



the  
*Roommate  
Arrangement*

Jae



# Chapter 1

THIS EVENING WASN'T GOING TO end well. Steph knew it the moment Marissa, the comic opening for her, pulled the microphone out of the stand and accidentally whacked herself in the nose.

The rest of her set didn't go any better.

The local country bar didn't have a greenroom, where comedians could wait before going up on stage, so Steph sat at the bar and had a front-row seat to the disaster that was her opening act.

Marissa clamped both hands around the mic as if about to recite a poem. "Has anyone here done a juice cleanse lately?"

Steph stifled a groan. A juice cleanse? Really? That was the material she had chosen for rural Idaho?

The people in the audience looked at Marissa as if she'd asked if anyone owned a pet dinosaur.

Marissa didn't seem to notice and prattled on. "All my friends swear by them. They say it gives them bright skin and a flat belly. But all I got was one hell of a headache when I woke up. How was I supposed to know that mimosas don't count?"

That got her a sympathy chuckle from a woman in the front row. Two of the men in the back got up and returned to the pool tables, and the noise level in the bar rose as people went back to their conversations.

Not even the skin-tight top Marissa wore could keep the audience's attention, despite its plunging neckline. Sweat gleamed on Marissa's brow, and she started to speak faster, rushing through her set and making things worse.

*Wonderful.* Steph didn't look forward to going up after her. She'd been happy when she had found out her opener would be a fellow female comic.

Stand-up comedy was still such a male-dominated field that Steph was often the only woman—and the only queer person—in the lineup. But now that Marissa was bombing, Steph would have to work harder to show them that women could be funny. Male comedians never have to deal with that. No one judged them by another guy's failure. It wasn't fair, and it made Steph even more determined to prove herself.

"Can I get you a drink...or anything else?" the bartender asked behind her.

Steph turned and regarded the pretty redhead. Was it just her imagination, or had there been a flirty undertone?

"You kinda look like you could use one," the bartender added with a subtle wink.

*Yep. Definitely flirting.* God knew Steph could have used a drink to make it through Marissa's routine, and flirting was her favorite pastime. At the start of her career, she would have said yes to the drink—and to the implied offer—but her nearly ten years in comedy had taught her a lot. Now she never drank before her set because it slowed her down, and she had learned the hard way to not hook up with employees at the venues where she performed.

Too bad. The redhead was cute. Steph sent her an appreciative grin. "Thanks. I'm good. Depending on how this goes," she gestured toward the stage, "I might have to hightail it out of here right after my set."

"Nah, I doubt it. I remember you from last year. You're good. Now she," the bartender nodded toward Marissa, "is a whole nother ball game."

They both paused and watched Marissa for a few seconds.

"...and then he nudged aside my selfie stick and said—" Marissa took a nervous pace forward and stepped onto the mic cord, pulling it out. Her voice cut out in the middle of the punch line, which might have been a blessing in disguise because their small-town audience wasn't into Marissa's big-city humor.

*Come on, read the crowd.*

Marissa managed to plug the microphone back in and struggled through the rest of her set.

Steph wasn't sure who was more relieved when it was finally over—Marissa or the audience. With a mumbled "This joke normally goes so much better," she fled from the stage.

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The bar owner took the mic and stared after her. “Um, thank you. That was...interesting. Give it up for Marissa Jones, everyone.”

The crowd clapped without much enthusiasm.

“Are you ready for your headliner?” the bar owner asked with fake cheer. “Please give a warm welcome to Tiffany Renshaw!”

Steph groaned. He had gotten her name wrong the second year in a row.

But she was a professional, so she smiled as she bounded onto the low stage as if she owned the place. No way would she let them see her sweat. She shook the owner’s hand and took the mic from him. “Thanks, but it’s Stephanie Renshaw, actually.” She gave the audience a conspiratorial grin. “Someone should tell him a man could really get in trouble calling out the wrong name at the wrong time.”

“Oh, he already knows that, sweetheart,” the owner’s wife shouted from the back of the room.

That got them the first real laughter of the evening.

Grinning, Steph launched into her routine and forgot about everything else—her frustration with Marissa, the fleabag hotel where she’d spent the night, and the eight hundred and fifty miles she’d have to drive to make it back to LA. It was always like this for her. Up on stage was the one place where she felt at home. Being a comic on the road for most of the year had stopped being fun a while ago, but this was why she was still doing it.

Before she knew it, an hour had gone by, and she was delivering her closing bit. “Since it’s Halloween, let me talk about something really scary: most comedians’ love lives. Have you ever noticed how the majority of comics are either single or divorced? Apparently, sarcasm and being gone most of the time are not desirable traits in a partner. Who knew?” She pressed her hand to her chest and acted surprised. “I also found out that Ramen noodles are not considered an appropriate first-date meal and that most people don’t find it attractive if you start scribbling down ideas for jokes while they tell you their life story.”

A chuckle went through the crowd.

“So, I’m single. I know, shocker, right?” She playfully tossed back her tousled hair.

The audience made fake sympathetic noises.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s by choice...well, not mine, but anyway.” That wasn’t exactly true, but it always got her a laugh, so she’d left it in.

“I’d take you, babe,” one of the guys who had drifted back over from the pool tables shouted.

“Sorry,” Steph answered without missing a beat. “That wouldn’t be fair to all my other suitors. Anyway, my parents think I have bad judgment when it comes to the people I date. Well, either that or bad eyesight. I used to have this really buff boyfriend. He wore an ankle weight all the time, and I thought, wow, he’s really into keeping fit.” She acted it out, hopping around on one foot to show the audience where the weight had been. Then she paused before delivering the punch line. “It turned out it was an ankle monitor. He’d forgotten to mention he was out on parole.”

The crowd roared, and a guy in a cowboy hat thumped his beer mug on the bar and doubled over, howling.

The wave of laughter flowed over Steph, and she soared on top of it like a champion surfer. The adrenaline rush hit her, and she couldn’t help laughing along with the audience. Nothing could beat the feeling of making a room full of strangers laugh.

When she thanked the audience and left the stage, she caught the gaze of the cute bartender.

Okay, maybe sex could. Too bad one of the few rules she lived by was to keep her hands off venue employees—and people with ankle monitors.

\* \* \*

Steph was still buzzing from her stage high when she crossed the parking lot toward her Mini Cooper convertible.

“Stephanie? Wait!” A woman’s voice from behind stopped her.

A wide grin formed on Steph’s lips. Apparently, the cute bartender didn’t intend to let her leave without saying goodbye. She turned, a bit of flirty banter already on the tip of her tongue.

But it wasn’t the redhead who’d followed her; it was Marissa. “Are you heading back to your hotel?”

“No. I’m so keyed up I figured I might as well head toward LA and get as many miles in as I can and just crash in some motel along the way.”

“Can I hitch a ride?” Marissa asked. “I took a Greyhound here because what they’re paying me doesn’t even cover the gas money.”

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Greyhound? Wow. That was true dedication. “Sure. Hop in. There’s not much legroom, but my car sure smells better than the bus.”

“Thanks.” Marissa squeezed her backpack into the trunk next to Steph’s duffel bag.

They climbed in and drove the first couple of miles in silence, but Steph felt what was coming, so she wasn’t surprised when Marissa said in a near whisper, “That was bad, wasn’t it?”

Steph wasn’t going to lie, but neither did she want to discourage a fellow comic. “We all bomb every now and then. Part of the job.”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand it. I did the exact same material in bars and cafés in LA, and it worked every time.”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. You can’t do the same jokes wherever you go. Those guys back there couldn’t relate to juice cleanses, mimosas, and LA rush hour.”

“Hmm. You might be right.” Marissa pulled her phone from her pocket and started to take notes. “Any other advice?”

