left. It was dripping with shame, guilt-tripping, bullying, anything but what a loving mother should be saying to her daughter.

‘Answer your phone, you pathetic little worm! Stop being so dramatic! So, your sister’s been sleeping with your boyfriend. I don’t understand why you’re acting like the world’s falling apart. Story and Jason are finally able to be truly happy now. And they’re family. We support family, so you’re going to have to forgive them and move on.’ There was some shuffling, and then you heard Mom talking to someone, ‘She should consider herself lucky to be in this family. If I’d had my way, I’d have gotten rid of her. I only ever wanted one baby anyway. Your stupid father said we couldn’t, that he loved you both,’ she said mockingly, ‘He’s just as pathetic as she is. Maybe she’ll callus when she decides to get over herself.’ As her voice began to laugh, the voicemail cut off.

Both of them, visibly trembling, sat there red in the face. I had yet to play Jason’s voicemail, and that was probably going to be the biggest blow to them all. I could see the devil on my shoulder shaking her pitchfork in the air while cheering for the look of utter devastation on Story’s face when I played that one next. It was going to be beautiful.

“This is a voicemail from Jason. He left it at this number only three weeks ago.” I

said as I watched him, his face going pale. I glanced at Sebastian through the screen, and I could see pride brimming from him. He smiled at me, squeezing my hand a little tighter. Always my supporter, always my best friend.

Hopefully, this date was a real date after this. Because, watching them fall, their narrative being destroyed, I think I was finally ready.

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‘Storm...I,’ he sighed heavily, “I honestly don’t know why I even call this number anymore. It’s not like I’ve heard from you even once after you ran out of that disaster of a cookout. That was still supposed to be a happy day. I wanted to wait until we got home. I didn’t want you to find out that way. It...It wasn’t how I wanted to tell you. I’m so sorry.” There was sniffing, his voice thick with emotion, “Like I said in the other voicemails, therapy’s going well. I just...I can’t move past the fact that I know I made the biggest mistake of my life, choosing her over you. She’s a...truly horrible person. I read your book last month,’ You could hear him full-on crying, ‘I’m so sorry I broke you like that. I’m so sorry I lied to you, led you on, and made you feel that way. You didn’t deserve any of that. You were the perfect girlfriend. You were the sweetest girl I’d ever been with. I really, honestly wanted to marry you. If I could go back in time, I never would have texted her back. I never would have even swapped numbers with her. I would have listened to you when you told me about your family. I wouldn’t have been swayed by such an evil person. I am so incredibly sorry. If you ever hear this, I hope you know I still love you. You’ll always be the only one for me.’

I watched as Jason’s voice played, the fury that took over Story’s face. I watched as she stood up, hitting Jason, yelling at him, my mother joining in, as the host quickly attempted to get someone to cut to commercial. Sebastian quickly leaned forward so he could mute the screen, so he could say something he clearly didn’t want anyone else to hear.

“They’re going to bring up the pregnancy. Alex texted me while you were playing the last voicemail. Your mother wants to tarnish your name any way she can. Especially after that display of utter brilliance on your part.” He had that hint to his tone that told me he was joking with me, but that he loved it also. I nodded, knowing both my

mother and sister would stop at nothing to hurt me.

“Are you okay, Stormi? That was pretty brutal.”

I nodded again. While it was brutal, I was over the drama and the bullshit that came with my family. The betrayal they served hurt worse because family was supposed to always be there for you and have your back. Mine didn't, but I think some part of me accepted that. I also knew they'd never change, maybe my dad had, or was trying, and I think I was finally ready to have a tentative relationship with him. I was over Jason hurting me and had been for a while. I was ready to be my own person. Because I was finally over most of the hurt, “I think I want a relationship with my dad, depending on what he does with what my mom's voicemail spilled.”

He looked slightly confused, then it was like a lightbulb turned on. He nodded as we saw the host come back on. Sebastian unmuted us, grabbed my hand, and set it firmly on his lap. In view of the camera.

What was he thinking?

“Welcome back, everyone! Sorry for that quick commercial interruption, we had to ask a few of our guests to handle the drama off-stage. We still have the parents of Stormi Buchcannan on, as well as Stormi herself, also known as the author of the famous self-help book, ‘Overcoming Family Trauma with New Discoveries’, Artemis Jones. Mrs. Buchcannan, I understand you have proof that your daughter claims she was pregnant as she was leaving the last day you saw her, a few years ago? Do you know if you have a grandchild, you've never met?”

“I don't know. And it,” she dabbed her eyes, getting those crocodile tears out, “hurts so much to know I might have a grandchild out there that I've never met. It hurts that she's kept them from all of us for so long over a little misunderstanding.”

