



## The Status of All Things: A Novel

By Liz Fenton, Lisa Steinke



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What would you do if you could literally rewrite your fate—on Facebook? This heartwarming and hilarious new novel from the authors of *Your Perfect Life* follows a woman who discovers she can change her life through online status updates.

Kate is a thirty-five-year-old woman who is obsessed with social media. So when her fiancé, Max, breaks things off at their rehearsal dinner—to be with Kate's close friend and coworker, no less—she goes straight to Facebook to share it with the world. But something's changed. Suddenly, Kate's real life starts to mirror whatever she writes in her Facebook status. With all the power at her fingertips, and heartbroken and confused over why Max left her, Kate goes back in time to rewrite their history.

Kate's two best friends, Jules and Liam, are the only ones who know the truth. In order to convince them she's really time traveled, Kate offers to use her Facebook status to help improve their lives. But her attempts to help them don't go exactly as planned, and every effort to get Max back seems to only backfire, causing Kate to wonder if it's really possible to change her fate.

In *The Status of All Things*, Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke combine the humor and heart of Sarah Pekkanen and Jennifer Weiner while exploring the pitfalls of posting your entire life on the Internet. They raise the questions: What if you could create your picture-perfect life? Would you be happy? Would you still be you? For anyone who's ever attempted—or failed—to be their perfect self online, this is a story of wisdom and wit that will leave you with new appreciation for the true status of your life.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Change your Facebook status, change reality? This book will be a *like*.” (*Cosmopolitan*)

“Another page turner from Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke, who are best friends in real life (and not just on Facebook).” (*PopSugar*)

"Pop culture references and a healthy sprinkling of magical realism combine to make *The Status of All Things* a timely reminder that all is not what it seems. With a sparkling narrative that will have you turning pages at a breakneck speed, this is women's fiction at its finest."

(Tracey Garvis Graves *New York Times* bestselling author of *On the Island and Covet*)

"I raced through *The Status of All Things* at a breakneck pace. A perfect blend of what-if and what-should-be, Fenton and Steinke have found a rhythm together that works. They bring that little touch of magic we could all use in our own lives to the page with vibrancy and wit." (Catherine McKenzie *bestselling author of Hidden and Forgotten*)

"Written with heart and keen insight into the influences of social media, *The Status of All Things* tells the tale of one woman's quest to change the past. The story gives us magic, a touch of whimsy, and a reality that's hard to shake. Smart and true with a pitch-perfect ending, it will leave readers feeling satisfied and also asking 'what if?'" (Michelle Gable *internationally bestselling author of A Paris Apartment*)

“You will fly through this book...!” (*Miami Living Magazine*)

“A new twist on modern day women's fiction...the integration of magical elements works surprisingly well in this witty story that is much more than charming romance. A fun and fast read for fans of Meg Cabot and Jennifer Weiner.”

(*Library Journal*)

“With their razor sharp wit and astute social commentary, Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke—two of women's fiction's brightest stars—tackle the question: Would you be truly happy if you could rewrite your own fate via Facebook? And the answer is definitely not what you expect.” (Emily Liebert *author of WHEN WE FALL*)

"What a treat! *The Status of All Things* is a fun, clever and utterly engaging story of love, loss, the power of destiny and the importance of friends. A thoroughly enjoyable read. I loved everything about it, from beginning to end." (Mary Kubica *author of The Good Girl*)

#### **Praise for *Your Perfect Life*:**

“I loved *Your Perfect Life* from the very first line (which will go down in history as the funniest, bravest first line ever). Hilarious, honest and truly touching, Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke are two important new voices in women's fiction who write about life in such a real, relatable way.” (Sarah Jio *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Violets of March*)

"*Your Perfect Life* has all of the ingredients that I love in a book—relatable characters who make me laugh

out loud, a delicious, page-turning premise, and sweet and surprising insights about the perfect life may be the one you've already got." (Jen Lancaster *New York Times* bestselling author)

