

RELATIONSHIP STATUS:
IT'S COMPLICATED.

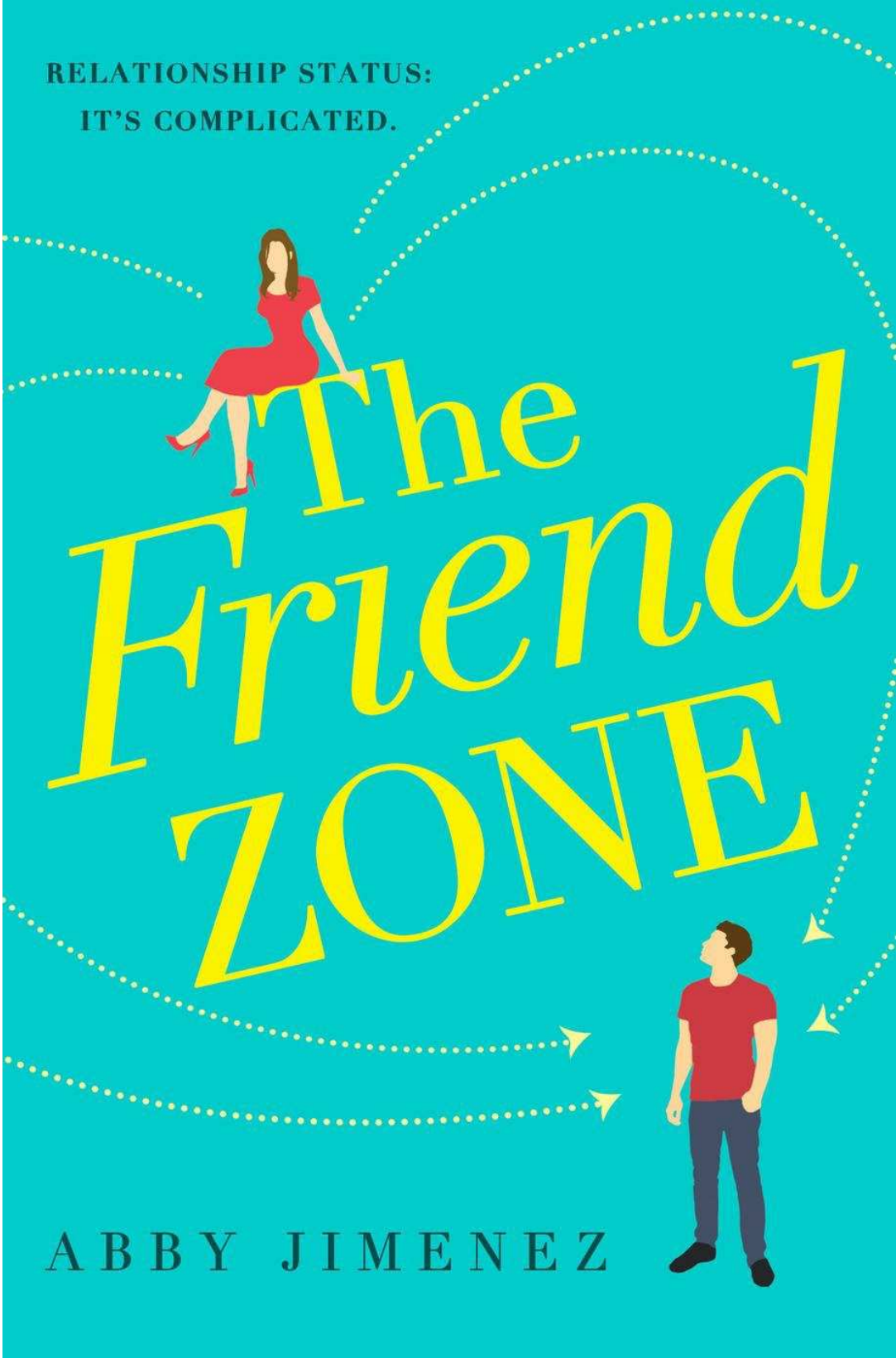


The Friend ZONE



ABBY JIMENEZ

RELATIONSHIP STATUS:
IT'S COMPLICATED.