“We just heard the voicemails, and yours was pretty harsh towards your daughter. Are you sure it was all a misunderstanding?” My mother nodded like a bobblehead, desperate for someone to buy into her narrative. My father shook his head, still looking at the floor, ashamed and embarrassed. He cleared his throat, looking right into the camera like he was looking at me.

“I’m going out there, making sure we get this on the record, saying my wife has always favored Story, and has openly admitted many times to many different people that she never wanted twins. I always tried to get her to engage when the girls were little. The only one she ever bonded with was Story, and she insisted we hire a nanny for Stormi. After a while, she started doing better than Story, which would cause Story to cry, and then their mother we scream and scold Stormi. That was when the bullying started. Eventually, I got her to leave Stormi alone, and when I was around, it seemed like everyone was getting along. It was my fault for not realizing what was going on sooner.” My dad grabbed a file from behind his chair, handing it to the host before looking back into the camera.

“My wife has been having an affair for several years, which is probably why she has been fine with Story’s behavior toward Stormi.”

He reached behind him again, pulling out another stack of papers and handing it to my mother, “These are divorce papers. Considering the prenup, it should be pretty straightforward. Stormi, I’m sorry it took me so long to leave and stick up for you, baby. You’ll always be my number one girl. I love you.”

And he walked off the stage. My mother sat there, mouth open, staring at the documents in her lap, then at my dad's back as he walked away from her. I clicked play on my dad’s voicemail from when I first left.

‘Listen, pumpkin, I know you’re upset at your sister and mother. I am, too. I didn’t know anything, and I had no idea that was happening. Maybe I was just choosing not

to notice, I don't know, but I am sorry. I know you can do better. You deserved better. I'm genuinely sorry about her sleeping with your fiancé. Please call me. I'm worried about you. I love you, pumpkin cake.'

Then I played another one, 'Stormi, I know it's been six months, I know you're ignoring my calls, it doesn't bode well for me. But I wanted to let you know, your mother's been cheating. I need definite proof to divorce her. But I will divorce the witch. Once I get enough proof that she can't wiggle out of it, I'm going to send a PI to look for you. I miss you, pumpkin cake. I hope you're doing okay. I love you so much, baby girl. Please believe in your ole dad one more time.'

The audience awed and cooed. With that, the host ended the interview, and that was that.

"Ready for breakfast?" Sebastian asked, still holding my hand, smiling at me. Love and pride shone in his eyes. I leaned in, putting my other hand on his cheek, and kissed him. For the very first time.

"Let's do this."

E I G H T: Happy Six Months

Stormi's POV

For the next six months, Sebastian and I dated, exclusively and slowly. We both wanted to be sure that this was exactly what we wanted. I also wanted to make sure I wasn't completely damaged. We had our breakfast date right after the interview, and it was wonderful. We held hands, ate delicious food, and talked about everything and nothing that meant the world to me. About midmorning that day, we went for a walk through downtown afterward. Sebastian never once let me go. He always had a hand on me, touching me in some way. Whether he was holding my hand, or his hand was

on the small of my back, or he had his arm around my shoulders or waist.

That's how he remained. Every day after, he was always touching me when we were together. He opened up a lot more about what happened with his late fiancée, how she died, and how he was left feeling after that, if there was anything he did to support him. He appreciated my kindness and care, as far as his late fiancée was concerned. Things were easy with us. He was always complimenting me, kissing my cheeks, making sure I felt the best I'd ever felt about myself. I made sure he had something for lunch, asked about his day, and always checked in to make sure that we were on the same page and feeling heard in our relationship.

He also acted as the go-between for my dad and me in the beginning. I wanted to believe that he was all in and wanted to be a big part of my life, but I was wary, for about ten seconds, only to realize this man had proved himself to me every day for over two years. He didn't need to do more, just be himself. Things had gone better than expected with my dad, and we'd all been working towards a better, less toxic relationship. Dad respects my boundaries, and always has. He'd only had Sebastian's number as I wasn't ready for that step, but we did talk at least twice a week until the divorce from my egg donor was finalized. Once it was, Dad asked if he could move closer to me. I told him I needed space to think and process what that would look like.

After thinking for a couple of weeks on it, I said yes to my dad's idea, and gave him the name of the town we lived in. He moved to town a month later after packing up, finding a new job, housing, and settling everything back home.

It was our six-month anniversary. He'd planned a date night for us, promising to take care of all the details so all I had to do was show up and smile, being the most beautiful girl in the world. He had made all the preparations. We started with dinner at our favorite little hole-in-the-wall restaurant we'd found by accident one day after a long hike through the surrounding forests. We dressed up a little that night, wanting

to feel special.