"Sassy, heartfelt, and smart, *Your Perfect Life* is a clever take on switched identities that will make you think hard about the choices you've made in your life and what matters most to us all in the end." (Amy Hatvany author of *Heart Like Mine*)

"For every woman who's ever wondered about the path not taken, Fenton and Steinke mine—with tremendous humor and insight—the mixed blessing of unexpected second chances." (Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus *New York Times* bestselling authors)

"Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke blend their voices seamlessly and hilariously and remind us that even though the grass often looks greener under our friends' lives, nobody gets happily ever unless they go after it. *Your Perfect Life* is clever, quirky, fresh, and ultimately, empowering!" (Claire Cook bestselling author of *Must Love Dogs* and *Time Flies*)

"Liz and Lisa's voices are warm and comforting, like a relaxed chat with great friends while wearing cozy PJ's and sipping wine. I highly recommend *Your Perfect Life*!" (Beth Harbison *New York Times* bestselling author of *When in Doubt, Add Butter*)

"*Your Perfect Life* puts a fresh twist on a 'Freaky Friday'-scenario: What if you switched bodies with your best friend, and got the life you'd always secretly coveted? I adore Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke's witty, winning style and gobbled up their debut novel." (Sarah Pekkanen author of *The Best of Us*)

#### About the Author

Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke have been best friends for twenty-five years and survived high school and college together. Liz lives in San Diego with her husband and two children. Lisa, a former talk show producer, now lives in Chicago with her husband, daughter, and two bonus children.

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The Status of All Things

#### CHAPTER ONE



In less than 24 hours, I'll be walking down the aisle.

Something borrowed, something blue? Check.

Something old, something new? Check.

The love of my life? Double check! #whatcouldgowrong

I upload my status to Facebook, tuck my cell phone away, and try to savor the only minute alone I've had all day. Sitting on the veranda of the bridal suite, I stare hard at the waves crashing against the Wailea coastline. I tug on the unforgiving fabric of my black peplum dress, having just fought my way into it moments ago. Stella, my wedding planner, with a permanent flush to her round cheeks and steely look in her eyes had unabashedly yelled, suck it in! as she yanked the zipper until it stubbornly found its way to the nape of my neck.

Embarrassed, I had immediately sent her away with a checklist, to place the gerbera daisies in the vases—two orange and one white in each—and to confirm that the ginger-glazed shrimp skewers and crispy spicy tuna rolls would be passed at 7 p.m. sharp. I also reminded her to make sure my mother and father, divorced for almost two decades, would be sitting not just at different tables, but across the room from each other, my mom’s quiet anger over my dad leaving her still easily triggered like a scab that gets scratched and starts bleeding.

“And please don’t forget to deliver Max his groom’s gift!” I had craned my neck out the doorway as she’d jogged down the hall, giving me a thumbs-up without ever turning around, no doubt trying to put as much distance between herself and the memory of forcing the folds of my lily-white skin into a size 8 dress.

I had spent months scouring Pinterest boards for the perfect gift for Max—finally settling on a vintage Tag Heuer watch, lightly engraving You’re still the one on the inside of the band, a nod to the Shania Twain song we’d danced to at the wedding where we’d been introduced by my best friend, Jules, three years ago. I couldn’t wait to tell Max the story of how I’d found the antique timepiece on eBay, then engaged in an intense bidding war with Shaggy202, my eyes burning and my hands sweating, all while Max slept soundly next to me. I waited patiently for the final seconds before the auction closed, then punched in a final bid, a number that far exceeded my budget, sending Shaggy202 retreating into cyberspace as I silently pumped my fists in the air and mouthed the words take that, bitch!

But if Max received the watch, he hadn’t told me. I’d texted him several times coyly referring to a special delivery he should’ve received—and it wasn’t like him not to respond. I push the thought aside as I watch two little girls giggling as the turquoise ocean water splashes up around their knees. I close my eyes, knowing I should take a cue from them and inhale the warm Maui air and just be. That my mind shouldn’t be swirling like the tide as I second-guess practically everything—including my decision to get Max the watch instead of the cuff links. But when you devote a year to planning one day, you want everything to be perfect.