The
Friend
ZONE

ABBY JIMENEZ

THE FRIEND ZONE

ABBY JIMENEZ



FOREVER

New York Boston

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 by Abby Jimenez

Cover design and illustration by Elizabeth Turner Stokes

Cover copyright © 2019 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Forever

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

read-forever.com

twitter.com/readforeverpub

First Edition: June 2019

Forever is an imprint of Grand Central Publishing. The Forever name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jimenez, Abby, author.

Title: The friend zone / Abby Jimenez.

Description: First edition. | New York : Forever, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018052066 | ISBN 9781538715604 (trade pbk.) | ISBN

9781549149795 (audio download) | ISBN 9781538715628 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3610.I47 F75 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018052066>

ISBN: 978-1-5387-1560-4 (trade paperback), 978-1-5387-1562-8 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

E3-20190503-DA-NF-ORI

E3-20190419-DA-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ONE: Josh](#)

[TWO: Kristen](#)

[THREE: Josh](#)

[FOUR: Kristen](#)

[FIVE: Josh](#)

[SIX: Kristen](#)

[SEVEN: Josh](#)

[EIGHT: Kristen](#)

[NINE: Josh](#)

[TEN: Kristen](#)

[ELEVEN: Josh](#)

[TWELVE: Kristen](#)

[THIRTEEN: Josh](#)

[FOURTEEN: Kristen](#)

[FIFTEEN: Josh](#)

[SIXTEEN: Kristen](#)

[SEVENTEEN: Josh](#)

[EIGHTEEN: Kristen](#)

[NINETEEN: Josh](#)

[TWENTY: Kristen](#)

[TWENTY-ONE: Josh](#)

[TWENTY-TWO: Kristen](#)

[TWENTY-THREE: Josh](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR: Kristen](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE: Josh](#)

[TWENTY-SIX: Kristen](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN: Josh](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT: Kristen](#)

[TWENTY-NINE: Josh](#)
[THIRTY: Kristen](#)
[THIRTY-ONE: Josh](#)
[THIRTY-TWO: Kristen](#)
[THIRTY-THREE: Josh](#)
[THIRTY-FOUR: Kristen](#)
[THIRTY-FIVE: Josh](#)
[THIRTY-SIX: Kristen](#)
[THIRTY-SEVEN: Josh](#)
[THIRTY-EIGHT: Kristen](#)
[THIRTY-NINE: Josh](#)
[FORTY: Kristen](#)
[FORTY-ONE: Kristen](#)
[Epilogue: Josh](#)
[A Note from the Author](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[Discover More Abby Jimenez](#)
[Don't miss Abby's second novel](#)
[About the Author](#)

*This book is dedicated to all the people who lifted me up
while I was writing it. And Stuntman Mike.*

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



FOREVER

ONE

Josh

I glanced down at the text while the light was red.

Celeste: I'm not giving you a dime, Josh. Go screw yourself.

“Goddamn it,” I muttered, tossing the phone on the passenger seat. I knew she was gonna do this. Leave me with my finger in the dam. *Shit.*

I'd left her the contents of the whole house, and all I asked was for her to pay half of the Lowe's bill. Half of three thousand dollars' worth of appliances I'd generously given her instead of selling them, despite the card and payments being in my name. And of course, *I* was somehow the asshole in all this for leaving the state for a new job three months after we'd broken up.

I had it on the highest authority she was now hooking up with some guy named Brad.

I hoped Brad enjoyed my Samsung stainless gas range with the double oven.

Asphalt-scented heat drifted in through my open windows as I sat in Burbank's slow-moving morning gridlock. Even on a Sunday, there was traffic. I needed to get my AC fixed if I was going to survive in California—another expense I couldn't afford. I should have walked to the grocery store. Probably would have gotten there faster at this rate, and I wouldn't have

wasted gas—another thing that cost twice as much as it did in South Dakota.

Maybe this move was a bad idea.

This place would bankrupt me. I had to host my best friend's bachelor party, there were moving expenses, the higher cost of living...and now this bullshit.