This restaurant made the best eggplant parmigiana I'd ever had! The sauce never gave me heartburn like ever sauce out of a can ever did. The pasta was always al dente, and the service was amazing. They treated everyone like family. We'd become regulars there, stopping in on date nights, or after hikes, or sometimes if we were just craving it. Walking through the doors, the hostess led us to the back of the restaurant, where they'd been working on turning the outside space into a patio. Walking out of the back door, my jaw dropped. There were lights strung above the patio, a few tables and chairs were set out, but we were the only couple there. Sebastian pulled out my chair so I could sit in it, then pushed it in for me. We ordered a bottle of Riesling, and our bread and oil were delivered with the bottle and two glasses a few minutes later. I was busy looking around, taking in the potted plants, the lights, and the Italian opera music that was playing softly from the speakers outside. It was magical.

"Happy six months, Stormi," Sebastian smiled at me, holding out his glass of wine. I held up my glass to cheers him, taking a small, practically nonexistent sip, wishing him a happy six months also. I wanted to keep my wits about me. I knew I was going to take the plunge and tell him tonight that I loved him. I just didn't know when the right time would be.

"Do you know what you're going to order?" I asked, grabbing the menu, like we hadn't been here hundreds of times already. I was just stalling, and it seemed he was okay with that. He looked nervous, actually. I reached across the table, putting my hand on his, making him look up at me.

"Are you okay, Bastian?"

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“Yeah,” he sighed, “Why wouldn’t I be? I’m on a date with the best, most beautiful, funny, and amazing girlfriend in the world.” I heard the hostess bringing more people out, but I was too worried about why he was nervous to listen closely to the conversations. He said there, trying to get me to focus back on the menu, but I kept peeking up at him, trying to see if he’d relaxed. Soon, the patio was full of voices, while I closed my menu and stared at Sebastian, who was looking at the menu like he couldn’t decide what he wanted to eat.

“Bastian. We can go somewhere else if you don’t want to eat here,” I smiled up at him, “I’m happy as long as I’m with you.”

He took a deep breath, exhaling, “Let’s do this.”

Let’s do what?

N I N E: New Adventures

Sebastian’s POV

Taking a deep breath, I looked around at all the friends and family who I had secretly gathered here with us. Alex, my parents, her dad, Andrew, the women she considered her family, Emily, Raven, Raven’s son, Ryder, and our friend Danielle from the coffee shop in town. I looked at my girl. The woman I’d fallen in lust with when she walked in, and fell in love with as I watched her heal from her trauma and betrayal. She looked concerned, worried about me, and why I was so nervous. I knew if I didn’t pull it together, she’d be ready to leave after this glass of wine.

The waiter came over, and once I'd reassured Stormi that, yes, I did want to eat here, we ordered our entrees and I asked for tiramisu for dessert. Taking one final deep breath, I stood up.

The whole patio started to murmur louder, then they started to quiet down as I walked over to Stormi. I kept my eyes on Stormi's beautiful green eyes that pulled me in the minute she stepped into that coffee shop to meet me two and a half years ago. Standing in front of her side of the table, feeling awkward for staring at her, unable to look away, I bent down and took her hand. I kissed it once, as I bent down further and took a knee. She gasped, hand covering her mouth, tears springing to her eyes.

"Stormi Buchcannon," My voice only cracking once, tears filling my eyes as I prepared to bare my soul to this woman, "You stole my breath and my heart the moment I saw you step into the coffee shop two and a half years ago. You looked perfect walking in with your all-black outfit and green coat. Your smile blinded me, and your eyes pulled me in. Getting to know has been the greatest privilege of my life, thus far. Your laugh is my favorite song, and talking to you is the best part of my day. I never knew I could love someone this much, and this deeply. It may seem like a quick six months of being together, but I've had this ring burning a hole in my pocket, waiting for you to be ready for me, for the last two years and five months." A collective gasp went around the patio, but I soldiered on, determined to give her the best proposal.

"I knew you were the one for me, and I waited for you. So, now, in front of our friends and family," at that bit of information, she looked around, letting the tears slide down her cheeks, as she smiled at all of them, before she looked back at me with all of the love in her eyes.

"I am asking," I said, reaching into my trouser pocket.

"Yes." She breathed out, earning a few chuckles from our audience and me.

“I haven’t asked yet,” I smiled at her, and she blushed, “Stormi, will you make me the happiest man in the world, and marry me? Be my wife?” With a smile that I’m sure you could see from outer space, tears steadily falling down her face, she nodded.

