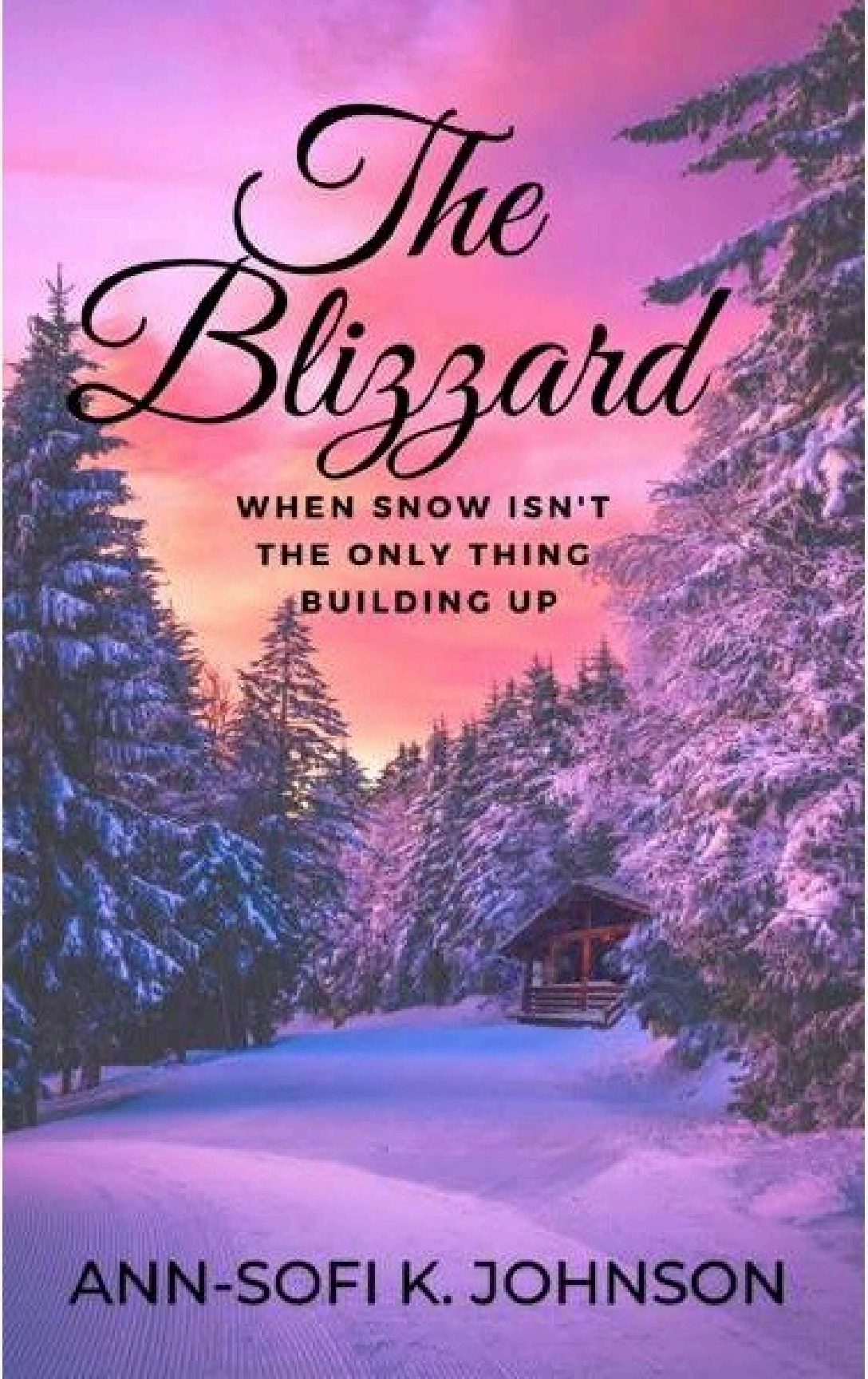

The Blizzard
WHEN SNOW ISN'T THE ONLY THING BUILDING UP
ANN-SOFI K. JOHNSON

The Blizzard

When Snow Isn't the Only Thing Building Up

Ann-Sofi K. Johnson

FikaTimeBooks.com

Chapter 1

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1

THE BEGINNING

The sound of a door opening filled Paige with dread. Nothing good ever came from *that* door opening. Paige crushed the receipt in her hand and let out a calming breath. *'Jesus, I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. I really need your help!'* she thought and she tossed the crumbled receipt towards the trash can, but missed. With a groan, she leaned down to retrieve it, using this opportunity to perhaps avoid the gaze of the rude manager.

"Look out!" the new girl squealed as she knocked over the tall vase on the corner of the reception desk and set into motion a domino effect.

This wasn't the first time her clumsiness had tipped something over, but this time Paige was leaning over to pick up the receipt that had missed the trash can, and she didn't have time to move before the water came flooding over her.

With a gasp, she quickly stood up and saw how the new girl was trying to catch the tipped-over vase but instead knocked it into the glasses that were stacked in front of her. The sound of the crashing glass filled the otherwise quiet lobby and called the attention of the tightly wound manager that happened to be walking by at that exact moment.

"Paige!" growled the manager and glared at her with a stare that would make even the most confident person uneasy, "my office, right now!"

"Yes ma'am." Paige nodded. She could feel the liquid dripping

down her spine, though she wasn't sure if the sensation was just the water or if it was also a physical and emotional reaction to being called into the manager's office for the third time this week.