Steph threw her a look out of the corner of her eye. When had this turned into a free consultation? But they had a lot of time to kill, so she might as well help out a colleague. She pointed at Marissa’s low-cut top. “I’d take a look at your wardrobe if I were you. Bits over tits.”

“What?”

Steph chuckled. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I don’t appreciate a good-looking pair of breasts. I definitely do. But if you want people to take you seriously, show them good comedy, not your cleavage.”

Marissa blushed and adjusted the neckline of her top. “Does that mean you’re gay? All those jokes about your bad taste in men are completely made up?”

“Nope. All true.” Steph grinned. “I’m bi, which means I have indiscriminate bad taste in men *and* women.”

A giggle drifted over from the passenger seat. “Oh my gosh, you’re funny. If you can make me laugh after that disaster, you’re really good.”

“Spend enough time working the road, and you’ll be really good too.” *Or slink home with your tail between your legs*, Steph mentally added. That wasn’t what she was doing, though, was it?

Marissa sighed. “I know you’re right. With the five minutes here and there I cobble together in LA, there’s no way to improve fast. I need the

longer spots you can get out here, but I've only been on the road for three weeks, and I already hate it. I thought being in a different town every week would be a fun adventure, but..."

"Tell me about it. Except for a week back in LA this summer, I've been on the road all year, bouncing around the country, living out of my suitcase, and eating shitty food."

"So you're going back to LA for good?" Marissa asked.

"Yeah. Let's face it. No one was ever discovered in a country bar in southern Idaho, so I'm aiming for my big break in the city of sunshine and smog. That's the plan anyway—if I can find an apartment without having to sell a couple of organs."

"If you need a place to crash for a while, I've got a sleeper couch," Marissa said.

That was part of what Steph liked about being a comedian. While competition for gigs was fierce, there was an unspoken code among comics. Whenever another comedian needed a place to stay for a couple of days, you provided it, no questions asked.

"Thanks, but luckily, my sister lives in LA. She's offered me her guest room for as long as I want it."

"Oh, I bet that'll be nice."

"Yeah, kind of. My sister's a neat freak, so it'll be like living with my parents." Although, truth be told, Claire had gotten more relaxed since she and Lana had become a couple for real. That was one of the reasons Steph liked her future sister-in-law so much.

"I know what you mean," Marissa said. "My sister's the same. Oh, hey, wait a minute! She and her boyfriend are moving from LA to New York and looking for someone to take over the lease on their two-bedroom apartment. It's not listed yet. Do you want me to give them a call?"

"That depends on how much the rent is. Like I said, I'm pretty fond of my kidneys."

"It's not too bad, especially considering it's close to Melrose and Sweetzer," Marissa said.

If Steph had been a dog, her ears would have perked up. Finding a halfway affordable apartment that close to two of the big comedy clubs was about as likely as encountering a zebra on the interstate. It was almost too good to be true. "How much is 'not too bad'?"

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“Twenty-two hundred, I think.”

In other words, highway robbery in most other parts of the country, but pretty cheap for such a central spot in LA. From what little she made as a comedian, she couldn't afford it. But if she got her friend Penny to give her back her old job as a dog walker and maybe picked up a few Uber rides, it might actually be doable. “You know what? Give them a call. If I find a roommate who pays his or her part of the rent on time, I think I can swing it.”

Marissa slapped her own forehead. “Oh, shoot. Sorry, forget I said anything.”

“What? Why?”

“The landlord doesn't rent to singles,” Marissa said. “I'm sure there's a story there, but I never found out what it was. I just know they don't want singles or roommate situations.”

Steph frowned. “Isn't that housing discrimination?”

“Only if you can prove it in court, I guess. Too bad. It's a great neighborhood—nice and quiet, but only a few blocks from The Improv and The Fun Zone. It even comes with two parking spots. Plus it's rent-controlled. If I didn't plan on being on the road for most of next year, I'd move in myself.”

“Damn.” Steph slapped the steering wheel. “For an apartment like that, I'd marry someone, if need be.”

“Sorry,” Marissa said again.

After that, both kept quiet for a while, with only the radio and the monotonous sound of tires on pavement breaking the silence. The words she'd just said seemed to echo through Steph's mind. *For an apartment like that, I'd marry someone.* She wouldn't go that far, of course; she enjoyed the freedom of sleeping with whomever she wanted too much. But the landlord didn't need to know that. What if she did what her sister had pulled off last year? When Claire's first fiancée had broken up with her, endangering the publishing contract for her relationship advice book, Claire had hired an out-of-work actress to play the role of her loving future spouse.

Maybe Steph could do something similar. In a city like Los Angeles, it shouldn't be hard to find someone who was desperate for a place to live and willing to play her significant other in front of the landlord.



Steph grinned at her idea. It was genius—as long as she avoided doing what Claire had done: falling in love with her pretend partner.

That should be easy since she wasn't the falling-in-love kind. She and her roomie would share the apartment, not the bed. Once the lease was signed, they could each go back to the joys of single life.

Now she just needed to find a person willing to go along with her plan. Craigslist probably wasn't the right place for that. She chuckled as she imagined the ad. *Wanted: roommate to share two-bedroom apartment. Centrally located, comes with a parking spot, on-site laundry, and a fake relationship.*

When they crossed the state line into Nevada, she was still amusing herself imagining the kind of person who would answer an ad like that. She couldn't wait to meet him—or her.

## Chapter 2

RAE SQUINTED INTO THE DARKNESS beyond The Fun Zone's front door, trying to keep watch on the people waiting in line. The glare of the flashing neon signs bothered her. She was already dreading driving home after the late show, but public transportation in LA was as shitty as her night vision, so there was no other option.

Damn, she really needed to find an apartment within walking distance of the comedy club.

*Not gonna happen. Stop whining and focus on work.*

"Hey, newbie."

The sudden voice seemingly out of nowhere sent her pulse skyrocketing, but she did her best to not let on that he had taken her by surprise and merely turned her head.

One of her colleagues, Brandon Zimmerman, came into her field of vision. He had taken up position at the door right next to her.

*Shit.* She couldn't miss things like that and show weakness while on the job.

Brandon crossed his bulky arms over his chest and regarded Rae with a toothy grin. "Want me to take over here while you keep an eye on the ladies' room? Last month, some girl drank too much and passed out in there."

Was that all he thought Rae, as the only female doorperson on staff, was good for—checking the ladies' room?

Rae looked him straight in the eye, even though her five foot ten couldn't quite match his impressive height. She fixed him with a glare that had made even the most hardened criminals tremble in their boots. "Let me make one thing clear: I've been hired to do the same job you're doing. If

you think I'm here to play the getting-the-puking-girls-out-of-the-restroom brigade, you—”

A commotion from inside the club interrupted her.

The early show wouldn't be over for another ten minutes, so it couldn't be patrons jostling for a selfie with the comedians.

“You can't kick me out, asshole,” a slurring voice shouted in the lobby. “I've got a ticket. I paid, man.”

“So did everyone else, and they are here to hear the comics, not your blabbing,” Carlos, one of the doormen, answered. “I warned you three times to shut up.”

“That's the guy who wouldn't stop complaining about the two-drink minimum,” Brandon said to Rae.

She snorted. The blabbermouth was drunk as a skunk, so he clearly hadn't limited himself to two drinks. He was just looking for a reason to cause trouble. “You know what? I changed my mind. You can take over the door. I've got this.” She nodded toward the lobby.

“You sure?” A wrinkle of concern formed on Brandon's forehead.

“Affirmative.” After two relatively uneventful weeks at the new job, this was her chance to prove that she could handle unruly customers—to her colleagues and to herself. Not waiting for further protests from Brandon, she pushed past him, into the club, and strode toward Carlos, who had grabbed hold of the patron's arm to escort him outside.