“Yes,” she breathed out. I slid the ring on her finger, and she flung herself into my arms. Arms, I’d hold her in forever, that would always be open to her. The crowd of our loved ones rang out in happy cheers. Everyone came up to congratulate us, and a fresh wave of tears formed and flowed from my fiancée. She introduced me officially, live and in person, to Raven, Ryder, and Emily. I could see what she meant when she called them ‘my older sister from another mister, and my real mom.’ They were exactly like that with her. Emily gushing over her, and when they’d go dress shopping, already talking wedding plans. Raven was sobbing, incredibly happy for her, while Ryder was a bit quieter and more reserved, giving me a fist bump as a congratulations. Alex had champagne brought out for everyone, though Stormi declined, saying she didn’t want to get drunk tonight.

“It’s a special night, I want to remember it and not wake up with a pounding headache, thank you very much,” she said, smirking at him. Alex just rolled his eyes, happy as hell that I was ‘finally taking the plunge’. Stormi walked back to our table, picking up her glass and tapping her fork against it.

“Could I please have your attention? Everyone? Please! I have an announcement to make,” she shouted out to the crowd of our loved ones. The crowd quieted. She looked around at everyone as she began.

“I wanted to thank you all for being here for this, as this...this is the best day of my life so far,” her voice trembled at that, tears lining her eyes, “and since you’re all here, the gift I was going to give Bastian, just the two of us, has turned into a group gift. I guess.” She handed me a beautifully wrapped white box with a rainbow bow tied to it. She stood there as I unwrapped it. Opening the box and taking out some of the tissue paper, what lay in the box had me frozen.

“What is it?!” Alex shouted from his table, three glasses of champagne deep already.

I looked up at her, tears in my eyes, the unasked question on my lips, and she nodded. I held up a shirt that said, ‘Regional Manager’ from my favorite show, *The Office*. And showed everyone, we got some cheers from fans of the show. But then I held up the tiny little onesie that said, ‘Assistant to the Regional Manager,’ and the crowd erupted again! My mother and Emily were screaming like schoolgirls, hugging each other and sobbing, two happy mothers. Stormi’s dad wrapped her tightly in a hug, crying into her hair, as she hugged him back. Alex and my dad shook my hands and slapped my back.

“This is the best day ever!” I exclaimed, pushing past everyone, grabbing Stormi from her father, wrapping her in a hug.

Could life be any sweeter?

I was going to be a dad, and I was about to marry my absolute best friend.

Let’s do this!

T E N:

Sebastian’s POV

One year later...

A whole year had gone by. Our first anniversary was coming up next month, the same month our little girl turned six months old, and I had a surprise planned for my little family. We were going to be going to Alaska on a whale watching trip. I knew Stevie wouldn’t remember it, but we would have lots of pictures and lots of memories to share with her as she grew older. Plus, we could always go again. It was something

Stormi had kept on her bucket list. For our tenth anniversary, I have a trip to Europe planned for the family, her mom, Emily, and sister, and soon-to-be brother-in-law included if they wanted to come. Family was family. Stormi had started her list of countries she wanted to visit and things she wanted to do and see in each of the countries on that list.

Life had been amazing. We got married the month after I proposed because Stormi didn't want to be too pregnant in our wedding photos, but if you looked really closely, you could see a tiny little bump on her lower abdomen.

It was the perfect day, surrounded by our friends and family. The reception was at the little Italian restaurant I proposed to her at. Everyone had come back out the month after the proposal for the wedding, which I think Stormi really appreciated. I don't think she would have married me had Emily, Ryder, and Raven not been able to make it. Though I think Emily was talking about either making the move permanent or somehow splitting her time between her girls. She had said she was missing too much of her grandkids growing up and wanted us all to be closer. The idea was nice, but we weren't sure what we'd do because our lives were here, and hers was there.

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Zoom, Skype, FaceTime calls, and visits when we could afford them were essential in making sure we could keep our bond growing. Especially for Stevie. She lived for those Nan calls.

Her biological mom, biological sister, and sister's husband, her ex, have all tried reaching out to us. We haven't answered, nor have we returned any calls. The lawsuit was dropped after almost a year of them trying to fight for it to be heard in a court of law. It was just sad, and they'd used practically all of the money that was left from the divorce and savings to keep paying lawyers to get it pushed through. After the third or fourth lawyer, the lawyers just stopped taking the case, as quite a few judges had it thrown out of their courtrooms. And thank the lord it happened when it did because Stormi gave birth to our girl, who is a carbon copy of her mother, minus the nose, two days after it was dismissed. Again.

Motherhood and the journey to become one had inspired Stormi, and she took photographs of her bump at every stage. She also started interviewing other mothers and asking if she could write their stories in a book. She promised an equal portion of the proceeds to all twenty-five mothers she interviewed. All of them were from all walks of life, with partners of all walks of life, though some had no partner. Husbands. Wives. Boyfriends. Girlfriends. It was beautiful.

