

ELLE KENNEDY

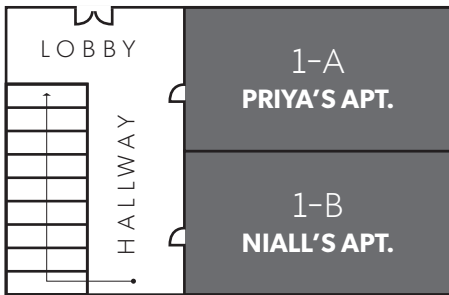
The
**DIXON
RULE**



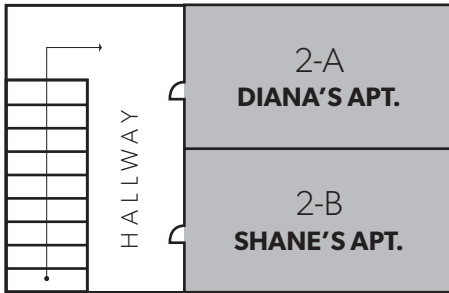
AMSTERDAM · ANTWERPEN

RED BIRCH BUILDING LAYOUT

GROUND FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



MEADOW HILL
APARTMENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Diana

Satan strikes again

JULY

Two beads of water form at the top of my mirror and then slowly begin to race each other down to the bottom. I make a bet with myself that bead number two will be the winner, since it's marginally bigger. Go big or go home, right? But while it picks up speed, there's a quick veer to the left. Bead one stays the course and drips onto my bathroom vanity.

This is why I refuse to gamble.

I grab a washcloth and wipe the rest of the condensation away to reveal my reflection. A pink flush covers my chest and shoulders, evidence of the scalding water temperature. There's something wrong with my shower, but I'm too broke to bring in a plumber, and my dad said he can't drive down to my neck of the woods until later this week. Which means I need to deal with my lava water for a few more days, if my skin doesn't burn off first.

Maybe after Dad fixes the shower, I muse, he can tackle the drawer of the kitchen cabinet that suddenly refuses to open. And then figure out why the refrigerator ice dispenser stopped working for no discernable reason.

Being a homeowner is exhausting. Especially when you're totally incompetent. Did I mention the original issue with my shower-

head was that it wouldn't stop dripping? I attempted to fix the drip myself by watching an online tutorial, and that's how the shower spray turned into a volcano. DIY plumbing is not my friend.

I turn away from the mirror and pull a fluffy, pink towel off the door hook, exiting the steam-filled bathroom to inhale the normal air in the hallway.

"I almost died in there," I inform Skip when I enter the living room, tucking the towel around me. I glance across the roomy, loftlike space toward the twenty-gallon fish tank against the far wall of the living area.

The fat goldfish glances back at me with that deathly, unnerving stare.

"I don't like that you can't blink," I tell him. "It freaks me the fuck out."

He stares again, then swishes his fins and swims to the other end of the tank. A second later, he's not so covertly hiding behind a gold-painted treasure chest. When I showed the guy at the fish store a picture of Skip, he told me he'd never seen a goldfish that large. Apparently my fish is obese. Not to mention too silent for my peace of mind. I don't trust pets that don't make noise.

"You know what, Skip? One of these days you're going to be upset about something and instead of comforting you, I'm going to swim away too. So put that in your stupid pirate's chest and choke on it."

I hate fish. If I had the choice, I would not be a fish owner. This horrible task was foisted on me by my dead aunt, who bequeathed her prized, unhelpful goldfish to me in her last will and testament. The executor looked like he was trying not to laugh when he read that part out loud to our family. My younger brother, Thomas, didn't make the effort—he busted out in laughter until Dad gave him the look.

On the upside, the fishbowl came with Aunt Jennifer's apartment, which makes me a twenty-one-year-old homeowner. So you win some, you lose some.

The shower was so scorching it left me parched. I want to chug a bottle of water before I get dressed. I walk barefoot to the fridge,

but my step stutters when the cell phone on the granite counter suddenly chimes, startling me. I pivot and check the screen, then stifle a groan. It's a message from my ex.