The light turned green and I pulled forward. Then the truck in front of me slammed on the brakes and I hit its bumper with a lurch.

Fuck. You've gotta be kidding me.

My day had been officially ruined twice in less than thirty seconds. It wasn't even 8:00 a.m. yet.

The other driver turned into a Vons parking lot, waving out the window for me to follow. A woman—bracelet on her wrist. The wave somehow managed to be sarcastic. Nice truck though. A Ford F-150. It still had dealer plates. Kind of a shame I'd hit it.

She parked and I pulled up behind her, turned off the engine, and rummaged in my glove box for my insurance information as the woman jumped from her vehicle and ran to look at her bumper.

"Hey," I said, getting out. "Sorry about that."

She turned from her inspection and glared up at me. "Yeah, you know you have one job, right? Not to hit the car in front of you?" She cocked her head.

She was small. Maybe five foot two. Petite. A dark wet spot cascaded down the front of her shirt. Shoulder-length brown hair and brown eyes. Cute. Impressive scowl.

I scratched my cheek. Irritated women were a particular specialty of mine. Six sisters—I was well trained.

"Let's just have a look," I said passively, putting on my calm-in-a-crisis voice. "See what we're dealing with."

I crouched between the back of her truck and the front of mine and surveyed the damage as she stood over me, her arms crossed. I looked up at her. "I tapped your trailer hitch. Your truck is fine." Mine had a small dent, but it wasn't anything major. "I don't think we need to get our insurance companies involved."

I couldn't afford to have an accident on my driving record. It wasn't good for my job. I pushed up on my knees and turned to her.

She leaned over and tugged on the hitch. It didn't wiggle. "Fine," she said, obviously satisfied with my assessment. "So, are we done here?"

“I think we can be done.”

She whirled, darting around to the passenger side of her truck as I started for the grocery store. She dove into the cab, her legs dangling from the seat as she leaned in on her stomach. Her flip-flop fell off into the parking lot with a plop.

She had a nice ass.

“Hey,” she said, twisting to look at me as I walked past. “How about instead of staring at my ass, you make yourself useful and get me some napkins.”

Busted.

I put a thumb over my shoulder. “Uh, I don’t have any napkins in my truck.”

“Think outside of the box,” she said impatiently.

Feeling a little guilty for openly admiring her assets—or rather for getting caught doing it—I decided to be helpful. I went back to my truck, opened my gym bag, and grabbed a tee. When I handed her the shirt, she snatched it and dove back into the cab.

I stood there, mostly because she had my favorite shirt, but also because the view wasn’t anything to complain about. “Everything okay?” I tried to peer past her into the front seat, but she blocked my line of sight.

A small, light brown dog with a white chin growled at me from the window of the back seat. One of those little purse dogs. I scoffed. It wore actual clothing.

“I spilled coffee in my friend’s new truck,” she said from inside. She lost her other flip-flop to the sweltering parking lot and was now barefoot, her red-painted toes on the running board. “It’s everywhere. So no, it’s not okay.”

“Is your friend a dick or something? It was an accident.”

She pivoted to glare at me like I kicked her dog. “No, he’s not a dick. You’re the dick. You were probably texting.”

She was feisty. A little too cute to scare me though. I had to work hard to keep my lips from turning up at the corners. I cleared my throat. “I wasn’t texting. And in all fairness, you *did* slam on the brakes for no reason.”

“The reason was I needed to *stop*.” She turned back to the mess.

I suspected the reason was she spilled coffee on herself and hit the brakes reflexively. But I wasn’t going to poke the bear. Well trained.

I slipped my hands into my pockets and rocked back on my heels, squinting up at the Vons sign in the parking lot to my left. “Okay. Well, good chatting with you. Leave my shirt on the windshield when you’re done.”

She climbed into the passenger side of the truck and slammed the door shut.

I shook my head and chuckled all the way into the store.

When I came back out, she was gone and my shirt was nowhere to be seen.

TWO

Kristen

Shawn planted a chair smack in the middle of the fire station living room and straddled it backward, facing me. He did this so he could harass me as close as humanly possible.