The stories of the struggles, triumphs, failures, and successes in situations they didn't think they could get out of. It made me see motherhood, fatherhood, parenthood in a different light. I respected what my wife's body could do and learned ways to help during those times when everything was falling apart for the pregnant woman because she didn't have pickles, or because her shoes didn't fit right. I couldn't wait to see Stormi pregnant with more of my babies. I moved in with her, and we decided we

were going to be doing an addition onto the side of the house to accommodate more children.

We were breaking ground today. We were making the current ‘mud room’ or foyer where we came in, into a short hallway, where we would still be able to enter from the outside, that added four more bedrooms off of a large room that would act as a playroom for the children when they get bigger. We would still be keeping the nursery as a nursery until the kids were big enough to be on their own in a big kid bed. We planned to use this other room, with more rooms off of it, as a guest wing until it got filled, and the nursery could go back to being a guest room.

I couldn’t wait for the future. Every day was a new adventure with my girls.

E L E V E N: The C-Word

Stormi’s POV

I could not believe the addition would be done in a month! Thank goodness, too, because it seemed we would be moving Stevie into her big girl room sooner than anticipated. I’d been more tired than usual and a little moody, which was more so than usual, so I decided to test two days ago. All I could hope was that Bastian would take the news well. We had been...in a weird place. I wasn’t sure what was going on with him.

He had been working a lot lately, I wasn’t sure if a project had him worried or what, or if he was trying to expand the publishing house. It had grown quite a bit since my book was published almost four years ago. He had still been a great father; he had just been distracted whenwewere together. He was always on his phone or his laptop. He was hardly ever home in time for bedtime anymore, let alone during dinner. In the last three weeks, he had only made it to three bedtimes and one dinner. One. Dinner. I knew I had been busy with Stevie lately, but she was finally starting to walk and be a

little more independent. Which was a blessing. I just hoped it was nothing too serious.

Cooking dinner for all of us, even though I knew it was most likely only going to be Stevie and me, Bastian probably wasn't going to make it again, I knew I was going to tell him tonight. Stevie had a shirt on that said, "Big Sis". I could not wait to see his face when he got home, whenever that was. Hopefully, before bedtime. I hoped he was excited. I made sure I had everything to make his favorite dinner, wedding soup, spaghetti, and meatballs with homemade garlic bread. I set the table, dished out food for the two of us, and hoped I wouldn't be checking the clock too often.

It was late when Sebastian got home. Incredibly late. Well past Stevie's bedtime. He jumped when I turned the light in the living room on from the chair I was sitting in. I felt like one of those wives in the movies, where she stays up late to catch her husband, thinking he's been cheating, but when he gets home, he just gaslights her until it comes out ten minutes further into the movie, her gut feeling was right all along.

"I thought you'd be asleep." His words were awkward as he looked away while he spoke to me, meeting my gaze when he was done.

"No. I wanted to wait for my husband, because I never see him anymore, Sebastian," I said, my voice strained, "What's been going on?"

He scoffed. "Nothing. Why would anything be going on?"

"Because you've been home for three bedtimes with Stevie and no dinner with us in three weeks. What is going on? Is everything okay at the publishing house? Is it a client? Are you sick?" I asked, throwing out whatever I could think of, whatever possibility came to mind, "Is there someone else?"

He glared at me when I said that, “Never. Why would you even think that?”

I stood, slowly walking towards him, pausing inches from him. I wanted to see when I hit the mark. I wanted him to see how badly I was hurting. If he couldn't, or wouldn't, see it from across the room, then he was going to see it up close and personal.

“Because you're never home, Bastian! What's going on with you?” I practically begged, my voice choking on the emotion ready to pour from me at any moment, “Please. Talk to me. I love you,” I looked in his eyes, reaching out and grabbing onto his shirt, begging him to talk to me, “I love you more than anything, Sebastian. I need you to know that, and I want to fix this. Whatever it is, whatever is going on.”

I was so close, so close I could smell his cologne. I could see how tired his eyes looked. I saw the pain and guilt flash in his eyes. I was begging for him to break my heart. I knew whatever was coming wasn't going to be pretty. I knew, but I still begged.

“Please?” Tears filled my eyes. I wasn't above begging my husband to talk to me. To let me help fix us. Or to break my heart into a million pieces, I would never recover from. I was about to become a broken mother of two, and I didn't know how to fix it. He looked away, taking a deep breath, letting the silence hang heavy in the air between us. When he finally looked back at me, he had tears in his eyes, and the pain and guilt were all-consuming him. This was it.