PERCY:

Hey, want to get together tonight and catch up? I'm free after 8.

Nope. Not interested. But I can't be that blunt, obviously. I might have a temper, but I'm not needlessly rude. I'll have to find a nice way of letting him down.

This isn't the first time he's reached out to "catch up." I suppose it's my fault, since I said we could remain friends after the breakup. Here's some advice: *never* offer to stay friends if you don't mean it. It's a recipe for disaster.

I abandon my phone on the counter and grab a water bottle from the fridge. I'll deal with this Percy text after I get dressed.

I'm tossing the empty bottle in the trash can under the sink when the familiar sound of meowing permeates the hall. The paper-thin walls of my condo do nothing to block out the noise outside my door. I hear every footstep, and the pitter-patter of Lucy's tiny paws is no exception. Plus the damn thing wears a bell on her collar, advertising her every move.

I stifle a curse as the sense of obligation sinks in. I love my downstairs neighbor, Priya, but her escape-artist cat drives me nuts. At least once a week, Lucy manages to break out of her apartment unseen.

Opening the door pulls a gust of cold air into my entryway. I try to shake off the goose bumps forming on my arms as I step onto the smooth tile outside my door.

"Lucy?" I ring out in a singsong voice.

I know better than to allow any hint of frustration to show in my tone when I call her name. At the slightest sign of anger, that gray ball of fluff will shoot downstairs for the lobby door like a meteor hurtling toward Earth.

Meadow Hill, our apartment complex, isn't like other buildings.

It's not some fifty-story monstrosity stuffed with hundreds of condos. Instead, the architect who designed it fashioned it after a beach resort, so the grounds consist of fifteen two-story buildings each housing four condos. Winding paths connect all the buildings, many of which overlook the lush lawn, tennis courts, and swimming pool. The last time Lucy snuck out, my other downstairs neighbor, Niall, was just coming home from work. Lucy took advantage of the opening lobby door and flew past him in the search for eternal freedom.

"Lucy?" I call again.

The jingling of a bell beckons me from the staircase. With a hoarse meow, the gray, striped cat appears on the top step. She sits down, all prim and proper, and stares at me defiantly.

Yeah, I'm here, she's taunting. What are you gonna do about it, bitch?

I slowly lower myself to my knees so we're closer to eye level. "You are the devil's cat," I inform her.

She studies me for a moment, then lifts one paw, giving it a demure lick before setting it back on the tile.

"I mean it. You were brought here from hell, personally delivered by the cold hands of Satan. Be honest—did he send you up here to torment me?"

"*Meow,*" she says smugly. Unblinking.

My jaw drops. Bitch basically just confirmed it!

I shuffle forward on my knees, gripping the top of my towel. I'm two feet away when, without warning, voices echo in the lobby and footsteps thunder from the bottom of the stairs.

Lucy bolts, literally jumping over my shoulder like she's a tiny hurdler in the feline Olympics. She flies through the open crack in my door, leaving me so startled that I stumble forward. My hands instinctively splay out in front of me to catch myself, causing me to lose my grip on my towel.

It hits the floor just as a shadow falls over me.

I screech in surprise. The next thing I know, three hockey players are staring down at me.

At *naked* me. Because I'm naked.

Did I mention that I'm naked?

"You okay there, Dixon?" draws a deep, mocking voice.

My hands rush to hide my nudity, but I only have two of them and there are at least three zones I'd prefer obscured.

"Oh my God, look away," I command, snatching the towel off the floor.

To their credit, the guys do avert their gazes. I shoot to my feet, hastily securing the terrycloth in place. Of *all* the people who could've found me in this predicament, it just *had* to be Shane Lindley and his friends. And what are they even doing here—

Understanding dawns. Oh no.

Dread forms in the pit of my stomach at the sight of Shane's amused dark eyes. "No. It's today?"