I sat in one of the six brown leather recliners parked in front of the TV. My Yorkie, Stuntman Mike, stood in my lap, growling.

Shawn bounced his eyebrows at me under his stupid pompadour hair. “Sup, girl. You think about what I said?” He grinned.

“No, Shawn, I don’t have any Mexican in me, and no, I don’t want any.”

The fire station captain, Javier, came down the hallway into the kitchen as I leaned forward with a hand on my dog’s head. “Shawn, I want you to know that if I needed mouth to mouth, and you were the last paramedic on Earth, I prefer donations made to the ASPCA in lieu of flowers at my funeral.”

Javier laughed as he poured himself a coffee, and Brandon chuckled over his book from the recliner next to me. “Shawn, get lost.”

Shawn got up and grabbed his chair, mumbling as he dragged it back to the table.

Sloan breezed back in from the bathroom. She had on that white linen skirt she got when we were in Mexico last summer and sandals that laced up her calf. She looked like Helen of Troy.

My best friend was gorgeous. Blond, waist-length hair, colorful tattoos down her left arm, a glistening rock on her ring finger. Brandon was her firefighter and equally hot fiancé.

It was Sunday. Family day at the station when the four guys on shift got to bring their friends and family to have breakfast with them if they wanted to. Sloan and I were the only takers this morning. Javier's wife was at church with his daughters, and Shawn didn't have a girlfriend.

Imagine that.

Technically I was here for Josh, the fourth member of the crew, though I'd never met him before.

Brandon's best friend, Josh, just transferred from South Dakota to be the station's new engineer. He was Brandon's best man, and I was Sloan's maid of honor for their April 16th wedding in two months. Josh had missed the engagement party, so it was some all-important thing that we meet each other *immediately*.

I checked my phone for the time. I was starving and getting irritable. Breakfast was on Josh today. He hadn't shown up yet though, so nobody was actually making anything and all I'd had was coffee.

He was already pissing me off, and I hadn't even met him yet.

"So," Sloan said, sitting in the recliner next to Brandon. "Are you going to tell me where you got the shirt?"

I looked down at the black, men's Wooden Legs Brewing Company T-shirt I'd knotted at the waist. "Nope."

She eyed me. "You left for tampons, and you came back wearing some random shirt. Is there some particular reason you're hiding this from me?"

Brandon glanced up from his page. He was a pretty level-headed guy. He didn't usually let things work him up. But explaining that I'd christened his new truck with my black Sumatra drip would probably earn me a stern disapproving look that would somehow be worse than if he cussed me out.

I opted against it.

I'd cleaned it up. I'd managed not to damage the bumper in the fender bender I'd caused slamming on the brakes when I spilled it everywhere. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Since my top was already ruined, I'd used it to clean up the mess and changed into Parking Lot Guy's shirt instead.

"It's Tyler's," I lied. "It smells like him. I just missed him." I put my nose to the top of the collar and made a show of breathing in.

Damn, it smelled good.

That guy had been kind of sexy. A nice body under those clothes, I could

tell. Good-looking too. That clean-shaven boyish face I always gravitate to.

I needed to get laid. I was starting to fantasize over strangers. It had been too long. Tyler hadn't been home in seven months.

Sloan's face went soft. "Awwww. That's so sweet. It's sad you can't be with him on Valentine's Day tomorrow. But just three more weeks and you'll have him for good."

"Yup. His deployment will be done and we'll officially be living together." A twinge of nerves twisted in my gut, but I kept my face neutral.

Sloan smiled and put a hand to her heart. She didn't much like Tyler, but she was still a romantic.

My cramps surged and I clutched my stomach with a grimace. I was in the throes of another epic period. This, coupled with hunger, the events from earlier, and the 3:00 a.m. police drama at my house that I wasn't telling Sloan about, had me in a fine mood. I was so tired I'd just tried to plug my charger into my coffee cup instead of my phone.

Sloan checked her watch and then wordlessly rummaged in her purse and shook two Aleve into her hand. She handed me her glass of water and gave me the pills in a well-rehearsed routine we'd perfected during our five years as roommates.

I swallowed the pills and turned to Brandon. "That book any good?"

"It's not bad," he said, looking at the cover. "Want to borrow it when I'm done?" Then he peered past me and his eyes lit up. "Oh, hey, buddy."

I followed his look to the door and my jaw dropped. The handsome jerk from Vons stood there with bags of groceries.

Our gazes met from across the room, and we stared at each other in surprise. Then his eyes dropped down to my—*his*—shirt, and the corner of his mouth turned up into a smirk.

I stood, putting Stuntman on the chair as the guy set down his groceries and walked toward me. I held my breath, waiting to see how he was going to play this.

Brandon laid his book over the arm of the recliner and got up. "Josh, this is Kristen Peterson, Sloan's best friend. Kristen, Josh Copeland."

"Well, hello—it's so nice to meet you," he said, gripping my hand just a little too tightly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Nice to meet you too."

Josh didn't let go of my hand. "Hey, Brandon, didn't you get a new truck

this weekend?” he asked, talking to his friend but staring at me.

I glared at him, and his brown eyes twinkled.

“Yeah. Want to see it?” Brandon asked.

“After breakfast. I love that new-car smell. Mine just smells like coffee.”

I gave him crazy eyes and his smirk got bigger. Brandon didn’t seem to notice.

“Got any more bags? Want help?” Brandon asked. Sloan had already dived in and was in the kitchen unbagging produce.

“Just one more trip. I got it,” Josh said, his eyes giving me a wordless invitation to come outside.

“I’ll walk out with you,” I announced. “Forgot something in the truck.”

He held the door for me, and as soon as it was closed, I whirled on him. “You’d better not say shit.” I poked a finger at his chest.

At this point it was less about the coffee spill and more about not wanting to reveal my brazen attempt at covering up my crime. I didn’t lie as a rule, and of course the *one* time I’d made an exception, I was immediately in a position to be blackmailed. Damn.

Josh arched an eyebrow and leaned in. “You stole my shirt, shirt thief.”

I crossed my arms. “If you ever want to see it again, you’ll keep your mouth shut. Remember, *you* rear-ended *me*. This won’t go over well for you either.”

His lips curled back into a smile that was annoyingly attractive. He had dimples. Motherfucking *dimples*.

“*Did* I rear-end you? Are you sure? Because there’s no evidence of that ever happening. No damage to his truck. No police report. In fact, my version of the event is I saw a hysterical woman in distress in the Vons parking lot and I gave her my shirt to help her out. Then she took off with it.”

“Well, there’s your first mistake,” I said. “Nobody would ever believe I was hysterical. I don’t *do* hysterics.”

“Good info.” He leaned forward. “I’ll adjust my story accordingly. A calm but rude woman asked for my help and then stole my favorite shirt. Better?” He was smiling so big he was almost laughing.

Jerk.

I pursed my lips and took another step closer to him. He looked amused as I encroached on his personal space. He didn’t back up and I glowered up at him. “You want the shirt. I want your silence. This isn’t a hard situation to

work out.”

He grinned at me. “Maybe I’ll let you keep the shirt. It doesn’t look half-bad on you.” Then he turned for his truck, laughing.

THREE

Josh

In honor of the new-guy-cooks rule, I made breakfast for the crew on C shift. A Mexican egg skillet, my specialty.

I was on probation—the probie. Even though I was five years into the job, I was only five shifts into this station. That meant I was the last one to sit down to eat and the first one to get up and do dishes. I was practically a servant. They had me cleaning toilets and changing sheets. All the grunt work.

Sloan and Kristen opted to help me, and Brandon took pity on me, so they all stood in the kitchen wiping counters and scraping food off plates while I washed the dishes and Shawn and Javier played cribbage at the table.

Kristen had glared all through the meal, but only when she didn't think anyone was watching. It was kind of funny, actually. I kept ribbing her. From what I gathered through my prodding, she'd told everyone the shirt was her boyfriend's.

I wasn't going to say anything. Brandon didn't need to have the thunder stolen from his new truck by learning it had already been defiled, but I was drawing untold amounts of enjoyment from giving Kristen shit. And she didn't take any of it lying down either. She matched me tit for tat.