God, the guy was massive, even towering over Carlos, who wasn't exactly tiny either. This could get ugly fast.

Rae reached out to put her right hand on the holster of her Beretta, but her fingers encountered only air. A sense of loss pierced her chest. Even after eight months, she still missed the familiar weight of her duty belt and what it represented.

*Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This is your job now.*

As she crossed the lobby, she tried to tell herself that she'd been in situations like this a thousand times before, and she had never needed a weapon. She had always managed to talk down even the most aggressive opponent. Well, except for—

*Don't think about it. You can do this.*

She took a steadying breath and calmly walked up to them, careful not to get between them or crowd the red-faced man, who looked as if he was about to deck Carlos.

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Sweat trickled down her back, dampening the black shirt beneath her suit jacket, but she knew her face was an impassive mask. At least she could still rely on her poker face. “What’s going on, sir?”

“This fucking asshole wants to kick me out!” The guy tried to break free of Carlos’s grip, throwing him against a column with a poster of the comedians who’d perform today, but Carlos hung on.

Rae knew she had about five seconds before fists would be flying. “Let go of him, Carlos.”

Her colleague looked at her as if she’d sprouted horns.

Damn, had no one taught him how to de-escalate a potentially dangerous situation? She’d have to talk to him when this was over.

“I’d like to have a word with him, to hear his side of the story,” Rae said.

The drunk guy stood taller, even though he was swaying, and gave Carlos a haughty look.

“Let go, Carlos,” Rae repeated with more force.

“If this blows up, it’s on you.” Carlos finally let go.

The guy stumbled and nearly fell.

Quickly, Rae grabbed his elbow—or rather, she wanted to—but missed. She gritted her teeth and managed to take a hold of his arm on the second try. “It’ll be getting really loud in here once the show ends, so let’s step outside and talk.”

The drunk guy threw Carlos a triumphant glance, then trotted after her like a well-trained lapdog.

Since dozens of people were lined up out front, waiting for the late show, she led him to the back door. There was no sense in dragging other people into this mess.

Once they were outside, she let him ramble about the two-drink minimum and the overpriced buffalo wings. When he started complaining about the cost of parking, she raised her hand to interrupt him.

“Sorry you had such a bad experience tonight, sir. Probably best if you don’t come back.” Without waiting for a reply, she slipped back inside, closed the door between them, and bolted it. By the time he realized she had no intention of letting him back in, she was halfway across the lobby.

“Damn,” Carlos muttered. “Didn’t think we’d get him out of here without at least a broken nose or two—one of them mine. Where’d you learn that trick?”

“LAPD.”

“Fuck, you’re a cop?”

“Was.”

“Wow.” Carlos looked at her as if she were a superhero in a red cape. “I tried to get into the academy myself, but...” He shrugged. “Why did you leave the department?”

Rae ignored his question and walked past him back to the front door.

The adrenaline that had pumped through her slowly trickled off, and a slight tremor went through her hands, which had been rock-steady during the confrontation. She shoved them into the pockets of her black slacks so Brandon wouldn’t notice.

By the time the club owner signaled them to let in the late-show crowd, her nerves had settled. “You handle this line.” She pointed to the people who had purchased their tickets online. “I’ll take that one.” She gestured toward the patrons who were hoping to get tickets at the door.

The corners of Brandon’s lips twitched as if he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to frown or give her an amused grin. “Are you always this bossy?”

It reminded her of what her partner, Mike, had always said when she had insisted on driving, and for a second, she nearly smiled. “Yeah. Better get used to it.” She stepped forward to check the ID of the first person in line and to do some random pat-downs for alcohol, drugs, or weapons.

Over the course of the last two weeks, she’d gotten pretty efficient with the door checks, so it didn’t take too long before she’d herded her part of the crowd inside—minus a butterfly knife and two flasks someone had tried to smuggle into the club.

Just when Rae was about to help her colleagues seat the audience, another customer—a woman in her late twenties—jogged up and tried to squeeze past with a “hi” and what she probably thought was a charming grin.

Unimpressed, Rae blocked the door with her broad shoulders. “I’ll need to see an ID, and the ticket for the show is twenty dollars, ma’am.”

“I’m not here to see the show,” the woman said. “I’m a comedian.”

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Rae's gaze went to the poster behind her, then to the slender woman in front of her. Blonde hair tumbled onto her shoulders in uncontrolled waves, and a zigzag part made it look even more tousled, as if she had just gotten out of bed. Her admittedly pretty face wasn't on the poster. "You're not in the lineup."

"Not tonight, but one of my friends is. I just want to say 'hi' for a minute." The blonde stretched her five-foot-seven frame so she could point over Rae's shoulder at one of the headshots on the poster. "Gabriel Benavidez."

That name was on the poster, which was probably how the blonde knew it. Rae wouldn't fall for such a cheap trick. "ID and cover charge, please."

"Oh, come on. Comics always get in free of charge at The Fun Zone." A mischievous glint entered the blonde's eyes. "Want me to tell you a joke to prove I'm a comedian?"

Rae crossed her arms over her chest. She wasn't in the mood to stand here for the rest of the night and argue with this troublemaker who thought she could charm her way inside without paying just because she was cute. "No, thanks. I'm sure you're hilarious," she said without even the hint of a smile, "but I'm a doorwoman, not a talent booker."

"Everything okay over there?" Brandon called.

Rae gritted her teeth. She hated that he thought he needed to come to her rescue. "Everything's fine."

A sudden touch to her left shoulder nearly made Rae jump out of her skin. She whirled around and caught sight of Brandon, who had taken up position only inches behind her. *Stand down*, Rae told her battle-ready body and struggled to unclench her fists. "For fuck's sake, Zimmerman. Back off. I told you everything's fine."

"Um, guys...and girls, can we all relax?" the blonde said. "I just want to say 'hi' to Gabe."

"Steph, is that you?" Brandon craned his head around Rae.

The blonde gave him an easy grin. "Yep, the one and only. Missed me?"

Brandon laughed. "Yeah. Probably not as much as the boss did, without you showing up here every week, begging him for a spot in the lineup."

"Hey, I don't beg." The blonde winked at him. "Well, not unless some hottie with very talented fingers is involved."

Brandon roared with laughter and reached around Rae to pull the blonde past her. “Let her in. She’s one of the comics. Totally harmless.”

Rae glared after them, not liking the way Brandon had encroached on her turf. *Harmless, my ass.* She would watch the blonde closely anyway.

\* \* \*

Steph walked past the framed headshots of famous comics who’d performed at the club. A few had been added since she’d last been here, and she vowed to one day have her own picture on The Fun Zone’s wall.

Brandon slowed his steps. “You still know your way around, right? I want to check in with Carlos before the show starts. He’s new and still getting used to how things are run here.”

“Sure, go ahead. Thanks for getting me past Ms. Doberman.” She pointed over her shoulder. Amazing how much had changed in just a few months. The club hadn’t had any women on the door staff last year or when Steph had been here for a week in June. Usually, Steph was all for more women in male-dominated jobs, but while Ms. Doberman with her broad shoulders and lean waist definitely looked hot in the black suit-and-tie uniform that doorpeople at the club wore, Steph wasn’t so sure she was a good addition to the team. She hated people who abused what tiny bit of power they had, and to her, that was what the doorwoman had been doing.

Brandon chuckled. “No problem. She’s new too, so I guess she’s trying to prove herself. I wish I could say her bark is worse than her bite, but I’m actually not sure. She’s a hard-ass.” It sounded like a compliment. “I’d better go. Talk to you later.”

When he walked away, Steph continued past the bar, through a curtain, and then down a narrow hallway.