“Knock-knock,” Jules says as she pushes the door of my suite open and I spot the familiar yellow label on the bottle of champagne she’s holding before I see her. I smile as she giddily holds up my favorite bubbly. From the moment we’d met over fifteen years ago on the first day of freshman orientation at UCLA, bonding over a shared disdain for our smarmy tour guide and his repeated use of the word homeboy, she’d had an uncanny ability to anticipate exactly what I needed. That day, as we’d paused in front of the student union, listening to our guide ramble on about the off the chain clubs we could join, at the precise moment I didn’t think I could take one more minute of his legit raps, she’d stage-whispered, “I don’t know about you, but I say we ask those guys to give us the rest of the tour,” pointing to a group of frat boys tossing a football in the quad. Jules looped her arm through mine, and as we muffled our giggles and inched away from the group, I knew I’d made a best friend.

“Hey.” She pulls me into a deep hug then steps back. “You look absolutely gorgeous,” she says, knowing exactly what I need to hear.

“Are you sure?” I prod, smoothing the material of my dress that’s buckling slightly at my waist and trying not to think about the way the shapewear underneath it is cutting off my circulation or the offending red indentation mark it will leave around my middle.

“Will you stop?” Jules pleads and grabs my arm, guiding me in front of the mirrored closet door. “Do you know how much I would kill for this hair?” She touches one of my strawberry-tinged loose curls. “And this face?” She smiles as she runs a finger across my lightly freckled nose and over my cheekbone, my powder-blue eyes peering back at me, wanting so badly to see what she does. I don’t understand the fuss she’s

making. Staring back at me is an average-looking girl who easily blends into the crowd—with limp locks, a button nose that’s too small next to her round cheeks, and a few extra pounds she hasn’t been able to lose since college. I can’t help but envy Jules, whose naturally lean figure towers over me, whose body has never needed the assistance of spandex underwear, whose nonexistent love handles have never been shoved into anything.

I tug at a straight strand of my hair that has lost its curl. “I’m not sure I should wear this up tomorrow.”

“No updo?” Jules frowns.

“Maybe not . . .”

“But you were so happy with it when we did the trial run last week. It looks great with the dress and jewelry. Very elegant.”

“I’m just rethinking the pictures.” I pause and gather my hair on top of my head. “I’m not sure I want to be that bride. Maybe I should go for a more casual look?”

Jules waits a beat before answering me, the slight frown that flashes across her face giving away her frustration with my indecisiveness. “What do you mean by that bride? Did something happen? What’s making you second-guess your hair in the eleventh hour?”

“Are you friends with Anne Freeborn?”

“On Facebook?” Jules squints at me as if she’s trying to conjure her face.

I nod.

“Yeah, but I think I hid her from my feed after the last election—her political rants were making me crazy. Why?”

“She’s getting married next month and she posted two pictures this morning asking people to vote on which hairstyle she should go with. Up or down? Tight bun or beachy waves?”

“Okay . . .” Jules continues to look at me skeptically.

“And way more people said down—something like 112 of her friends were against wearing it up—they commented that she’d look more carefree if she wore it loose.”

“Okay . . .” Jules says again.

“So it just made me think—maybe I should wear mine down too? I don’t want to look uptight. Like I’m not having a good time.”

“Because you won’t actually be having a good time?” she asks gently.

“No, but it’s something to think about. The hair,” I say slowly, suddenly feeling self-conscious as I stare at Jules’ face, still registering confusion and doubt. “What?” I challenge. “I can’t make a last-minute change?”

“Of course you can, but—”

“But what?”

“Never mind. You’re right. It’s your day. Down it is!” She claps her hands together, the sound echoing loudly on the balcony.

“Tell me what you were going to say.”