She felt like a wet dog. Standing in the manager's office and being chewed out for something she hadn't even done. However, correcting the manager was simply not something you did, unless you wanted the reprimanding to get even worse. Something that Paige had learned the hard way.

Happily, the owner really liked Paige and though the manager had tried to have her fired on a few occasions, the owner had kept her safe so far. Paige knew that even if the manager would run the story by the owner of how she made a huge scene in the lobby and destroyed expensive company property, the owner would always ask to hear Paige's side of the story before making a decision.

Paige had taken up the habit of praying in tongues whenever she was around the manager, as that was the only way she could keep herself from calling her on the lies, misdirected anger, and blame.

The only reason the manager was still around was that she was the owner's sister-in-law and she had managed to get him to agree to sign a contract with her as the manager, until the day she retired. She had clearly manipulated her way into the position in the first place, but no one in their family had ever dared to stand up to her.

Paige really loved her job and enjoyed training new coworkers whenever the manager was elsewhere. Unfortunately, word of the rude manager had spread and now it seemed the quality of people applying to work there was subpar. Hence, the current new girl.

The manager blamed Paige for their lack of professionalism, even though she was the one who had hired them in the first place.

Paige was reaching her limit as this had been escalating for the last couple of years. She did great work but wasn't appreciated for it. She didn't get paid enough to have to deal with the manager's attitude anymore. She had had it.

As she stood there, dripping wet, listening to the manager calling her incompetent and sloppy, "It would be better to hire a hobo than have you working here. I don't understand why Rick won't just let me fire you!" Paige couldn't take it anymore.

"If you want me gone that much, I'll quit! See how well you will do without me constantly cleaning up after your messes. Yes, your messes. You don't know anything about being a manager, let alone a

decent person!"

The manager gasped audibly at Paige's outburst. "GET OUT!" she yelled, "GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT! No one talks to me like that! I'm your boss! Now Rick will for sure let me fire you! You really did it this time!"

"Wow, you really don't hear anyone but yourself, do you?! I said I QUIT! You are officially no longer my boss. Rick can say whatever he wants, but I don't care. I'm out!" Paige said sternly.

The manager was shaking with anger and offense. No one had ever talked to her like that. She always got her will eventually, but this wasn't the way! Paige wasn't supposed to quit, that was cheating. Paige was cheating her out of the satisfaction of seeing her fired. But before she had time to think of a comeback, the door to her office slammed shut as Paige stormed out of there.

Never again! Paige thought as she ripped the wet work clothes off and put on her own dry clothes instead. She didn't even care that she was still dripping wet. She wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. *Never again! God, I will never again subject myself to a bully like that, for any reason. I will never let anyone talk to me with such condescension again!* But knowing herself, she wasn't sure how true that would be in practice. She jumped into her car and drove off until she found a desolate place where she pulled over as the tears that filled her eyes made it dangerous to keep driving.

All of a sudden Paige found herself surrounded by darkness. Disoriented, she tried to get up but something was restricting her movement. *A seatbelt, and the steering wheel,* she thought as she realized she was in her car. It took her another second to remember where she was and why she was waking up in her car in complete darkness.

Then it all came back to her. She had quit her job! She felt guilty about how she had chosen to behave, even towards that evil woman who had bullied everyone there for years. Paige wasn't like that. She didn't raise her voice, she didn't call people out in anger, and she definitely didn't quit her job! *She had quit her job!?!* Now, what would she do? The manager would for sure not give her a good review, and she needed a job as her best friend had recently gotten engaged and there would be expenses as Paige was going to be the maid-of-honor. It wasn't official yet, but Hailey hadn't been able to keep it quiet once

she knew she was getting married.

She had come running into Paige's room with a squeal and her hand held out to show the beautiful engagement ring that Michael had already shown Paige, just to make sure she thought Hailey would like it. It was a beautiful white gold band with a 1 ct moissanite stone surrounded by three tiny ones on each side. It had looked gorgeous in the box, but seeing it on Hailey's finger, tears began to flood Paige's eyes. At which Hailey burst out, "You have to be my maid-of-honor! I mean, not *have to*, but please, please, please. I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for you, and you're so good with all of that organizing and planning stuff."

Paige gave her a joking glare before responding with "YES! Of course, I will be! I love you and I love you with Michael. He's such an amazing man! You know he's set the bar really high and normal men just don't cut it for me anymore. I want someone of his caliber, too!"

"Oh, I'm sure you will meet someone soon! Maybe at my wedding? I know some pretty good guys, and Michael has some pretty cool friends that might be of interest to you." Hailey winked teasingly.

"Ha ha, I think I'll be a little busy assisting you with wedding things to have time to look at guys, and also, my track record with men I've met at weddings has been pretty awful."

"That's different! This time, we're in charge of who we invite, and we're not having pigs at our wedding!"

"Hey, that's an insult to pigs," Paige joked. Looking at the ring she changed her tone, "I'm so happy for you Hailey. Congratulations!"

"Oh, no!" Hailey exclaimed.

"What?" Paige asked perplexed.

"I wanted to ask everyone in the wedding party with those bridesmaids boxes everyone is doing nowadays. But I already asked you!" She pushed out her bottom lip and looked at the floor.

"You can still ask me that way officially. It's like how Michael asked you if you'd ever consider marrying him, so you knew it was coming, but it wasn't official until now."

"Yes, you're right! Thank you! