

*The
Happy
Ever After
Playlist*

"Fierce humor and fiercer heart."
—CASEY McQUISTON, *New York Times*
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Red, White & Royal Blue



USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE FRIEND ZONE*

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FOREVER

New York Boston

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The Friend Zone

*This book is dedicated to my husband and kids.
Thank you for being my happy ever after.*

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FOREVER

Chapter 1

Sloan

Playlist: ♪ In the Mourning | Paramore

Do you want me to meet you at the cemetery, Sloan?”

Kristen was worried about me.

I shook my head at my car’s center console, where my phone sat on speaker. “I’m fine. I’m going to the farmers’ market afterward,” I said, hoping that would placate her.

My car idled at the red light next to a sidewalk lined with worn-out businesses and thirsty, drought-resistant oaks that looked like the lack of rain had finally broken their spirit. I baked in the blazing sun. My open sunroof had broken over Easter weekend a few weeks ago and I’d never fixed it, part of my time-honored tradition of not repairing things in my crappy car.

“The farmers’ market? Are you going to cook?” Kristen’s voice lit up with hope.

“No. A salad maybe,” I said as the light turned green. I didn’t cook anymore. Everyone knew that.

I didn’t do a lot of things anymore.

“Oh. Well, do you want me to come over later?” she asked. “I’ll bring cookie dough and liquor.”

“No. I’ll be— *Oh my God!*” A furry, copper-colored blur darted into the road, and I slammed on the brakes. My phone became a projectile into the dash and my purse dumped over the passenger seat, spilling tampons and single-serve flavored creamers.

“Sloan! What happened?”

I clutched the wheel, my heart pounding. “Kristen, I gotta go. I...I think I just killed a dog.” I hit the End Call button and unbuckled myself, threw the car in park, and put a trembling hand on the door to wait for a break in traffic to get out.

Please let it have been quick and painless. *Please.*

This would destroy me. This was just what it would take. The limp body of somebody’s poor pet under the tires of my shitty car on this particular cursed day, and what little joy I had left would just pop out and float off.

I hate my life.

My throat tightened. I promised myself I wouldn’t cry today. I *promised...*
Barking.

A floppy-eared dog head popped up over my bumper, sniffing the air. I barely had time to process that this animal was still alive before it leapt up onto the hood. He yapped at me through the glass and then grabbed my windshield wiper and started tugging on it.

“What the...” I tilted my head, actually laughing a little. The muscles involved felt weak from disuse, and for a heartbeat, just a flicker of a moment, I forgot what today was.

I forgot I was on my way to visit a grave.

My cell phone pinged with a quick succession of texts. Probably Kristen, losing her shit.

This was why I never got up this early. Nothing but mayhem. Was this what went on in Canoga Park at 9:00 a.m. on a Friday? Dogs running all willy-nilly in the streets?

A horn blared and a middle finger shot up from a passing convertible. My car sat parked in the road with a dog on the hood.

I leapt into action to stage a mid-street rescue. I didn’t want him to bolt and get hit in the road. I waited again for a pause in the cars while the dog crouched on his haunches and barked at me through the glass. I was shaking my head at him when he backed up, gave me one more smiling head cock, scaled my windshield, and *dove through my sunroof.*

He landed on top of me in a wallop of flying fur and legs. The air was pushed from my lungs in an *oomph* as a foot slid right down my tank top into my cleavage, sticking the landing and scratching me from collarbone to belly button. Then he was on me, paws on my shoulders, licking my face and whining like we'd grown up together and I'd just gotten home from college.

I screamed like I was being eaten alive.

I wrestled him off me into the passenger seat, gasping and disheveled, dog drool on my face, and when my cell phone rang I grabbed for it reflexively.

"Sloan, are you okay?" Kristen asked before I even got the phone to my ear.

"A dog just jumped through my sunroof!"

"What?"

"Yeah." I wiped my cheek with the bottom of my tank top. "It's...it's in my front seat."

The dog *smiled* at me. He actually grinned as his tail whacked back and forth. Then he lowered his head and made a single *cacking* noise. I watched in horror as he hacked up a slimy ball of grass right into my drink holder over my untouched latte.

Aaaaand police lights fired up in my rearview.

"You have got to be kidding me," I breathed, looking back and forth between the barf, the dog, and the lights in my mirror.

I started to giggle. It was my stress response. That and a twitching eyelid. Both of which made me look insane.

This cop was in for a show.

"Kristen, I need to call you back. I'm getting pulled over." I laughed.