In the greenroom, nothing had changed at all. Two comics sprawled on the worn couches, trying to best each other with stories about bombing on stage, while another sat in a corner and recited his material to himself. A fourth stared up at the framed covers of comedy albums lining the wall as if they were the most fascinating things he’d ever seen.

Was he high on something? Steph shook her head. While she had smoked weed every now and then in the past, she knew that getting high before a show was never a good idea.

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The fridge door thumped closed, and Gabe appeared from behind it, a beer in one hand and his set list in the other. When he saw her, he quickly set them on the counter before crossing the greenroom and engulfing her in a hug. “Steph! You’re back!”

The familiar scent of his aftershave greeted her, and she could even detect a whiff of butter, cinnamon, and sugar from his mother’s homemade *churros*.

After a few seconds, he let go and stepped back to study her. “Wow, you look like shit.”

Steph laughed. “Such charm. Must be why I broke up with you.”

“Breaking up?” He elbowed her, but his tone was light, without a hint of bitterness. “Is that what it’s called when you sneak out the next morning without even leaving a note?”

“Oh, come on. Like you wanted to take me home to meet your mother.”

“You have met my mother.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah. But seriously, you do look like shit. Don’t people sleep in Iowa?”

“Idaho,” Steph said. “I didn’t stay after the last gig. We made it one-third of the way to LA before crashing at a motel.”

“How long are you staying this time?” Gabe asked.

“I’m back for good. My clock is ticking, you know?” She made tick-tock-tick-tock sounds.

Gabe’s jaw gaped open. “You wanna have a baby? Seriously?”

“God, no!” Steph laughed. “Can you imagine me as someone’s mom? I’d probably kill the poor kid the first time I try to feed it my cooking.”

“What’s up with the tick-tock-tick-tock, then?”

“I wasn’t talking about my biological clock,” Steph answered. “I’m talking about my professional clock. Back when I tried stand-up for the first time and everyone kept telling me you can’t make a living from it, I gave myself ten years to prove them wrong. I promised myself I’d have my big break by my thirtieth birthday.”

Gabe counted the months until March on his fingers and let out a low whistle. “That gives you four months. No pressure or anything. So I guess that means you want to get back into the LA game right away and hit some open mics with me tomorrow?”



"I'd love to. But first I need to find a roommate who'll pretend to be the love of my life," Steph said with a grin.

Gabe stared at her. "Um, what?"

"Long story. I'll explain the details later. Basically, I have a chance at an apartment right around the corner, but I can't afford it without a roommate."

Gabe sighed. "Story of my life. Between Yolanda and our two roommates, the last time I got to use the bathroom without someone knocking on the door, hurrying me along, was...well, never."

"Seriously, I want that apartment. Can you imagine hitting two or three clubs in the same night without spending hours stuck in traffic?"

Gabe gave her a dreamy look. "Man, that sounds great. I'd move in with you myself, but Yolanda probably wouldn't like it."

No, she definitely wouldn't. Gabe's girlfriend wasn't a big fan of their friendship, even though their one-night stand had been long before Yolanda had been in the picture. "Guess I'll have to play the roommate roulette on Craigslist." She groaned. The last time she had put out an ad for a roomie, one potential roommate had shown up with enough pets to populate a zoo, and another seemed to have confused her ad with the *casual encounters* section.

"Hey, wait," Gabe said. "I think Ray is looking for a place closer to the club."

"Ray?" Steph repeated.

"Yeah, one of the newbies on the door staff." He pointed toward the club's entrance.

"Might not be a bad idea. The club does a background check before hiring anyone, so at least I would know I'm not moving in with an ax murderer."

"At least not one who got caught," Gabe quipped.

"Right. If he's clever enough to evade the police, he's hopefully got his shit together enough to pay his part of the rent on time. So where do I find this Ray?" Steph asked. "Is he working tonight?"

"Yeah, but Ray is actually—"

One of the club's assistant managers popped his head into the greenroom. "Benavidez, you're up."

Outside, Steph could hear the MC give Gabe's intro.

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Gabe grabbed his set list and took a step toward the short hallway that would take him from the greenroom to the stage. Then he paused and looked back at Steph. “Ray is—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll find him.” Steph made a shooping motion. “Go out there and kill it!”

Gabe grinned. “Will do. Call me tomorrow—but not before noon.”

Then he was gone. Applause from the showroom drifted over as the audience gave him a warm welcome.

Steph wished she were out there instead, making people laugh in one of the biggest comedy clubs in the city. Well, she would get there, but first she needed to secure an apartment. Time to go talk to Ray.

\* \* \*

When Steph left the greenroom, the lobby was empty except for Brandon.

“Hey, Brandon, can you point me in the direction of your new colleague?” Then, remembering that there were several, she added, “Where’s Ray?”

“Outside, calling a cab for some girls from a bachelorette party who drank a little too much,” Brandon said.

Steph wrinkled her nose. Bachelorette and bachelor parties were the worst audience ever. They often showed up drunk and expected the night to be about them, not about comedy.

Well, if Ray could handle a group like that, he could handle a little fake romance to convince their future landlord they were worthy of his apartment.

“Thanks. See you next week.” She gave Brandon a friendly wave and pushed through the glass doors.

Ms. Doberman stood at the curb, keeping vigil over a cab that was pulling away, but there was no sign of Ray anywhere.

Then Steph looked more closely. In the orange light of a neon sign forming the words *The Fun Zone*, she could make out a bulky figure leaning against the building. The black suit almost blended in with the near darkness, but the glowing tip of a cigarette gave away his position.

*Ugh. Ray’s a smoker.* Steph decided she could deal with it, as long as he smoked only in his own room. But French-kissing to fool their landlord was definitely out.

She walked over to him and cleared her throat.

“Oh shit.” He tossed away his cigarette and frantically waved his hand to disperse the smoke, like a teenager who’d been caught smoking. Then he blew out a breath and slumped against the wall. “Man, I thought you were the boss. He doesn’t like it if we’re smoking on the premises.”

“Nope, just little ol’ me. Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t. But I’m new, and I don’t wanna get in trouble my first month here.” He ran a hand over his crew cut and produced a pack of smokes from somewhere, which he held out to her. “Want one?”

“No, thanks,” Steph said. “I came out here because my friend Gabe said you’re looking for a place closer to the club. I heard about an unlisted two-bedroom apartment we could share. Interested?”

He froze with the lighter raised halfway toward the cigarette dangling between his lips. “Uh...”

“It’s only a couple of blocks from here,” Steph added. Why was he staring at her as if she had offered her services as a hit woman?

“Not sure that’d be a good idea,” he mumbled around the unlit cigarette. “I’ve got a girlfriend, and I don’t think she’d like me moving in with another chick.”

“Oh.” Steph chuckled to cover her embarrassment. “Sorry, Ray. Gabe failed to mention that.”

Now he stared at her again, his jaw so slack that he was close to losing his second cigarette too. “Looks like he failed to mention something else too.”

“What?”

He finally took the cigarette out of his mouth. “My name’s Carlos.”

What the fuck was going on here? Steph blinked up at him. “Then who the hell is Ray?”

“I am,” a deep but unmistakably female voice came from behind her.

Steph whirled around.

Ms. Doberman stood in front of her, strong arms folded over her chest. The neon sign threw flickering lights across her striking face, which carried a don’t-mess-with-me expression.

“Y-you...? But...but I thought...” Steph glanced back and forth between Ms. Doberman and her male colleague. “You are Ray?”

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“Looks like it.” Ms. Doberman tapped the name tag pinned to the lapel of her suit jacket.

Earlier, Steph hadn’t paid it any attention. Now she squinted to read it in the dim light.

*Rae*, it said. With an *e*, not a *y*.