He flashes a broad smile, showing off a set of perfect white teeth. "Oh, it's today."

Satan strikes again.

Shane is moving in.

Luckily, not with me. Because that would be doubly appalling. I could never share an apartment with such a cocky jackass. It's bad enough that we'll be sharing a floor. Shane's parents—because they're rich and apparently believe that excessively spoiling their children is conducive to raising humble adults—bought their not-at-all-humble son the unit next to mine. It's been sitting vacant since my last neighbor, Chandra, retired and moved to Maine to be closer to family.

My best friend, Gigi, is married to Shane's best friend, Ryder, so she warned me the move would be happening sometime this week. I would've appreciated a more specific day and time, however. Or at least a heads-up text today. Then I could've been prepared and maybe *not* in a towel. I'm definitely yelling at her about this at dinner tonight.

"Don't worry, we didn't see a thing." The reassurance comes from the boy-next-door face of Will Larsen.

"I saw your tits and one butt cheek," Beckett Dunne says helpfully.

I don't know whether to laugh or groan. With his perfect face, faint Australian accent, and wavy blond hair, Beckett is too sexy for his own good. Anything that exits his mouth simply comes off as charming, whereas from anyone else it would be sleazy.

"Erase them from your memory," I warn.

"Impossible," he replies, winking at me.

I glance back at Shane, my good humor fading. "It's not too late to sell," I say in a hopeful tone.

But I know that's just a beautiful dream. He's not going anywhere, not after his parents probably spent a fortune renovating the place for him. There've been nonstop construction noises coming out of his condo this past month. Poor Niall from downstairs was having daily power drill-induced nervous breakdowns. That man is violently allergic to noise.

I wonder what changes Shane made to the apartment. I bet he turned it into a stereotypical man cave to suit his fuckboy tastes.

And trust me, I'm well aware of those tastes. They include (as of now, but I'm still counting) two and a half of my cheerleading teammates—half because he only made out with the third one. Still, the guy's plowing through them like a farmer after harvest season. Gigi told me he got his heart broken last year and this is his first time being single in forever. She says he's making up for lost time. But that sounds like a whole bunch of excuses, and I don't think you need to make excuses for fuckboys. They're just born with that gene.

"You don't have to put on this tough-girl act in front of the guys," Shane tells me. "Everyone knows about your crush."

I snort. "I think the only one who has a crush on you is *you*."

Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if the guy spent his free time off the ice ogling himself in the mirror. Hockey players are notoriously obsessed with two things: hockey and themselves. And Shane Lindley is no exception.

I'm not sucked in by how handsome he is, though he's unarguably gorgeous. Tall and handsome. Wide, sensual mouth and black hair in a buzz cut. A jacked athlete's body and dimples that

dig little grooves into his cheeks whenever he tries to lure you in with a brash smile. This afternoon, that ripped body is clad in basketball shorts and a red T-shirt that complements his darker skin tone.

When I notice Beckett's gray eyes give my towel-wrapped body another scan, I aim a frown his way. "You can stare as long as you want, but I promise, the towel isn't slipping down again."

"Well, if it does, I'd prefer not to miss it." His teeth practically gleam from the fluorescent lights when he gives that fuck-me smile.

"Is that your apartment?" Will asks, gesturing to the door behind me.

"Unfortunately."

"Damn. When Gigi said you two were going to be neighbors, I didn't realize you were *neighbors*," he remarks, his gaze shifting from my door to the one down the hall.

"Please don't rub it in," I grumble. To Shane, I say, "If you're expecting a welcome parade, you're shit out of luck. My new goal is to find a way to live my life without ever bumping into you."

"Good luck with that." Shane's dark-brown eyes flicker with humor. "Because my new goal is for us to become best friends and spend every waking hour together. Oh, hey, actually. I'm throwing a party this weekend. We should cohost. Keep both our doors open and—"

"No." I stab my index finger in the air. "Nope. That is not happening. In fact, you two"—I shoot a glare at Will and Beckett—"go wait for him in his apartment. Lindley and I need to discuss the rules of engagement."

CHAPTER TWO

Shane

The summer of Shane

I'm laughing to myself as I follow the angry blond into her apartment. The moment we emerge from the entryway into the main room, I have to blink a couple of times because it's not at all what I expected. The living area contains mismatched furniture and a burgundy area rug that clashes with the pale-blue floral-pattered sofa. The kind of sofa you might find in your dead grandma's house when you're going there to clean out her stuff. Like, nobody in the family is going to be fighting over that couch unless it's to argue about who has to drive it to Goodwill.

"This place has a real cat-lady vibe," I remark.

"*Meow*," something whines from the kitchen.

"Holy shit. You actually have a cat." My jaw drops as a gray tabby appears from behind the narrow island and eyes me like I murdered her kittens.

Diana's expression mirrors the cat's. "That's Lucy. She likes to sneak out when our downstairs neighbor is seeing one of her therapy clients."

"S'up?" I tell the cat, nodding in greeting.

"Don't bother. She's a demon from the pits of hell," Diana says at the exact moment Lucy wanders over and rubs up against my leg.

The cat gives a happy purr, snaking her furry body between my shins.

Diana glowers at us. “Why am I not surprised you two get along? Go away, Lucy. Lindley and I need to talk.”

Lucy just sits at my feet, still purring.

“She has great taste in people,” I say, while continuing to examine my bizarre surroundings.

There’s an antique cabinet full of glassware that’s completely out of place next to the super-modern bookcase beside it. And is that...

“Oh my God. You have a fish? Who has a pet fish? Have some self-respect, Dixon.”

Her emerald-green eyes shoot fireballs at me. I can practically feel the heat. “Leave my fish out of this. He’s not perfect, but he’s mine.”

I bite back a laugh. It doesn’t escape me that she’s still in nothing but a towel. And...well, I’m not going to lie...she looks really fucking good. Diana’s gorgeous, with wide-set eyes, platinum-blond hair, and a sassy mouth. She’s a little shorter than I usually like, barely over five feet, five-two if we’re being generous. A pint-sized hottie with a big personality. Although it seems like a major part of that personality involves busting the balls of yours truly.

“I’m going to change. But we need to talk, so don’t go anywhere.”

“I can help you get dressed,” I offer innocently.

“Ew. Never.”

I smother a laugh. Diana and I have a love-hate relationship. As in, she hates me, and I love to annoy her.

As she flounces off, I admire the way the towel rides up the backs of her toned thighs. I swear I glimpse the bottom curve of her ass cheeks. Her fair skin boasts a deep summer tan, which tells me she must be making good use of the pool outside. Fuck, I’ve got a *pool* now. This place is so sick.

I don’t even care that my friends and teammates keep ragging me about the fact that my “rich daddy” bought me a condo. Sure, my family has money, but I’m not some spoiled, entitled dickhead. I didn’t ask Dad to buy me an apartment. It’s an investment for him—once I graduate from Briar University and head to Chicago to play

in the NHL, he'll just rent this place out, the way he does with his hordes of other properties in Vermont and northern Massachusetts.

In the meantime, I get to enjoy my own space after sharing a house with Ryder and Beckett for the past three years. Two of those years were spent at Eastwood, our former college. After the Eastwood and Briar men's hockey teams merged, we moved to Hastings, the small town closest to the Briar campus.

Diana returns in a pair of tiny cutoff shorts and a baggy T-shirt. She's not wearing a bra, and my eyes dip involuntarily toward the tight buds of her nipples, which are poking against the thin material.

"Stop looking at my boobs."

I don't deny that's what I was doing. Shrugging, I shift my gaze and sweep my hand to gesture at the loftlike space. "Terrible interior design aside, this place is really nice. Looks a little bigger than mine too. How much is your rent?"

"I don't rent. And I'm not telling you how much my mortgage is. Nosy much?"