He was going to shatter me.

“I have cancer.”

What?

“Stage three.” He whispered into the stillness of our living room. My breath hitched in my throat.

No. What?

“What?!” I whispered-shouted, confusion on my face, my brain refusing to accept what was happening. My confused question, that sounded more like a demand, was rasped out, dripping with desperation, that I’d heard him wrong.

“I have stage three colon cancer.” He was talking slowly like he was talking to Stevie, and it was important, and he wanted her to understand. How could he have stage three colon cancer? He looked completely healthy.

“They don’t know if we can operate. I’ve been doing scans and biopsies, and getting second and third, fourth, and fifth opinions these last three weeks since finding out.” I stared at him, my hands gripping so tightly around his shirt that I couldn’t feel my hands anymore.

“No.” I felt my knees give out as Sebastian wrapped me in a hug, slowly easing us onto the floor, me sitting on him. “No,” I said more strongly, like I could tell the cancer to go away and it would listen. Like if I said it enough, it would be true, that I could will the cancer away.

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“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Stormi. I’m sorry I’ve been keeping a distance from you two. I didn’t want to have this talk until I knew more, had more answers, and a plan. I just—” Something snapped back in place when he said that.

A plan.

“When’s your next appointment? I’m going to be there.” I needed to talk with his doctor, or doctors, to get a plan together for him so we could get through this. We were going to fight it. All of it. Fighting like never before.

“Tomorrow at nine.”

“Great. My dad was going to watch Stevie anyway while I met with the contractor,” Already planning to have Mom pop in on camera and talk with the contractor, or have him email me a report so I could email back questions I had. I didn’t care. I had to be at that appointment. He nodded.

“You should know, I made my last will and testament. Just in case.” I put my hands over his mouth, having to swallow the bile that rose in my throat at the thought of him being gone.

No. He was going to stay here. With me, with Stevie. With our baby.

“Tomorrow. Tell me tomorrow. Tonight, I need your love, and to tell you something. And we hold each other. I need you,” I looked him right in the eyes, tears falling down both our cheeks, “Please.”

“Anything,” he kissed me deeply. Not in a rushed, I need you now, kind of way. More in a, I want to savor everything in this moment kind of way. From the way he tasted and the way he felt. To the way his mouth felt on mine and the way he made my body shiver, pulling moans from me that made him get even more excited.

Those were the moments I was lost in for the next hour while we kissed, and touched, and memorized each other, feeling every deep emotion, every single good memory came flooding back to me, everything that turned me on about him, everything I knew I’d never forget. Every inch of skin on each other was worshipped. We would worry about everything else tomorrow. After the doctor’s appointment.

“I love you, Stormi. You are my life. You and Stevie,” he whispered into my hair as he fell asleep.

“And our newest member,” I whispered to him, pressing his hand on my flat stomach. I watched as realization sunk in. He pulled me snugly next to him as I laid my head on his chest, listening to the thump of his heart. Wishing there was a way to record the sound so I could play it at night when he would most likely have to be stuck in the hospital.

God.

It was going to be hard as hell to be away from him. We would need to come up with a good plan, a good support system, good team of doctors who believed in us. With a yawn, one final thought crossed my mind.

Let’s do this.

T W E L V E:

Stormi’s POV

Three years later...

Three years since Sebastian was first diagnosed with colon cancer. It was such a hard thing to grasp at first that he could be taken from me. I was almost certain I would never forget what it felt like to be sitting in the doctor's office. Praying, even though I wasn't a religious person at all. I prayed that they would have good news. When this doctor, the sixth one he'd seen and given all his imaging he had brought from all the other doctors, he said it was too big to operate. We talked about time, things he wanted to do, what our options were.

As soon as the words passed his lips, too big to operate, I thought I was going to pass out. I took a deep breath and grabbed Sebastian's hand. No way was I not showing him I was able to be supportive, even silently, because my words were failing at the moment. Mainly because I had used all my brain power to keep myself alive and breathing. Because I couldn't speak. I felt like I couldn't even breathe! He did six months of chemo and twelve rounds of radiation at the same time, to try to shrink it.

That was our only hope. That it would shrink.

He hated everything about that period of his life. Those six months when he was too weak to go to my appointments and his. The same six months during which his hair had started to fall out, and he dropped a ton of weight, and not just because of the chemo. He was so sick from the chemo and radiation that he couldn't hardly eat anything. Anything he did eat either came back up, or ran right through him.