*Oh shit.*

Ms. Doberman—Rae—observed her with an impassive gaze. “Problem with that?”

Steph lifted both hands, palms out. “Oh, no, no, I just...” God, she was going to kill Gabe as soon as she got her hands on him. Slowly. Painfully.

“Um, I think I’ll go see if Brandon needs any help keeping an eye out for hecklers.” Carlos squeezed past them and hurried inside.

Rae didn’t move. She kept fixing Steph with that cool gaze of hers. In the near darkness in front of the club, Steph couldn’t make out her eye color, but something about her eyes seemed off somehow, though Steph couldn’t put her finger on what it was. Maybe the low light was playing tricks on her.

“You were looking for me,” Rae said. “You found me. What did you want?”

Jeez, she wasn’t one to mince words. Steph hesitated. Should she still go through with her plan? She took a deep breath. Yeah, why not? She and Rae had gotten off on the wrong foot, and they’d probably never sit on the couch and watch Netflix together, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be roommates, right? Break-ins had been on the rise in Beverly Grove for the last couple of years, so if they sold Rae as someone who worked in the security industry, they’d have a better chance of getting the apartment.

But this time, she’d approach it a little differently so she wouldn’t embarrass herself a second time, as she had with Carlos. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Pardon me?” It sounded like a growl.

“Or a boyfriend,” Steph added quickly. With her chiseled features, her swimmer’s build, and the cut of her black hair—short on the sides and back, but longer on top—Rae looked like a lesbian or a queer woman, but Steph didn’t want to stereotype. There were plenty of tough-looking straight chicks after all, or Rae could be bi or pan.

“If that’s your attempt to tell me a joke, you’re bombing.” Rae turned on her heel and headed toward the door with a powerful stride, no doubt intending to close it after her, leaving Steph outside.

“Wait!” Steph rushed after her and grabbed Rae’s arm to stop her.

Rae froze. The muscles of her forearm seemed to turn into a block of concrete beneath Steph’s fingers. Slowly, she turned her head and looked down at Steph’s hand. Her gaze had the intensity of a laser beam.

Steph wrenched her hand away as if she’d been burned. “Look, I know I started this all wrong, but please hear me out.”

Rae’s stance didn’t soften, but she gave the tiniest of nods, indicating that she would listen.

*Okay, here goes nothing.* “My friend Gabe said you’re looking for an apartment closer to the club.”

Rae turned so she was facing Steph, who bit back a smile.

*Gotcha!* She had Rae’s full attention now, but she had to reel her in carefully. “I just heard about a great two-bedroom apartment not too far from here. The tenants are moving out, and they are looking for someone to take over their lease.”

“What’s the catch?” Rae asked.

Steph tried not to shuffle her feet under Rae’s probing gaze. “Well, the rent is over two grand, so I’m looking for a roommate.”

“Roommate.” Rae tilted her head. “You mean, you and me...living together?”

Steph quirked her lips. The way Rae had said that, as if it was an entirely foreign concept to her, was almost cute. “That’s usually what a roommate arrangement implies.”

Rae’s brows bunched together. “If I said yes, would you always be such a smart-ass?”

“In the interest of full disclosure...yeah, probably. My family says I don’t have an off button.” Steph tried out her most charming smile on Rae, but the woman’s expression gave nothing away. “So are you interested?”

“How close to the club is the apartment?”

“Walking distance.”

Rae’s brooding expression lightened. She rubbed her strong chin. “And I’d get my own bedroom?”

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“Of course,” Steph said. “Even though it would officially be a guest room or a home office.”

“What?”

*Damn.* She’d nearly had her, but now Rae looked at her with that suspicious expression again. “The landlord is a bit of an asshole. I mean, not that I know him, but he insists on renting to couples only. So you and I—”

“Forget it,” Rae said.

“Thank you very much. Has anyone ever told you, you’re killer on a girl’s ego?” Steph reached out to nudge her but then pulled back. She playfully puffed out her chest and fluffed her hair. “Just so you know, there are dozens of people all over the country who’d love to be my significant other.”

Rae arched her brows. “If you’re such a hot commodity, why aren’t you asking one of those plentiful people to move in with you?”

“Because I’m not the relationship type, and I don’t want them to think otherwise,” Steph said. “You and I, we’d just pretend to be a lovey-dovey couple when we’re around the landlord. As soon as the lease is signed, you can go back to scowling at me.”

Rae stared out into the darkness or maybe at the flickering neon lights of Melrose Avenue.

Steph waited, bracing herself for rejection.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour but was probably only a few seconds, Rae directed her attention back toward Steph. “All right.”

“All right?” Steph hopped up and down. “You’ll do it?”

“Only if I like the apartment—and if you abstain from hugging me.”

Steph froze because she’d been about to do just that. “No hugging. Check. Um, well, I might have to hug you or hold your hand in front of the landlord. We wouldn’t want him to think we’re about to break up, right?”

Rae sighed. “Right.”

“Great. Glad we’re on the same page.” Steph beamed at her. “So want to give me your name and number?”

Rae just looked at her.

“Jeez, I’m not trying to chat you up. I need your number so I can call you once I set up a meeting with the landlord, and we won’t be very believable as a couple if we call each other ‘hey, you.’”

“Your family is right. No off button,” Rae grumbled. She took the phone Steph handed her and added her name and number to Steph’s contacts, then sent herself a text so she’d have Steph’s number too.

Steph took the phone back and checked the small screen. “Pleased to meet you, Rae Coleman. I’m Stephanie Renshaw.” She held out her hand, but Rae just gave her a nod. “Wow, so I guess we’re really doing this.”

Rae shrugged. “Guess so.”

“Okay, then.” Steph decided to get going before Rae could change her mind. “I’ll call you as soon as I set something up with the landlord.”

Rae gave her another nod.

When Steph walked toward her car, she felt Rae’s gaze following her.

“Stephanie,” Rae called.

She turned and grinned. “Steph, please. If you call me Stephanie, I’ll think I’m in trouble.”

“Somehow, I get the feeling that happens a lot,” Rae said.

“What, now you’re a comedian too?” Steph asked.

Rae let out a huff. “God, no. Just wanted to answer your question from earlier.”

“What que—?” Then it occurred to her. “Oh, the girlfriend...or boyfriend question?”

“Yeah,” Rae said. “I don’t have one.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’ve got a girlfriend now, babe.” Steph blew her a kiss and sauntered off.

## Chapter 3

WHAT THE HELL HAD SHE gotten herself into? Even hours later, Rae still couldn't believe she had agreed to Stephanie's...Steph's bizarre plan. She had enough complications in her life, so why hadn't she told her no?

The thought of sharing space with someone, especially someone who seemed as different from her as night and day, was already making her uncomfortable. She had grown used to living on her own and handling things her way. On top of that, she would also have to pretend to be happily in love with Steph.

Happy. In love. She'd forgotten what either felt like. What on earth made her think she could pull this off?

With a heavy sigh, she climbed into her Subaru.

Just as she turned the key in the ignition, the first raindrops hit the windshield.

*Great.* Rae sent a glare up at the night sky. *So much for "It never rains in Southern California."*

In the past, she would have welcomed the sporadic light showers LA sometimes got in November, but the rain made driving in the dark even harder.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she slowly backed out of the parking space.

God, she hated that such a simple task was now giving her trouble. She had spent the past eight months trying to adapt and only looked for a new job once she could make it through the day without spilling drinks and bumping into doorways. But her depth perception was still dodgy, especially at night, without any shadows to help her judge how far away objects were. Her brain screamed at her that she was about to hit the bumper of another



car, even though the Subaru's camera and security features told her it was farther away than it appeared.