“It’s just . . . you should do what you want and not worry about what others think of it. It’s going to be the biggest day of your life—not theirs.”

I know she’s right—that it’s my day—but I also can’t ignore the words on the tip of my tongue, even if I wish they weren’t perched there, like divers about to sail off the board. The truth is, I care. I care a lot.

“I can’t really explain it, okay? It’s just how I feel. And anyway, maybe I should take this as a sign? Maybe I was supposed to wear my hair down, no matter what the reason.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Jules smiles, and I can tell by the flickering in her eyes that there is a lot more she wants to say, but she lets it drop and I’m relieved.

“Sorry. I’m just kind of a mess. I want to get it right.” I consider asking Jules for her opinion about why I haven’t heard from Max, but worry I’ll sound too neurotic after my hair up/hair down diatribe. My cell phone buzzes and I pull it out of the pocket of my dress and shake it at Jules. “And it’s not helping that my mom refuses to stop texting me about Dad and the wife—”

“I cannot believe she still won’t use her name,” Jules says, cutting me off.

“Well, you know, it’s only been eighteen years.” I shake my head. “Apparently the wife has already offended her, and I quote, ‘multiple times,’ today.” I think of the last message from my mom demanding that I ban my stepmom, Leslie, from the family picture and feel my stomach tighten into yet another knot.

“I’m sorry you’re even dealing with this! I told Stella she was supposed to keep your mom’s neurosis from you—she’s under strict orders to pass all of her complaints my way.” She places her hands on her slim hips and narrows her green eyes.

“Cut Stella a break. She’s had to operate way beyond her job description in other ways today.” I pat my stomach and laugh as Jules gives me a questioning look. “She deserves hazard pay for helping me squeeze into this.”

Jules rolls her eyes as she pops the cork and pours the champagne into two flutes and holds one out to me as the bubbles race to the surface. “I’d like to propose a toast. To your marriage tomorrow. Welcome to the club!”

I press the glass to my lips. “I know! Me? A married woman . . . finally.”

“Thanks to my supreme matchmaking skills!” Jules pats herself on the back.

I clink my glass against Jules’. “How will I ever properly thank you?”



“You can start by naming your first child after me!” she teases.

“Maybe.” I run my finger around the rim of my flute, thinking of the night Max proposed, his voice breathless after I’d said yes, like he’d just sprinted at the end of one of his long runs.

I can’t wait to be a family, he’d whispered.

His olive-green eyes had brightened and then squinted as if he was picturing us with our arms wrapped around a baby. I knew Max would be a good dad—he had an instinct with children that didn’t come as naturally to me. I loved kids and wanted to be a mom, but I was always afraid of something happening to any child in my charge. Even Jules’ kids, Ellie and Evan, whom I considered my niece and nephew because Jules was like the sister I never had, would roll their eyes at me if I suggested taking them to the pool or for a bike ride. It was as if they could smell my apprehension. But they’d been calling Max Uncle M practically since the moment they’d met him, when he’d scooped them up, under each arm, and swung them in the air as if he’d done it a hundred times before. As they’d squealed in delight, Jules raised her eyebrows and pressed her lips together, her look saying, this could really be the guy for you.

I watch Jules smoothing a strand of her white-blond hair that has fallen from its effortless-looking sleek ponytail and I think about how it mimics the way she has always seemed to glide through life. She’d married her college sweetheart, Ben, almost ten years ago and had quickly produced Evan, then two years later, Ellie, both blond-haired, emerald-eyed replicas of her. And although she had no formal training, she’d always been able to whip up the richest masterpieces from the most basic of ingredients, quickly working her way up to her current position as the pastry chef for The Midnight Snack, one of West Hollywood’s hottest restaurants. She seemed to juggle motherhood, marriage, and a career with the precision of an air-traffic controller, not to mention the confidence of one. It was probably the reason why people had always been drawn to her the way a bee is pulled to a budding flower.

As Jules and I nearly drain our glasses, a familiar deep voice cuts through the air. “Is everyone decent in here?”