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah. I know. I'm parked in the middle of the street and now the cops are here."

I hung up and the police car made an impatient siren whoop behind me. I crawled along until I could pull into a mini mall. I looked down, fixing my tank top and shaking my head, alternating between grumbling to myself about irresponsible dog owners and giggling like a lunatic.

I considered whether I looked cute enough to get out of a ticket.

All evidence pointed to *no*.

There was a time, in another universe, when this face had won beauty pageants. Now I looked like I'd been in a fight with a raccoon over a pizza

crust—and lost.

Scratches streaked my arms from the dog's nails, and I was covered in enough orange fur to make a puppy. My blond hair was pulled up in a messy bun that had been half yanked loose in the melee, and my yoga pants and paint-stained tank top weren't doing me any favors. My bare face looked pale and tired.

I'd looked tired for two years.

"We'll have to ride this one out on personality alone," I mumbled to the dog. He smiled with that lolled-out tongue, and I gave him a reproachful look. "Your parents have a lot of explaining to do."

I rolled my window down and handed over my license and registration to the cop before he asked for it.

"That was quite the scene back there, Miss"—the officer glanced down at my information—"Sloan Monroe. It's illegal to obstruct traffic," he said, his tone bored.

"Officer, this wasn't my fault. This dog bolted into the street and then he just jumped through my sunroof."

I could see my reflection in his aviator sunglasses. My eyelid twitched and I squeezed it shut, squinting up at him with one eye. God, I looked nuts.

"This isn't my first rodeo, young lady. Find something that doesn't require you to block traffic for your next YouTube video and just be glad you're only getting an obstruction ticket and not one for letting an unleashed animal run around."

"Wait. You think he's *mine*?" I plucked a long piece of fur from my mouth. "I get that nothing says dog ownership more than one diving through the top of your car, but I've never seen this guy before in my life." Then I looked down and started to giggle. The dog had his head on my lap doing an Oscar-worthy performance of being-my-dog. He looked up at me with "Hi, Mommy" eyes.

I snorted and descended into manic laughter again, putting a finger to my twitching eyelid.

Today. Of all days, this happens today.

The cop stared at me for a solid half a minute, soaking in all my crazy. I'm sure the dog barf in the cup holder didn't help. Not that it did much to take away from the original ambiance of my dilapidated car. I hadn't washed it in two years. Still, he must have seen something he believed on my face because

he entertained my story for a moment.

“Okay. Well, I’ll just put a call in to animal control.” He leaned toward the radio mic on his shoulder. “Get this dangerous stray off your hands.”

I sobered in a second, dropping my finger from my eye. “No! You can’t send him to the shelter!”

His hand froze on the mic, and he arched an eyebrow. “Because this is your dog?”

“No, because he’d be terrified. Haven’t you seen those ASPCA commercials? With the sad dogs in cages? And the Sarah McLachlan song?”

The cop laughed the whole way back to his squad car to write me a ticket.

When the dog and I got home, I stuck my ticket to the fridge with the flip-flop magnet Brandon and I had picked up in Maui. Both the ticket and the magnet made the lump rise in my throat, but the dog pushed his head under my hand and I somehow muscled down the urge to sob. It was 10:00 a.m. on The Day, and I’d so far kept my vow not to ugly-cry.

Yay me.

I called Kristen, who was probably freaking out and gathering a search party since I hadn’t answered her last five calls. She picked up on the first ring. “What the hell happened? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay. I have the dog. He’s at my house. I got a ticket for stopping in the middle of the street.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Unfortunately, I am,” I said tiredly.

She made a *tsking* noise. “You didn’t push your boobs up, did you? Next time use your boobs.”

I pulled my tank top out and rolled my eyes at the scratches between my breasts. “I think I’d rather have the ticket and what’s left of my dignity, thank you very much.”

I grabbed a blue plastic bowl from the cabinet, filled it from the tap, and watched as the dog drank like he hadn’t had water in days. He pushed the bowl across the tile of my dated kitchen, sloshing as he went, and I pinched my temples.

Ugh, today sucks.

This was way too much excitement for me. Most days I didn’t even leave the house. This was *why* I didn’t leave the house. Too many people and *things*. I wanted to hiss at the sun and go back to sleep.

“I’m gonna call the number on his collar. Let me call you back.”

I hung up and looked at his tag. Weird area code. *Tucker, A Good Boy.*

“A good boy, huh? That’s debatable. Well, Tucker, let’s see what excuse your people have for letting you run around in traffic,” I muttered as I punched the number into my cell phone.