He never once gave up. When he saw that I was backing him one hundred and ten percent, he pushed. Hard. He was determined to be done with both chemo and radiation before the baby got here, so he could be in the room with me and hold the baby after it was born. Since he wasn't well enough to come to the anatomy scan, I chose not to find out. It would be a surprise for both of us, and I think he appreciated me not finding out. I think, even though he never said anything, that he would have

been incredibly sad if he'd missed that moment when he'd already been beating himself up for missing most of the pregnancy. No matter how much reassurance I gave, he still hated not being able to physically be with me.

Thankfully, two days after our son, Sage, was born, which was the best Christmas gift we could all get, we got the news that his tumor had shrunk small enough to do the surgery! They would go in and remove the tumor and any other parts of his colon that were affected, giving him what we hoped was a temporary colostomy bag.

We both cried happy tears, hugging and thanking whatever higher power was out there. We thanked his doctor and the whole oncology floor. They were amazing, working with the Mother/Baby Unit to get a plan for him to meet our baby if he was still doing the chemo and radiation at the due date.

Here we were, two and a half years later, still cancer-free! With his diagnosis, he handed over the reins of the company to his CFO, while still holding the majority of the shares, thus making sure that the publishing house still helped smaller, lesser-known writers become published, while not having to run the day-to-day of it.

Stevie was four, going on fourteen. Sage was three, and deep in his three-nager phase. And we were adopting our third child. This little boy had been living with us for about three months, practically full-time. He was another little four-year-old, but from Stevie's Pre-K class named Jettson, but he liked to be called Jett. His story wasn't shocking. His parents were addicts, and had dropped him off for a weekend at Grandma's that never seemed to end. It had been two years since he had been living with his grandmother, with no word from her daughter or son-in-law. She was having difficulties getting around as she got older, so after the Halloween parade, where Stevie had held Jett's hand the whole time, his grandmother asked if we would be willing to adopt him, since Stevie and Jett already get along so well. We agreed to give it a try, to see how he liked coming over after school, and gradually making the visits longer, and soon there were sleepovers, and then he was living with us full

time.

The thing was. Before having chemo and radiation, we had decided to put some of Bastian's baby tadpoles on ice for possible future kids. We had also talked about adopting if I was determined to be done being pregnant and having babies. So, we had been doing both. I was currently the size of a house, because we did a round of IVF days before Stevie came home and told us about Jett and his situation with his grandma. Bastian and I talked. That was going to be our only round of IVF because we were going to focus solely on Jett and get him into a big family.

That single round took hold, and now, I was due any day. We found out, with all three of our kids, that we were having another boy. Stevie would be our only girl, which she was thrilled about. It was finally the long-awaited day to adopt Jett, making everything official. We just couldn't wait for our boys to be officially part of our family.

And apparently, neither could they.

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Either of them. I winced as another contraction came right as the judge banged his gavel, declaring Jett part of our family.

T H I R T E E N:

Sebastian's POV

Getting up with the alarm, I noticed that Stormi's side of the bed was empty. She'd been having trouble sleeping towards the end of this pregnancy, bigger than all the rest, exhausted the whole time, and uncomfortable, but as beautiful as the day I saw her. I sat on the edge of the bed and heard the shower going, not thinking anything of it. Her back might be hurting, and she said that the warm water in the shower flowing over her felt wonderful. It was why she liked it when we would take the kids to the pool. It took all of the weight off her back and stomach. She practically lived in a pool this pregnancy. I laid out her navy-blue, knee-length maternity dress, and grabbed my navy-blue suit and laid them both on the bed. I peeked my head into the bathroom, letting her know I loved her, and was going to start getting the kids up, and all I heard was a grunt back.

Weird, but we had a busy morning and I had to get on the ball with the kids.

Heading down towards the kids' rooms, I went into each room, one at a time, helping each one of them as they got out of bed, got dressed up, so we could head to court and officially have a judge sign off on adopting Jett, and out to the kitchen so they could get some breakfast and something to drink. Stevie looked like she didn't sleep a wink. Once they were at the kitchen table, the monitor was set up to watch them so I could run and get myself ready. I was about to walk back out and check on the kids

when I noticed her dress was still laying on the bed. I poked my head in to check on Stormi. She was usually making breakfast for the kids by now.

“Babe?” The shower was still going, so I walked in. I saw her, palms against the glass door of the shower, head down, groaning, the hot water hitting her low back. Opening the shower door, I took her in. “Babe? Are you okay? Are you in labor?”

She nodded her head, eyes closed tightly, forearms pressed against the wall, leaning towards the wall, her hips shifting back and forth. Looking at her, I could feel the panic rising. She was in labor! Our court date was in less than an hour! How...what...what do I do?

Shit.