Jules giggles. “No, we’re hanging out in our lingerie even though the rehearsal dinner starts in fifteen minutes!”

Liam peaks his head out, his hazel eyes lighting up when he sees my arm wrapped around Jules’ waist. “Well you two may not be half naked, but this still looks like some fun I’d like to get in on.” He smiles and raises his eyebrows. As he ambles across the room, I notice his new charcoal-gray suit drapes perfectly over his tall, lanky body, smiling as I remember his moans after yet another jacket he’d tried on was too short for his arms, warning me that we’d better find something, anything soon because if he missed the Dodgers game there’d be hell to pay. He wraps a strong arm over each of our shoulders, the white pocket square the salesman talked him into grazing my cheek, me reaching up and touching his tousled light brown hair.

“Did you even bring a brush on this trip?” I tease.

“Haven’t you heard? The messy look is in,” he says with a laugh.

The three of us had been linked from the moment we’d traded deep sighs over our college professor for Economics 101, the insufferable Dr. Kinsey, whose jowled face, crusty demeanor, and steep grading curve gave us many sleepless nights that semester. Liam had nudged me at the end of the first day of class, flashing a crooked smile, his eyes narrowing from behind his dark-rimmed eyeglasses as he made a joke about how

our curmudgeonly teacher needed to just get laid already. He wondered if possibly I was up to the task so I could save us all from our inevitable fate—dying of boredom before we were even twenty-one.

When I'd fake gagged and hit him with my notebook, he'd relented. "Fine. If not you, maybe your friend?" he'd said, pointing to Jules as she walked toward us. When she'd given him the finger after hearing his pitch, he'd deadpanned, "What? Didn't you guys see the size of his hands when he was writing our assignment on the dry-erase board? You know what that means, right?" As if on cue, Jules and I had cried, "That is so foul," and broke into a fit of laughter, silently sealing a promise of a lifetime of friendship.

"Okay, people. Time to head up to the restaurant," Jules says authoritatively, resting her empty glass on the wood table sitting between two deck chairs. "As your matron of honor, I feel it is my duty to get you there on time," she adds, elbowing Liam jokingly.

Liam clears his throat dramatically and tugs at the collar of his crisp white shirt. "Well, as her best man, I feel strongly that she should have another drink first—in fact, I brought something stronger." He grins as he pulls a tarnished silver flask from his back pocket—one I gave him when we were in college, instantly evoking memories of ski trips to Tahoe, late nights lounging on the deck of his fraternity house, and Fourth of Julys spent sunbathing on the bow of a speedboat in Havasu. I'd had it engraved. Think of me every time you take a sip. He swore that he did.

"Well, this isn't the Met Gala and Kate's not exactly Anna Wintour . . . no offense—" she says, turning toward me.

"None taken." I laugh.

". . . so being fashionably late isn't going to cut it," Jules continues, grabbing the flask and putting it up to her nose, releasing a small cough as she inhales. "Whoa—what the hell is in here?" She shoves it back into Liam's hand.

"Whiskey," he says with a shrug, and takes a drink, releasing an exaggerated sigh when he's finished. "And not just any whiskey—it's Pappy Van Winkle! Do you know what I had to do to get my hands on this? It's harder to find than my man card after I let you talk me into wearing those skinny jeans you bought me last Christmas!" He shakes his head at the memory.

"Pappy Van what, what?" Jules laughs. "It sounds like one of those shows my daughter watches on the Disney Channel, not a brand of whiskey!"

"Oh, Jules, you have so much to learn," Liam says before taking another swig.

"Well, I don't care if it's laced with gold—Kate's not drinking that. Her friends, family, and fiancé are expecting her to be there when the party starts! Not to stumble in late." Jules turns toward me. "Right?"

"I'm not getting involved." I wave my hands in front of me like an umpire calling a baseball player safe. "But I will say this is exactly why I asked both of you to be in my wedding—so you can fight over what's best for me. I love it!" I grab my iPhone and study the screen, my face falling for a moment when I realize my earlier text to Max has still gone unanswered.