The call went right to voicemail and a deep male voice said, “Jason. Leave a message.”

I left my contact information, hung up, and shook my head at the dog sloshing water all over my kitchen floor. “You’re probably hungry too. Well, I don’t have any dog food, so we need to go to PetSmart.”

I might have a half-eaten Starbucks lemon loaf in the car, but it was probably petrified.

I didn’t have a leash, so I made one from the belt of my black Victoria’s Secret robe, the one Brandon had given me the Christmas before his accident. Tucker immediately began to gnaw through it.

Just perfect.

When we got to PetSmart, I took him to the store vet to see if he was microchipped. He was, but the number on file was the same as the one on his tag. No address.

This was seriously so inconvenient. I kept checking my cell phone to make sure the volume was up.

No calls or texts.

I was contemplating my limited options when, like the cherry on top of the sundae, Tucker peed on the floor of the vet’s office.

The vet looked unfazed. She pulled paper towels from a dispenser without looking up from her chart and handed them to me. Tucker retreated under a chair and looked on with sorry puppy dog eyes.

“He was eating grass too.” I crouched and dropped towels on the mess. “I think he has a stomachache.”

“He might have a bladder infection. We should test the urine.”

I whirled on her from my pee puddle. “Wait, *me*? You want *me* to pay for this test? Seriously? This isn’t even my dog.”

She shrugged over her clipboard. “Well, just be aware that if he has an infection he won’t be able to hold his urine. Tomorrow’s the weekend, so it’ll cost more to bring him in then if he doesn’t get picked up. Plus he’s likely in pain. If you can’t afford it, you could always take him to the Humane

Society. They might treat him there.”

The shelter was out. And the pain thing bugged me. With my luck I *would* end up with him until tomorrow and I’d be back here paying double, begging them to make the peeing stop. I put a finger to my twitching eyelid. “Fine. Test him. Maybe the owner will pay me back?”

God, I was already tired tomorrow, just from today.

My cell phone pinged, and I looked at it wearily.

Kristen: Did the cop have that porn-stache they always have?

Ping.

Kristen: You should have cried. Machine gun sobbing always gets me out of tickets. Just sayin’.

I snorted. She was trying to make me smile. She and her husband, Josh, were on Sloan watch today. High alert, code red. Keeping an eye on me in case I flipped out or broke down.

It was probably a good idea.

Two hundred dollars and one expensive bladder infection later, we left with our dog antibiotics. On top of Tucker’s vet bill, I bought a leash and a small bag of dog food. I needed enough supplies to at least get me through tomorrow in case this ended up being a sleepover. I also grabbed a chew bone and a ball to keep him busy. I didn’t need this Tasmanian devil destroying my house.

I wasn’t familiar with his breed. I forgot to ask the vet. He looked sort of like a small golden retriever. It wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be half honey badger. He was a little wild. What dog jumps through a sunroof?

Whatever he was, he was not what I was supposed to be doing today.

Today I was supposed to be with Brandon.

Setting a bottle of Woodford Reserve against his headstone. Sitting on a blanket on the grass next to where we laid him to rest, telling him how much I missed him, how the world was worse for him not being in it, how hollow I was and it wasn’t getting better with time like they said it would.

April eighth was the two-year anniversary of his accident. Not the date of

his death—he lived a month before he succumbed to his injuries—but the date of the crash. That was really the day his life was over. *My* life was over. He never woke up. So today could never just be some day.

The year held a lot of days like that for me. The day in December when he'd proposed. His birthday. *My* birthday. Holidays, the date of the wedding that never happened. In fact, most of the calendar was a minefield of hard days. One would crest, I'd live through it, and then another one would roll toward me in the constant ebb and swell that was the year.

Another year without *him*.

So I had planned to distract myself today. Have my visit to the cemetery and then be productive. Get some paintings done. Eat something healthy. I'd committed to not sleeping through the day like last year. I'd promised myself I would ignore that the month of April smelled like a hospital to me now and reminded me of fixed pupils and beeping machines with tempos that never changed.

I glanced at my phone again.

Nothing.

Chapter 2

Sloan

♪ **affection | Between Friends**

Ten days. I'd had Tucker for ten wonderful, fur-on-my-bedsread, wet-kisses-in-the-morning, tail-wagging days.

I knocked on the door of Kristen's house, grinning from ear to ear. When she opened it, she stared. "You fucking did it."