My eyebrows fly up. "You own it? That's badass."

She pauses, as if she doesn't want to engage with me, then says, "My aunt left it to me in her will. She only lived here a year before she died."

I glance around. I don't want to ask, but...

"Oh my God, she didn't die in this room. She had a heart attack in her office in Boston."

"Damn. That sucks. I'm sorry."

"Anyway. Let's get this out of the way. The rules." Diana crosses her arms. "Just because you're in Meadow Hill now, doesn't mean you'll have the run of the place."

"I think that's exactly what it means." Highly amused, I mimic her pose by crossing my own arms. "I live here."

"No, you live *there*." She points to the wall behind her to indicate my apartment beyond it. "You don't live *here*." She waves her hand around her living room. "So don't go around offering to throw parties in my house."

“I didn’t offer. I simply made a suggestion.”

She ignores me. “Because I’m not cohosting any parties with you. This is my sanctuary. I don’t know what Gigi’s told you about me—”

“She said you’re a pain in the ass.”

Diana gasps. “She did not.”

“And she said you’re high-maintenance.”

“She didn’t say that either.”

“Actually, that part she did.”

That narrows her eyes, and I know she’ll be texting Gigi after this for verification. My best friend’s wife—Christ, that’s still strange to say—warned me away from Diana, advising me to leave her best friend alone if I didn’t want daily tongue-lashings. It’s not in my nature, though. Some people might shy away from confrontation. Some might lose sleep over the notion that someone might not like them—and I know for a fact Diana doesn’t like me. But I’m not averse to confrontation, and for some reason, her dislike only makes me want to bother her even more. It’s the preschooler in me. All men regress to their kindergarten days every now and then.

“Are you listening to me?” she grumbles.

I lift my head. Oh, she’s still lecturing. Totally spaced out. “Sure. No parties in your apartment.”

“And no parties in the pool.”

I raise a brow. “Now you’re speaking for the whole building?”

“No. The building is speaking for the building. Did you not read your homeowner’s packet?”

“Babe, I just walked in here.”

“Don’t call me babe.”

“I didn’t even reach my front door before you dragged me in here.”

“Well, read your HOA package. We take this stuff very seriously, okay? The association meets twice a month on Sunday morning.”

“Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

“I didn’t expect you to. And frankly, don’t want you there.”

Okay—” She claps her hands as if she’s leading one of her cheerleading practices. Diana’s the cheer captain at Briar. “Let’s summarize the rules. Go easy on the parties. Wipe the equipment down after you use the gym. Don’t have sex in the pool.”

“What about blowjobs in the pool?”

“Look, I don’t care who you want to suck off, Lindley. Just don’t do it in the pool.”

I grin at her. “I meant I would be on the receiving end.”

“Oh. Did you?” Diana smiles sweetly. “I think the most important thing for you to remember is, we are not friends.”

“Lovers, then?” I wink at her.

“We are neither friends nor lovers. We are floor mates. We are quiet, respectful residents of the Red Birch building in Meadow Hill. We don’t annoy each other—”

“I mean, you’re kind of annoying me right now.”

“—we don’t cause trouble, and, preferably, we don’t speak.”

“Isn’t this considered speaking?”

“No. This is the conversation leading up to the future conversations we won’t be having. In conclusion, we’re not friends. No shenanigans. Oh, and stop screwing my teammates.”

Ah, so that’s what all this is about. She’s still salty because I messed around with a few of her cheerleaders last semester. Apparently one of them, Audrey, caught feelings and was so distracted at practice she fell off the pyramid and sprained her ankle. But how is that on me? When I’m on the ice, I’m able to push everything out and focus on hockey. Banish all distractions and excel at my sport. If Audrey couldn’t block out a dude she hooked up with *once*, that sounds like a her-problem.

“All right,” I say impatiently. “Are there any more Dixon rules, or may I please be excused? My furniture isn’t gonna assemble itself.”