Finally, she managed to navigate the SUV onto the street and tried to ignore the glare from oncoming headlights as she drove to her apartment in Silver Lake.

This. She nodded grimly. This was why she had agreed to Steph's outlandish plan.

If they could convince the landlord to let them rent the apartment, she'd no longer have to drive at night. She could walk to the club and back, and that would be worth all the silliness that came with this arrangement.

But Rae didn't let herself hope for too much. Maybe the apartment would turn out to be an overpriced dump with a leaky roof, a broken AC, and more drug dealers than she'd ever arrested as her next-door neighbors. Or, with the luck she was having, Steph would turn out to be the roommate from hell. After all, how normal could a woman who came up with such a bizarre plan be?

\* \* \*

On Sunday morning, Steph hurried toward the café where she'd told Rae to meet her. "Sorry, I can't talk long," she said into her phone. "I'm meeting my girlfriend."

For several seconds, only the sound of a dog's barking filtered through the phone.

"Your...what?" her friend Penny nearly shouted. "Okay, what happened to you in Idaho? Drugs? Brainwashing? Some weird cult?"

Steph laughed. "All right, I admit it. We're faking it."

"Faking *it*?" Penny repeated. "Um, you know, Steph, I'm not sure I want to know that much about my best friend's sex life. Not that I don't already know all the details, since you're not exactly shy about oversharing."

Steph huffed playfully. "You're just jealous."

"Ha! You know I prefer dogs to women." Penny paused. "Ugh, that sounded pervy, didn't it? You know what I mean. A dog will never break your heart or drive you up a wall during PMS."

"Exactly what I'm always saying. Give me a dog over a relationship any day." The one time in her life when Steph might have been interested in being someone's girlfriend, she'd made a big mess of things and ended

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up hurting everyone. “Speaking of dogs...” She had reached Blue Bottle Coffee and lingered in front of the door to finish her conversation before going in. “Do you think your canine customers would appreciate a good-looking, friendly, not to mention modest dog walker?”

“I’m sure they would. But I thought Gabe was allergic to dogs.”

Steph could almost see the big grin on Penny’s sun-kissed face. “Hardy-ha-ha. You know I was talking about me. So can I have my old route back? Pretty please?”

Penny didn’t answer immediately. “You know you left me in a bit of a lurch when you spontaneously decided to hit the road in January. That’s not fair to the other dog walkers—and especially not to the dogs. They can’t understand why you just don’t show up one morning.”

Steph winced and tried not to imagine how poor Moose might have felt when another dog walker had come to pick him up. “I’m sorry. I promise I’m sticking around for longer this time. Who knows? If I’m not on TV or headlining in the big clubs in four months, I might even come work for you full-time...if you’d have me.”

“I’d love that.” More softly, Penny added, “But I’d love it even more if the comedy biz would finally realize how hilarious you are and you would achieve all your dreams.”

*Aww.* For once, Steph struggled to come up with a joke to hide how touched she really was. “Tell me again why you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Better yet, why do you suddenly have one?” Penny countered. “Seriously, what’s up with that?”

“I’m on my way to look at an apartment. I talked to the current tenant, and she agreed to let me take over the lease if the landlord agrees, but apparently, he has this thing about not renting to singles, so I found myself a fake girlfriend.”

A couple with a stroller stared at her as they walked by.

Penny blew out a noisy breath. “I swear, the ideas you come up with sometimes...”

“Hey, don’t judge. Remember that little detail Claire let slip when you got her drunk on her birthday last year?”

“For the hundredth time, I didn’t get her drunk. She was a bit tipsy at best, and all I did was to get her a bottle of red for her birthday because I

had no clue what else to give her. How was I supposed to know she's such a lightweight?"

"Whatever," Steph said. "But at least now you know that my sister did the same thing."

"Yeah, and she's going to marry her fake girlfriend next year," Penny answered.

Steph chuckled. "I admit she's taking the whole thing a little too far. But don't worry. That won't happen to me, no matter how hot my fake girlfriend might be."

"Is she?" Penny asked.

Was she? Their first meeting last night had been so confrontational that Steph hadn't stopped to think about the way Rae looked. Okay, at least not much. Of course she had noticed Rae's powerful build. Now she peered through the café's floor-to-ceiling window.

Somehow, she wasn't surprised to find Rae already there, sitting with her back to the wall. Gone was the black shirt and tie she'd worn last night. Instead, she wore a pair of black jeans and a white button-up that strained against her broad shoulders. She appeared more relaxed than she had been at work, but her eyes were alert, constantly scanning her surroundings.

Now, in the light of day, Steph could make out details she hadn't noticed last night. Rae was a few years older than Steph had thought—probably in her midthirties—and her hair wasn't actually black, just such a dark shade of brown that it could be mistaken for it. The color reminded Steph of coffee beans. Her short hair emphasized her sculpted cheekbones and her strong jawline. With the permanent near scowl on her face, she was too intimidating to be called beautiful, but she was certainly striking. Only her sensitive mouth and a few unruly strands flopping across her forehead softened her brooding appearance.

As if sensing Steph's gaze on her, Rae turned her head and looked at her. She didn't smile or lift her hand for a wave; she just looked back at Steph with that strange intensity that made a shudder go through her.

"Steph?" Penny said. "You still there? Is she hot or not?"

"Um, I guess she is—if you're into the tall, dark, and brooding type. And you know I'm not. At least not the brooding thing." Steph switched the phone to the other ear, preparing to open the door with her right hand. "Listen, I have to go, but can I give you as a reference to the landlord?"

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“Sure. Call me later, and we’ll set up a schedule for you.”

“Will do. Um, Penny...is there a chance I could have Moose back or at least get to see him? I really missed him while I was gone.”

Penny breathed in and out audibly. “You’re in luck. I’ve walked him for the past month because his walker gave notice. If you want him back, he’s yours starting tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

When they ended the call, Steph tried to rein in her broad grin as she entered the café. She paused to take in the airy room with its white-painted brick walls and minimalistic decor and then walked up to the tiny, round table Rae had claimed and settled on a chair across from her. “Hi. Thanks for meeting me here.”

Rae nodded and shifted a little to the side, as if wanting to keep the front door in her sight.

Steph grinned at her. “Are you waiting for someone else?”

“No,” Rae said but didn’t offer an explanation, so Steph decided to ignore that little bit of weirdness.

She threw a glance at the counter, where an espresso machine let out a gentle hiss that reminded her she hadn’t had her morning coffee yet. “I’m getting a latte. Can I get you anything?”

“Coffee.”

Steph arched her brows and waited, but again, nothing further came from Rae. Oh great. Was this what she had to look forward to if she lived with Rae? Having to drag every single syllable out of her? “Do you want cream or sugar?”

“No. Just black coffee.” After a beat, Rae held out a five-dollar bill and added, “Please.”

Steph shook herself at the thought of black, unsweetened coffee. Well, at least Rae wouldn’t use up all of the cream and leave the empty container for Steph to find, as one of her previous roommates had done.

It didn’t take long for her to return with a creamy latte for herself and a single-origin brew from Guatemala for Rae, which she slid in front of her. “Want half?” She held up the tahini chocolate chip cookie she had splurged on.

“No, thanks.”

“More for me, then. These are really yummy.” Steph took a big bite and studied Rae while she chewed.

A couple of what looked like pockmark scars dotted Rae’s forehead and gave her a hint of vulnerability. Her eyes were a lighter shade of brown than her hair, and the left one didn’t seem to move as much as the other. Rae put her cup down and straightened as if uncomfortable with the close perusal. “What?”

“Nothing.” Steph didn’t want to make Rae uncomfortable by mentioning her lazy eye. “Can’t I just enjoy gazing adoringly at the woman I love?” She fluttered her lashes.