"I told you I would." I beamed, edging past her into the house, not waiting to be invited in. Tucker and her little dog, Stuntman Mike, circled each other, tails wagging, noses to butts.

She closed the front door behind me. "You walked here? That's like seven miles, you crazy bitch."

"Yeah, I know," I said. My reemergence into daylight had been shocking friends and family alike lately. "I have to use your bathroom. Is Oliver awake?"

"No, he's down for his nap." She followed me down the hall. "God, you're really loving this dog thing, huh? Oh, which reminds me," she said, "I made him something." She disappeared and came back a second later holding up a dog tee that read I JUMPED ON SLOAN THROUGH A SUNROOF AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS T-SHIRT.

I snorted. Kristen ran an online business from her house that sold merchandise for dogs.

I went into the bathroom, and she tucked the shirt under her arm and leaned on the door frame. Josh wasn't home, so we fell immediately back into our old roommate habit of never closing doors between us.

"He's incredible. I've never seen an animal so well trained," I said. "Somebody must have really spent time working with him." I washed my hands and looked at my flushed face in the mirror, tucking some flyaway hairs behind my ear.

"Still no callback from that Jason guy?"

I hadn't heard a word from Tucker's owner. Tucker had spent the first two days peeing in my house despite his expensive antibiotics, and I'd spent two days taking him outside as much as humanly possible to save my carpets.

It was miraculous how motivating a puddle of dog pee on your floors could be. Seriously. Better than a personal trainer. My Fitbit had never seen so much action.

I, of course, got no painting done at all while I was walking him. But this body had a tan for the first time in longer than I could remember, and I had to admit that the exercise felt good. So even after his infection was gone, we kept up the walks.

Today I felt particularly ambitious, so I decided to walk to Kristen's house to see her and the baby. I figured if I got tired, we could just call an Uber. But we made it, and the victory was glorious.

"Not a peep from Jason," I said.

I'd put up posters with Tucker's picture at the intersection where I found him, and I'd listed him on a few missing-pet websites. I'd even registered him as a found dog at the Humane Society. And every day I left a message for Jason. I was beginning to think Tucker had been officially abandoned.

"Soooo, I saved your dog from certain death and he thanked me by jumping on me through my sunroof like a grenade. Give me a call to arrange for a pickup. I have so many questions."

"Hi, Jason. Sloan again. Your dog is peeing all over my house from the bladder infection he got from not being let out. It would be great if you came to get him so he can pee all over your house instead. Thanks."

“Sloan and Tucker here. While Tucker’s love of expensive food basically makes him my twin separated at birth, I can’t afford to keep feeding him. Think you might be able to call me back?”

I followed Kristen into the kitchen and gave Tucker a bowl of water with ice cubes in it. Then I sat at the granite counter, and she slid a glass of iced tea over to me. “Can I just say how happy I am that you’re getting out?”

My mood deflated in an instant, and her steady brown eyes studied me.

“Kristen? Do you think it’s weird Tucker showed up on the anniversary of the accident? I mean, it is, right?”

She waited for me to continue, stirring her ice around her glass.

“Tucker literally fell into my lap. And do you know what kind of dog he is? A Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever.” I ticked the long name off with a five-finger tap on the countertop. “A hunting dog, Kristen. Ducks.”

Kristen knew better than anyone the significance of that. Duck hunting had been Brandon’s favorite sport. He’d fly out to South Dakota every year for it with Josh.

“What if Brandon sent him to me?” I said, a lump bolting into my throat.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “Well, I do think Brandon wouldn’t have wanted you to be this unhappy,” she said gently. “Two years is a long fucking time to be this sad, Sloan.”

I nodded and wiped my face with the top of my shirt. I stared bleary eyed at the high chair pushed up against the kitchen table. Kristen’s life was a painful reminder of what mine should have been. If Brandon had lived and we’d been married like we planned, I’d probably have a baby of my own, taking him on playdates with Kristen and Josh’s one-year-old son.

Kristen had been my best friend since sixth grade. Our worlds had been on the same trajectory since junior high. We’d done everything together. Our lives’ milestones had always lined up accordingly.

Brandon and Josh had been best friends too. I’d pictured couples trips and having babies together. Buying houses next door to each other. And now Kristen had continued without me. Her life had kept its pace, and mine had crashed and burned when Brandon’s motorcycle did the same. I was stuck in some sort of arrested development, trapped in a continuous loop I couldn’t pull myself out of.