“That’s all. Although, really, there’s only one Dixon rule that matters. No Shanes allowed.”

“Allowed where?”

“Anywhere and everywhere. But mostly just in my vicinity.” She smiles again, but it lacks any trace of humor. “Okay, we’re done

here.” She points to the entryway. “You can go now.”

“So it’s going to be like that, huh?”

“Yes, I literally just *told* you it was going to be like that. Happy housewarming, Lindley.”

I dutifully leave her apartment and return to mine, where Will and Beckett are tackling the assembly of my new sectional couch. Will’s using a knife to slice open the plastic that the big cushions come in, while Beckett crouches on the hardwood floor, trying to figure out how to lock the main section to the chaise. I opted for a dark-gray color because it’ll be easier to clean. Not that I’ll ever get the chance—my mother insists on sending a cleaner to my house every two weeks. She did the same for the townhouse I shared with the boys. According to her, my cleaning abilities will never be anything other than subpar. I disagree. I think I could at least make par. Gotta aim high in the cleaning world.

“Sorry about that,” I tell the guys. “Dixon needed to chew me out for a while. It’s how she shows her love for me.”

Will snorts.

Beckett glances up with a grin. “Yeah, sorry, mate, but that is one bird you’re not gonna win over with those dimples.”

He’s probably right about that.

“Dude, she really doesn’t like you,” Will adds, hammering the point home. “I grabbed dinner with her and Gigi last week, and when your name came up, Diana rolled her eyes so hard, it looked like they were gonna pop out of her face.”

“Aw, thank you. Hearing that makes me feel *so* good about myself.”

“Uh-huh, I’m sure your massive ego took a real hit.”

I walk over to help Will with the cushions and then the three of us drag the couch to a new spot after Beck decides it can’t be under the window because it’ll get too cold in the winter. We position the sectional so it now faces the exposed red brick that makes up the far wall of living room. I step back to examine the layout. It’s perfect.

“We should mount the TV there,” I say, pointing to the brick. “Can we drill into that?”

“Yeah, should be fine,” Beckett answers, walking over to study the wall. He shoves a few messy strands of blond hair out of his face. “Larsen, grab the drill?”

“Look at you,” I mock. “Mr. Handyman.”

Beckett winks. “Are you seriously surprised to hear I’m good with my hands?”

Good point.

Once we’ve got the couch and TV squared away, we head for the bedroom to put the bed together. It’s a queen, although I probably could’ve fit a king in here. Will unpacks the hardware. Beckett and I organize the various pieces of sleek dark-cherry wood. While we work, Beck rambles on about everything he plans to do when he’s home this summer. Technically speaking, his home is in Indianapolis, which is where his family moved when Beckett was ten, but he was born and half raised in Australia. He’s leaving for Sydney on Sunday.

“Sucks neither of you are coming,” he says glumly. “I get why Ryder can’t. But seriously? Neither of you could get away?”

I shrug. “Yeah, sorry. I can’t fuck off to Australia. Summer’s really the only time I get to hang out with my family.” It’s the truth. For the rest of the year, I’m laser-focused on hockey and, to a lesser extent, the schoolwork required in order to remain eligible to play.

Beckett nods. “I feel you. Family’s important.” I know he’s tight with his parents and with his cousins in Australia. He’s an only child, so they’re the closest things to siblings he has.

“I’m surprised you’re not going,” I say, glancing at Will.

He shrugs. “I’m working this summer. I want to do a backpacking trip through Europe after graduation. Maybe spend six months to a year over there.”

“Nice. Sounds awesome.”

Beckett snickers at me. “Coming from the guy who would never be caught dead backpacking.”

“That’s not true. I would totally do it.”

“Really,” Beck says dubiously.

“Sure. I’d wear a backpack while we explored some cool part of the city and then take it off when I returned to my five-star hotel.”

“Bougie prick.”

I grin. In all honesty, I don’t mind roughing it. Camping is great. And backpacking around Europe does sound like a blast. But why travel on a budget when you don’t have a budget?