OH SHIT! We had to reschedule our court date, Jett’s adoption day. There was no way she’d be able to sit through that long ass process. Not on that hard wooden bench. I pulled out my phone, ready to make the call to either of our parents, who would be there at Court in a matter of minutes to meet us there. I was ready to call and tell them whatever we needed. If that was needing our parents to reschedule for tomorrow, or to ask for a quick one because Stormi was in labor.

“Do we need to go to the hospital right now?”

“No. The contractions are really far apart. Like, close to an hour. I’m just sore and using the hot water to massage my muscles.” She sounded calmer now, more at ease, and her face didn’t look like she was in pain anymore.

“Are you sure they’re real contractions? They’re not Braxton-Hicks?” The exacerbated look she gave me was almost comical, but I kept my thoughts to myself. This was her third time doing this. She knew. I just wanted to find a way to make it all work.

“Every hour on the hour. Plus, the plug is gone.” My eyes went wide. Stevie took forever to get here, but Sage came quickly. “We should get—” I was getting ready to call my parents when she cut me off.

“Going so we can adopt our son today. Our other son will be here tomorrow, or later today, most likely.” She tried to comfort me as I helped her out of the shower, quickly, gently, drying her off so she just had to lean on the vanity to do whatever made her comfortable.

I still felt like I needed to make sure we were ready. I had a feeling we weren’t going to have as long as she thought we would. I grabbed the diaper bag, as well as her suitcase and mine, and took them to the SUV. I hurried back inside to start getting the kids shuttled out to the SUV and buckled in. I made sure I had my phone and called my parents and father-in-law. I let them all know that Stormi was in labor, but we were proceeding to the courthouse because she wanted to make sure that Jett became a part of our family. They all let me know they would be putting their suitcases in their cars to take shifts watching the kids at our house while we went through the birth of our little guy, and I heard her dad confirm he had three car seats in his car for the kids. We had a luxury pull-out couch for them to stay on, and there was still one guest room left.

The whole way to the courthouse, Stormi seemed like she was alright, and it wasn’t until we had to park and walk in that I noticed her grimacing again. She shook her head when I started to try to get her back in the car. She insisted she was fine, and she wanted Jett to be a part of our family. Walking in, I made sure that she was comfortable. The judge had been informed of what was going on with Stormi from my mother, and as soon as we were all in the courtroom, he asked us all to rise as he announced Jettson to be our son, officially. We all signed a document, and the judge banged the gavel. Jettson’s grandmother cried and asked if we would still let her be grandma. Of course, we said yes.

We were all taking our first official family pictures, everyone had happy tears in their

eyes and down their face, when Stormi winced and put her hand to her belly. I had been so caught up in the moment, loving how Stevie and Sage and Jettson, jumping up and down together, so happy. I had turned to fully look at her, and she was almost doubled over. I reached out, catching her just before her knees gave out.

“Fuck. Me.” She gritted out as the contraction ripped through her body. I stood behind her, my arms under hers as I helped her to the ground. She sat in a squat position, holding onto my arms like a lifeline. I knew before the questions left my lips, but I had to ask.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” She let her head lull back, face full of pain and concentration.

“Con...tract...tion,” she said through clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut, breathing deeply through the pain.

“How far apart?” I needed to know how much time I had to get her there.

“Seven.” What?! Seven minutes?! Sage came about thirty minutes after that! We had to hurry!

“Shit! Mom! Dad! We have to go! Now! The baby’s coming!” I shouted as I lifted her up, slipping under one arm.

“Go! Go!” Dad shouted, showing us the way. Her dad came rushing to her side, Emily right in front of us, opening all of the doors as we hurried as quickly as she could move to the car.

“I’ll get the car! Sandra! I’ll call you to let you know when you all can come up. Thank you!” Emily called out to my mother as she ran to move the car to the front of the building.

“Will you be able to get her in and to the hospital? I need to help your folks with the kids and getting them settled before coming up.” I nodded to Andrew who kissed her head and promised to be there as soon as the rugrats were settled in.

Four hours later, my parents and our kids were at the hospital with the rest of us. They had just walked through the door, making everyone do a double-take. We had no idea we had another little princess hiding behind her brother. Jettson and Sage held their little brother, Ziggy, while Stevie held her little sister, Olive, whom Stevie had already affectionately nicknamed Ollie. She was our hidden bonus baby. Her dad and Emily, who was in town visiting us, ran out to the store and bought everything we would need for little Ollie, like a second everything, but in pink, Emily said. She had invited us out because she and her fiancé were getting married soon, and Stormi loved him. She remembered Jefferson and liked him.

Our family was finally complete. My beautiful wife was at the head of it with me as her first mate. Then our three boys, and our two girls. Life was perfect.

I couldn't imagine anything better.