"What is it?" Jules, who never misses a beat, catches my strained expression.

“Nothing,” I lie.

“You sure?” Jules presses.

“Positive,” I say.

Liam arches an eyebrow and I look away quickly. “Kate probably just has a little case of prewedding jitters, Jules. I know I’d be shitting bricks if it were me!” Liam laughs as he leans back in a lounge chair, his long legs dangling off the end. “Exactly why she needs some of this.” He waves the whiskey in front of me and I happily take it. As I’m sipping the liquor, he scoots his chair close to mine, his eyes suddenly filled with an intensity that makes me pull the flask away from my lips. “But hey, Kate, you don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to. Everyone will understand if you decide you aren’t ready to settle down.”

I stare at him, blinking hard, the backs of my eyes watering from the whiskey stinging my throat, unsure of how to respond.

“Will you relax.” He slaps my knee. “I’m kidding!” he says, laughing. “But you should have seen your face. You turned white as a ghost. Priceless.” He leans back in his chair again and I release the breath I’d been holding.

“God, you are terrible! I should fire you! And I blame this!” Jules reaches for the flask, but I hold it just out of reach as I take another sip, the whiskey going down much easier this time.

As Jules and Liam banter, I decide I’m just obsessing. Of course Max received the watch. And of course he loves it. How could he not? I saw him eyeing a similar one in Esquire, and that’s what had sparked the idea in the first place. He’ll show up tonight wearing it and wrap my hand inside of his protectively, the way he has so many times before.

“Okay, let’s get a pic for our little Facebook whore.” Jules elbows me playfully, bringing the dialogue in my head to an abrupt halt. “You know you want one!” She giggles as Liam holds my phone high above our heads, all of us jockeying for position as I give Liam instructions on how to angle the phone for the best shot, finally accepting that his forehead won’t make the cut.

After I settle on a photo, Liam sighs. “I will never understand the effort that goes into taking a picture of women that’s Facebook-worthy. I’m quite confident NASA spent less time helping the Apollo 13 astronauts get back home!”

I roll my eyes at him and pull up my page, filter the photo, tag him and Jules and then Max as well, knowing our picture will make him smile.

Feeling thankful! Lanai selfie with my besties.

•••

My mother is the first person I spot as I enter the restaurant on the top floor of the hotel, Liam and Jules waving good-bye as Jules makes a beeline for Ben and Liam for his date, Angie, a leggy raven-haired beauty I just met yesterday.

“Kate!” my mom says, her sleek golden blond bob bouncing as she hugs me. “You’re here. I was beginning

to wonder if you were going to show up.” She laughs, but the not-so-subtle disapproval drips from her voice like a leaky faucet.

“Well, I’m here now,” I say, straightening my back as I scan the room for Max. “Speaking of being here—”

“Did you get my texts?” my mom interrupts, awkwardly tugging at the hem of her knee-length dress despite the fact that it fits her slim figure perfectly. Her body is more toned than that of many women my age—including my own.

“Have you seen Max?” I ask, ignoring her question as I follow her wistful gaze to my dad and stepmom, huddled closely in the corner like they are the ones exchanging vows tomorrow. When my dad announced he was marrying Leslie, who is only twelve years older than I am, my mother had scoffed, promising he and the baby wouldn’t make it six months. But nearly twenty years later, they are still mad about each other, and I am still unable to admit to my mom that I have also come to genuinely love Leslie. She has kind blue eyes that still light up whenever she talks about my dad, and she always welcomes me with a warm embrace I can feel long after we’ve parted. It’s as if her sunny personality radiates through her skin and transfers onto mine.

My mother grabs a mai tai from a passing waiter and takes a long drink, her ruby-red lipstick staining the straw. “I haven’t seen him . . . I assumed you two were together.” She motions her cocktail glass toward the crowded room without taking her eyes off my dad, and I fight the urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake the bitterness out of her like a coin you try to retrieve from a piggy bank.