“So, Josh, you drive the fire truck, huh?” Kristen asked casually, wiping down the stove.

“I do.” I smiled.

“Are you any good at it? No problems stopping that thing when you need

to?” She cocked her head.

“Nope. As long as someone doesn’t slam on the brakes in front of me, I’m good.”

Glare. Smirk. Repeat. And Sloan and Brandon were oblivious. It was the most fun I’d had in weeks.

Sloan handed me the cutting board to wash. “You’ll be walking Kristen down the aisle at the wedding.” She smiled at her friend. “She’s my maid of honor.”

“I hope you walk better than you drive,” Kristen mumbled under her breath.

I grinned and changed the subject before Sloan or Brandon asked questions. “What’s your dog’s name, Kristen?”

The little thing had sat on her lap all through breakfast. Occasionally his head popped up over the table to look at her plate, the tip of his tongue out. He looked like a fluffy Ewok.

“His name is Stuntman Mike.”

I raised an eyebrow over my sink of dishes. “Tarantino?”

She raised hers. “You’ve seen *Death Proof*?”

“Of course. One of my favorite movies. Kurt Russell as Stuntman Mike. And your dog has issues?” I asked. The little Yorkie wore a shirt that read I HAVE ISSUES on it.

“Yes, they’re mostly with Shawn.”

I chuckled.

Sloan swept cilantro stems into her hand and tossed them in the trash, and Brandon pulled out the bag and tied the top. “Kristen has an online business called Doglet Nation,” Brandon said. “She sells merchandise for small dogs.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” I asked, setting a casserole dish into the rack to dry.

Kristen pulled out the coffee grounds and dumped them into the compost bag. “Clothes, bags, gourmet dog treats. Sloan bakes those. Our big-ticket item is our staircases though.”

“Stairs?”

“Yeah. Little dogs usually can’t jump up on a high bed. So we make custom staircases that match your bedroom set. Stain, carpet, style.”

“And people buy that?” I set the last bowl to dry in the rack and peeled off

my rubber gloves.

“Uh, yeah they buy that. Why would you drop a couple grand on a nice Pottery Barn or Restoration Hardware bed, only to have some hideous foam staircase next to it from PetSmart?”

I nodded. “I get that, I guess.”

“Which reminds me—I’m out a carpenter,” she said to Sloan.

Sloan’s brow furrowed. “What? Since when?”

“Since Miguel quit on me last week. He got a union job at Universal doing set work. Dropped me like I was radioactive. I have three stairs on order.”

Sloan shook her head. “What are you going to do?”

Kristen shrugged. “Put an ad on Craigslist. Hope the guy doesn’t end up being some kind of pervert out to kill me to sell my organs on the black market.”

I snorted.

Brandon nodded at me as he put a new bag into the trash can. “Josh is a carpenter. He’s pretty good at it too.”

Sloan looked at me. “Really?”

Brandon was already fishing out his cell phone. I knew what he was pulling up. The tiki bar I’d built in my backyard. Celeste’s tiki bar. *Brad’s* tiki bar.

“Look,” he said, handing around the phone. “He built this.”

Sloan nodded in approval. Then the phone went to Kristen, and she glanced at it before her eyes shot up to mine.

“Not bad,” she said begrudgingly.

“Thanks. But I’m not looking for any side work,” I said, waving them off. I didn’t need to build dog stairs for pennies on my day off. The living room of my new apartment was still full of boxes.

“Yeah, who needs an extra two hundred dollars for three hours of work?” Kristen said, flipping a hand dismissively. “Not Miguel apparently.”

I froze. “Two hundred dollars?”

Sloan sprayed the counter with lemon-scented all-purpose cleaner. “Sometimes it’s more—right, Kristen? It depends on the style?”

Kristen stared at her best friend like she was telling her to shut up. Then she dragged her eyes back to me. “The stairs run four to five hundred dollars apiece, plus shipping. I split the profits fifty-fifty, minus the materials, with my carpenter. So yeah. Sometimes it’s more.”