“You’ve got a landscaping gig or something, right?” I ask Will.

“Pool company.”

My jaw drops. “You’re a pool boy?”

As Will nods, Beckett heaves a loud sigh.

I glance over in amusement. “Do you have something to add?”

“Just...don’t get your hopes up. You find out your mate is a pool boy and you create a whole narrative in your head and then *bam*, he shoots down your bubble and your dreams float away like a feather on the wind.”

“Those were a lot of weird metaphors just to say I don’t fuck the clients.” Will rolls his eyes and reiterates that point to me. “I don’t fuck the clients.”

“Why the hell not?” I’m picturing neglected MILFs in tiny bikini-sashaying over to bring Will glasses of lemonade, and then, *oops, my bikini top fell off. Would you like to bang?*

“Because I’d get fired, for one.” His tone is dry.

“Fair. But what’s life without the risk of getting fired?”

“Says the rich boy.”

“Isn’t your dad a congressman? I feel like you’re probably richer than I am. AKA the last person who needs to work as a pool boy all summer.”

“Nah. I don’t ever want to be beholden to my dad. I’d rather make my own way.”

I guess that’s admirable. With that said, I’m not about to complain about the fact that my folks are still paying my way. I’m twenty-one years old and blissfully unemployed. It’s the summer before senior year and I want to enjoy every second of it. My plan is to really focus on strength and conditioning ahead of this hockey season. Hit the gym every morning. Try to incorporate swimming

into my cardio regimen. I also got a membership to a golf club near here, so I'll be on the green at least a few times a week.

Let the Summer of Shane commence.

After the boys and I finish assembling the bed and clean up, Beck and Will ask if I want to grab dinner with them in town, but I beg off. I want to do some unpacking and organize my shit.

For this afternoon's services, I'm repaying them in the form of beer and a party on Saturday night, which Beckett reminds me of as I walk them to the front hall.

"Don't forget about my goodbye party," he drawls.

"Yes, of course, the goodbye party you're throwing for yourself."

"And?"

"And that's stupid. But I'm looking forward to christening the pool, so I guess a my-dumbass-friend-is-going-on-vacation gathering is as good a reason as any."

He chuckles. "What did your new neighbor say about the party?"

"Dixon? Oh, she's excited. Can't wait for it."

"Tread carefully," Will warns. "Diana can be vicious. And she's not above playing dirty."

"Is that supposed to deter me?" I ask with a grin. "The dirtier the better."

After my buddies leave, I wander toward the kitchen island to examine all the documents my mom left on the counter. My parents were here yesterday making some final preparations ahead of my move-in date. Meaning that Mom stocked the fridge and made sure all the important paperwork was in one place, while Dad squared up with his contractor.

I settle on a tall, black-leather stool and sigh as I sift through the large stack of paper. The information is about as lame as I expect it to be.

I flip pages until one catches my eye. It's an illustrated map of the Meadow Hill property, and I lean forward on my forearms to study it. Why is every building named after trees? Mine is Red Birch. Next door is Silver Pine. White Ash, Weeping Willow, Sugar Maple. The main building is called the Sycamore, which is

where our mailboxes are located. It also offers a round-the-clock security guard at the front desk. That's good.

I set the map aside and try to focus on the next page, but it's tedious reading. Like Diana said, the homeowners' association meets every two weeks, and I'm invited to join. Twice a month, though? What kind of HOA needs to meet that often? And on a Sunday? Yeah, I won't be caught dead at some stuffy board meeting where soccer moms and their sex-starved husbands can argue about pool regulations and when to start your lawn mowers. I'll never be that mundane.

The noise ordinances make zero sense. It says no noise after nine p.m. on weekdays, except for Fridays, when it's eleven p.m. No noise after midnight on weekends, except on Sunday, when you're only allowed to be noisy until ten p.m. So basically, Friday doesn't count as the weekend, neither does Sunday, and the only night you can have fun is Saturday. Okay then.