No reaction. Not even a tiny twitch of Rae’s lips. Rae cradled her mug as she observed Steph across the table. Her hands, which were big for a woman, made the cup seem as if it were part of a tea set from a dollhouse. “Why did you want to meet at ten when we’re meeting the landlord at eleven?”

“Well...” Steph gestured, cookie in hand, accidentally getting crumbs everywhere. “I thought we could get to know each other.”

Rae regarded her suspiciously. “You’re not gonna be that kind of roommate, are you? The type who sticks to me like glue and insists that we go grocery shopping together and share all of our meals?”

“God, no. Way too domestic. But I think we should get to know each other a bit if we want to convince the landlord that we’re a couple.”

“Fair enough.” Rae stiffly tilted her head, her body language screaming out how uncomfortable the situation made her. “What do you want to know?”

Steph decided to keep it simple so she wouldn’t spook her any further. “How long have you worked the door at The Fun Zone?”

“About two weeks.”

“And before that? Have you worked for another comedy club?”

“No.”

Steph sighed and took a gulp of her latte, wishing it contained something stronger. This wasn’t getting them anywhere. “Why don’t you tell me what you think I should know about you?”

Rae seemed to think about it for a moment before she nodded. “My full name is Raelynn Joy Coleman, I’m 36, and I have no criminal—”

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“Wait! Raelynn Joy?” Steph burst out laughing, then covered her mouth with her hand to control her mirth. That name so didn’t fit the intimidating woman.

Rae shrugged. “My parents believed in letting the universe choose my name on the day of my birth, and it turned out to be a sunny day, so...”

“So Rae like ray of light?”

“Guess so.”

Steph giggled. “Well, considering you could have been a Rainbow or a Cloudy-with-a-chance-of-rain, I think you got off lucky. I actually like Rae.”

Another shrug from Rae, but her stiff stance seemed to loosen a bit. “What about you?”

“No Rainbows in my family. They named me Stephanie Katherine, after my mom’s parents, Stephan and Katherine. That’s the part of the family that was filthy rich.”

“Your family’s rich, and you are looking for a roommate to help with the rent?” Rae moved her head from side to side while she studied Steph. She did that a lot, Steph had noticed, and it made her look a little like a bird of prey peering at a mouse from all angles. Another little quirk Steph hadn’t quite figured out yet.

“It’s my mother’s money, not mine. I’m not saying I never accepted a cent from her. I’ve done that once or twice, but only when I had no other choice. Usually, I find another way to rustle up some money. I can do without the lecture about responsible behavior or the reminder that I shouldn’t have dropped out of college that comes with the money, you know?”

Rae nodded and, to Steph’s surprise, actually looked as if she understood disappointing her parents.

Steph’s phone started to buzz in her pocket. She pulled it out and glanced at the screen. “It’s Mr. Kleinberg, the landlord. Oh shit. I hope he isn’t calling to tell us he already gave the apartment to someone else.”

“If he is, this was the shortest fake relationship in the history of mankind,” Rae said.

Only one way to find out. With a finger that was slightly damp, Steph swiped the screen and lifted the phone to her ear.

Rae watched Steph as she nodded several times, as if the landlord could actually see her.

“Yes, sure,” Steph said. “No problem at all. We’re in the neighborhood anyway. We’ll be right there.”

Okay, that didn’t sound as if Mr. Kleinberg had called to tell them he’d rented the apartment to someone else. Rae wasn’t sure if she should be relieved or disappointed. The more time she spent with Steph, the more she doubted that moving in with her and pretending to be her lover was a good idea. Not that there was anything wrong with Steph. Aside from her irreverent nature and smart mouth, she actually seemed nice, but God, they were just so different. Could they really live under the same roof without wanting to kill each other?

Steph put the phone away and looked up. For the first time, Rae noticed that her eyes were a pale gray. Maybe the color should have reminded her of cool stone or unbending metal, but with the twinkle in them and the easy grin on Steph’s face, they appeared warm somehow.

“He asked if we can make it a little before eleven since he has another couple coming to look at the apartment later,” Steph said.

Rae grabbed the leather jacket from the back of her chair and slid her wraparound sunglasses onto her face to protect her eye as they left the café. “So we’ve got competition.”

“Looks like it. Are you ready to impress the hell out of Mr. Kleinberg?”

Rae gave a noncommittal grunt. She couldn’t remember when she had last tried to impress anyone, and it admittedly made her a little nervous.

“Let’s walk.” Steph pointed around the corner, toward Sweetzer Avenue. “It’ll be faster. The apartment is only two blocks from here.”

Rae nodded and tried to inconspicuously circle around Steph to keep her on her right.

Pain flared through her left knee. Suppressing a curse, she turned her head to see what she’d bumped into and found a square stone planter. She glared at the damn thing.

“You okay?” Steph lightly placed her hand on Rae’s arm.

*There she goes again with the touching.* Rae started walking again so Steph’s hand would fall away. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

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“You sure?” Steph asked. “That looked like it hurt.”

“I’ve had worse.” And wasn’t that the truth! In the beginning, her left leg and shoulder had looked as if she was someone’s punching bag because she’d constantly run into things. “So how do we convince him we’re a couple?”

“Just act naturally,” Steph said.

That wasn’t very helpful advice. Rae gestured at where she was walking with a careful distance between her and Steph. “This *is* my natural.”

Steph chuckled. “Not the touchy-feely type, hmm? I figured. Relax. I don’t think he’s going to expect us to christen the kitchen counters with a hot make-out session. Something simple should be fine.”

“Simple?” Rae sent her a questioning look, not sure what that meant in Steph’s book.

“Yeah. Something like...this.”

For a second, Rae thought Steph might try to kiss her, but all she did was slide her hand into Rae’s.

Somehow, that gesture was even more intimate than a kiss, maybe because Steph didn’t seem to be in a hurry to let go. Rae stared down at their entwined hands. Steph’s slender fingers looked nearly vulnerable in her grasp, yet there was an easy confidence in her secure grip. Her skin was warm and soft against Rae’s rougher palm. It wasn’t unpleasant at all, but she hadn’t held anyone’s hand in so long that it felt surreal.

When Rae continued to stare, Steph gave a gentle squeeze. “This okay?”

Rae wrenched her gaze away and tried for nonchalance. “Yeah. Of course.”

Steph studied her. “I know you said you don’t have a girlfriend, but you’ve had one in the past, right? I mean, you’re into women, aren’t you?”

Clearly, she had sensed Rae’s discomfort and wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Rae gently pulled her hand from Steph’s and stuffed it into her pants pocket. “I’m not into anyone right now. But yeah, I’m a lesbian. So don’t worry; you won’t weird me out or anything.”

Steph grinned. “Good to know.” She strolled alongside Rae, easily keeping up with her despite the three inches Rae had on her, as if she was used to walking a lot.



Since Steph's attention was on the Spanish-style cottage across the street, Rae could observe her without being caught. Steph's style was an interesting mix of classy and rebellious. Her charcoal gray skirt had deep pockets, like cargo pants, and a pair of attached suspenders that trailed up her formfitting, purple top. Rae would rather have shot herself than worn something like that, but she had to admit that Steph looked cute. It didn't hurt that the above-the-knee skirt showed off her killer legs.

"What?" Steph asked.

"Nothing." Rae directed her gaze back to the street ahead of her. The neighborhood where they might soon live exuded the same relaxed vibe as Steph did. Even though the bustle of Melrose Avenue was only a few blocks away, this area was surprisingly quiet and walkable. Palms and other trees and carefully watered strips of lawn lined the street. A mix of houses from the thirties, newly built single-family homes, and small apartment buildings rose on both sides. "Just wondering... What do we say when he asks how we met?"

"The truth," Steph answered.