I scan the area again, noticing most of the guests have already arrived, wearing colorful leis around their necks, sipping cocktails with umbrellas, a warm bronzed tone to their skin from their first day in the sun—or in the case of my uncle Louie, a shade closer to lobster red—but there’s still no sign of my fiancé.

I frown. Max is never late. I think back to the morning we flew to Maui. At 6 a.m., he was already off on his daily six-mile run, his single black Tumi suitcase and garment bag sitting by the front door hours before we were scheduled to leave, his items thoughtfully and precisely packed the day before. Meanwhile, I was in our bedroom heaving my severely undercaffeinated body on top of my third piece of luggage, desperate to squeeze in one last sarong and pair of espadrilles just in case.

Where is he?

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be here any moment,” my mom says, as if she’s just read my mind. “It’s Max we’re talking about here, not your father,” she adds, an edge to her voice.

“Mom, please. Not tonight.”

“So about my texts. Do you believe the nerve of that woman?” She presses on anyway. “It’s a family picture!”

I bite my tongue, holding back the thoughts scrolling through my mind like the ticker at the bottom of a news program—that my mom’s palpable anger was not an invited guest to my wedding weekend, that her lipstick is three shades too dark for her ivory skin, that I’m truly sorry my dad fell in love with someone else and even sorrier that she refuses to let go of the anger that’s been eating her alive ever since. I shoot Jules a look across the room, letting her know I need her help.

“It’s not a completely unreasonable request—they’ve been married a long time,” I finally say gently, not

wanting to hurt her feelings, no matter how foolish she is acting.

My mom starts to respond, but Jules intercepts her, swiftly grabbing her hand and guiding her toward the bar, mentioning something about the freshly shaved coconut in the piña coladas.

I turn on my heel to search for Max. I'm relieved when I finally locate him on the veranda, in deep conversation with Courtney, my friend and the other vice president at the advertising agency where I work.

"There you are." My gaze is immediately pulled to Max's empty wrist like a magnet. "Didn't you get a special delivery from me today? Stella swore it was delivered—"

Max glances sideways at Courtney, then back at me. "Stella didn't forget. I got the watch." He runs his hand through his wavy dark brown hair and across his stubble-lined jaw.

"Then where is it?" I chew on my lower lip as I wait for his answer.

"It's down in my room."

"Really? Why?" I say, my mind spinning. "You didn't like it." My cheeks redden with embarrassment as I catch Courtney's sympathetic stare. She looks away quickly. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

"No, I did like it—loved it actually," he says slowly.

"Oh, thank God. So you just forgot to put it on. No big deal. I'll see if Stella can go get it." I slide my phone out of my pocket. "I know you're probably dying for a scotch but I just want to take a picture with you first." I glance around for the best light. "Over there?" I say, pointing next to the railing, the sun casting a red and orange glow across the sky as it begins to set. I grab Max's hand and start to walk toward the edge of the lanai, then glance back. "Courtney? Will you take it?"

Courtney obediently follows us and snaps several pictures.

"Can you take one more?" I ask apologetically, noticing Max looks like he's posing for a passport photo in all of them. I turn to him, his jaw tight and his body rigid, whispering in his ear, "Will you please smile?"

But the corners of Max's lips still don't curve upward. "We need to talk," he says quietly.

"After this," I say through my grin, my hand perfectly poised on Max's chest as I tuck a wisp of my hair behind my ear and tilt my chin downward. "Trust me. You'll thank me when we're showing this photo to our kids."

"No, I need to talk to you right now," Max replies forcefully, and I step back, his voice sounding foreign to me—almost guttural. I glance over to see if Courtney heard his reprimand, but she's disappeared into the party like a ghost, the only sign she's ever been there is my phone, resting on the edge of a teak chair.

"What is it?" I ask slowly, our eyes locked. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

It's the moment I can feel him begin to slip through my fingers.

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