I get about halfway through the stack before I give up. I'll finish the rest later. My brain isn't equipped for this much boredom.

I head to my new bedroom. My approach to packing up my room in the old townhouse was very utilitarian. Much to my mother's dismay, I shoved most of my clothes and linens into garbage bags.

Not pretty, but efficient. I rummage through the linens bag and find a new set of sheets and pillowcases. Another garbage bag houses a duvet and cover. After I make the bed, I sit at the foot of it, wriggle my phone out of my pocket, and dial my mom's number.

"Hello!" she answers happily. "Are you all done?"

"Yup, the guys just left. Couch, TV, and bed are all set up."

"Good. What about the condo in general? Do you like it? Are you happy with the paint colors we chose for the kitchen? And the backsplash? I thought the white tile was more tasteful."

"It all looks great," I assure her. "I mean it. Thanks again for everything you did. I couldn't have decorated it more perfectly myself."

Mom literally chose it all: the paint swatches, the artwork for the walls. The random shit I probably wouldn't have even thought

about, like dish racks and coat hangers.

“Of course,” she says. “Anything for my kid. Have you—Maryanne! No! Give me that baking soda!” Her voice grows muffled as she reprimands my little sister. Then she’s back, and I hear her clearly again. “Sorry. Your sister is driving me up the wall. She’s trying to build a modified bottle rocket.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“They learned how to make mini bottle rockets at camp last week and she found a way to modify it so it’s more powerful.” Mom curses under her breath. “This is what we get for sending her to space camp.”

“I thought she was doing geology camp.”

“No, that’s in August.”

Only my little sister would be attending not one but two science camps in the span of a summer. Luckily, this doesn’t make her a nerd because she’s legitimately the coolest ten-year-old I’ve ever met in my life. Maryanne is awesome. So are my parents, for that matter. We’ve always been super tight.

“Anyway, what else did I want to ask you?” she says thoughtfully. “Oh right. The three other condos in Red Birch. What about your neighbors? Have you met any of them?”

“Just one. She was outside her apartment buck naked when we got here.”

“What? You’re joking?” Mom gasps.

“Nope. She was chasing after a cat and dropped her towel. Best accident I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Don’t be gross, Shane.”

I laugh to myself. “Sorry. Anyway, don’t worry. She hates my guts, so we’re all good.”

“What? That isn’t good at all. Why doesn’t she like you?”

“Oh, I know her from Briar—she’s a friend of a friend. It’s fine. I don’t consider her a real neighbor. I’m sure the other ones are awesome and not at all obnoxious.”

We chat for a bit longer, and I make plans to come home to Vermont at the end of the week for a couple days. After I end the

call, I wonder who else might be in town this week. If any old high school friends are visiting for the summer and—

Is this what we're doing now? a voice in my head mocks. *Lying to ourselves?*

Oh fuck. Fine. I wonder if Lynsey will be there. And I know I shouldn't wonder. Or care. Because we broke up a little over a year ago, and that's a fuckin' long time to still be thinking about someone.

Fortunately, my phone buzzes with an incoming text before I can dwell on how pathetic I am for still being hung up on my ex-girlfriend.

CRYSTAL:

Are you all moved in?

I ran into her in town earlier when the boys and I grabbed coffee from Starbucks before heading over here. She's cute. Dark, shiny hair. Great smile. Even greater rack. We exchanged numbers while standing in line, much to the amusement of Beckett and Will.

Since I need to redirect my brain ASAP, I waste no time composing a response to Crystal. The last thing I want to do tonight is sit here obsessing over my ex. I'm better than that. And hornier.

ME:

Wanna chill tonight?

CRYSTAL:

Yeah, I could hang. I don't have cheer camp tomorrow.

I guess I should also mention that Crystal is a cheerleader at Briar. Yup. Another one of Diana's teammates.

Look at me, breaking all the Dixon rules.

ME:

I'll text you the address.