"Oh, you want to tell him we met when you tried to con your way into the club?"

For a moment, Steph's mouth moved without anything coming out. "I...I wasn't... Comics really get in free at The Fun Zone. At least it's always been that way in the past."

"I know," Rae said. "But no one told me."

"Is that an apology?" The amused twinkle was back in Steph's eyes.

"It's an explanation." Rae had never apologized for doing her job, and she wouldn't start now.

Steph tilted her head in a faux regal nod. "Explanation accepted. Let's tell him we met at work." She pointed at a two-story building across the street. "I think this is it."

Rae assessed the apartment building with an analytical gaze. Four units faced the street, each one with a balcony, and she guessed that at least the same number of apartments lay on the other side. The sliding glass doors might be a possible entry point for burglars, but all in all, the building and the neighborhood seemed very safe.

## The Roommate Arrangement

Flanked by a couple of palm trees, half a dozen stairs led up to a sturdy front door. A bald man in his sixties waited next to two rows of white mailboxes.

Steph slipped her hand back into Rae's and tugged her across the street.

Rae tried to ignore the feeling of Steph's fingers entwined with her own and focused on not misjudging the height of the curb or the steps.

"Mr. Kleinberg?" Steph asked as they approached.

"Yes." He smiled. If he was surprised to be faced with two women instead of a heterosexual couple, he didn't show it. "You must be Ms. Renshaw and Ms...?"

"Coleman." Rae slid her hand free of Steph's hold and stuck it out for him to shake. It was a trick she had learned early on. If she was the one who held out her hand first, she wouldn't embarrass herself by missing when she tried to grasp someone's hand.

Mr. Kleinberg took her hand in a firm grip. "Thanks for meeting me a little earlier. Let's go in, and I'll show you around." He led them inside and up the stairs, to one of the units on the second floor, facing the backyard.

Steph reached for Rae's hand again, and this time, Rae wasn't sure if she was trying to convince Mr. Kleinberg of their loving relationship or if she needed some encouragement.

Just in case, she kept her hand in Steph's until Steph pulled free to follow Mr. Kleinberg into the tiny bathroom.

It was the only one in the apartment, Rae realized, so they'd have to share. Well, they were adults. They could manage.

The landlord and Steph kept up a constant stream of chatter about the gated parking spots, the AC, and the laundry in the back.

Rae was happy to let Steph do the talking while she wandered through the apartment and looked around. Her gaze skimmed over the gas range in the kitchen, the dark hardwood floors in the living area, and the carpeted bedrooms with spacious closets.

Finally, Steph joined her in the kitchen. Under the pretense of placing a tender kiss on Rae's cheek, she leaned close to whisper in her ear. "What do you think?"

"Hmm?" Heat spread through Rae's face from where Steph had fleetingly placed her lips, distracting her.

"The apartment."

“Oh. Right. Looks good to me,” Rae answered. “You?”

A low laugh tickled Rae’s ear, making her shiver. “I spent most of the year on the road, so my standards aren’t very high. If there’s no funky smell and no stains on the carpet that make me think someone has been murdered, it’s fine with me.”

“If you come in here, you can see the parking spots from the window,” Mr. Kleinberg called from one of the bedrooms.

When Steph walked away to take a look, Rae stayed behind and lifted her hand to her cheek. Maybe she should establish some house rules from the start. Rule number one: no touching. In her former job, letting someone close enough to touch had meant inviting danger, and even before joining the police department, she’d never been the touchy-feely type.

But before she could start thinking about house rules, they needed to get the apartment first.

Rae crossed the room to check out the small balcony facing the tree-lined backyard. From here, she could see that the building formed an O around a small inner courtyard with two potted trees and other plants, so there were more units than she had initially thought.

Steph hurried over, wrapped one arm around Rae, and tried to tug her away.

“What are you doing?” Rae whispered. Was there something wrong with the balcony? She gave it another skeptical look but couldn’t detect anything out of the ordinary.

Steph tugged again, but Rae didn’t budge. “What are *you* doing?”

Mr. Kleinberg joined them. A frown carved the lines bracketing his mouth even deeper. “Something wrong?”

“No, no, everything’s wonderful. You’ll have to excuse my sweetie.” Steph patted Rae’s arm with her free hand. “She can’t help it, you know? Once a cop, always a cop.”

*What the fuck?* She hadn’t told Steph she’d been on the force. How had she known? Even the comedy club rumor mill couldn’t work that fast. And why would she comment on it like that?

Steph gave her another loving pat. “Sweetie, you look like you’re serving a search warrant.”

It was only then that Rae realized she had flattened herself against the wall and was peeking around the doorjamb to gaze through the glass sliding

## The Roommate Arrangement

door. *Damn*. Old habits really did die hard. To the landlord, she probably looked more like a police officer searching a suspect's apartment than a potential tenant.

At Steph's words, the confused expression on his face faded. He gave Rae an appreciative look. "Oh, you were a cop?"

Rae consciously tried to relax her stance by leaning into Steph's semi-embrace. The warmth against her side felt the same way holding Steph's hand had earlier—pleasant yet strange at the same time. "Yes," she said as lightly as she could. "Fourteen years."

"Impressive. You must have made captain or something."

She shook her head. "Didn't like the paperwork or the politics. I was always happiest out there, patrolling my beat."

"Well, I'm sure the other tenants will appreciate having someone down the hall who'll keep an eye on the building," Mr. Kleinberg said.

*Keep an eye*. His wording made Rae suppress a grimace.

Steph sent him a hopeful gaze. "Does that mean we'll get the apartment?"

He smiled at them. "Well, there's another couple coming to look at the apartment later today, but to be honest, I'd really like to give it to you. Provided your credit and background checks and references check out."

"They will," Steph said firmly.

"Well, then let's get the formalities out of the way." He slid a pen from his pocket and laid it down on the breakfast bar, next to an application form.

Within minutes, they had filled out the application and were back outside, with a promise from Mr. Kleinberg that he'd get back to them by Tuesday.

"Yes! I think we did it!" Steph threw her arms around her.

Rae stiffened.

"Oh, sorry." Steph let go and stepped back.

Rae waved away her apology. Her focus was on something else. "How did you know?"

"That we'd get the apartment? I had a feeling. I mean, who can resist this charming face?" Steph pointed at her grinning visage.

"Not that. That I'm a cop." Rae bit her lip. "*Was* a cop." Realizing that she no longer had a right to claim that title still hurt as much as the day she'd had to give up her job.

“Sounds like you’re missing it,” Steph said. “So why did you leave?”

Rae waited until she had safely navigated down the stairs and stepped onto the sidewalk before she answered. “Long story.” That had become her standard answer because it usually got people to back off. Having her story spread all over the newspapers and the Internet had been bad enough; she had no desire to share it with anyone else. “So, how did you know that I used to be on the force?”

“It’s kind of obvious when you know what to look for. I used to have a boyfriend who taught me how to spot a cop, and when I saw you checking out the apartment, I remembered how you sat with your back to the wall earlier, watching the front door, and I put two and two together.”

Rae raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, boyfriend. I’m bi.”

Rae didn’t care if Steph was bi, gay, or straight. That wasn’t why she’d raised her brows. “Sounds like you’re into bad boys.”

“And bad girls,” Steph added with a grin.

“Good to know your type. I’m definitely safe, then.”

“Yeah, don’t worry.” Steph patted her arm as they made their way down the street. She didn’t even seem to notice that she was once again touching Rae. “I won’t try to sneak into your bed at night or join you in the shower.”

Rae nearly choked on her own spit and tried to ignore the interesting images those words conjured up. One thing was sure: living with Steph wasn’t going to be boring.

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# THE ROOMMATE ARRANGEMENT

BY JAE

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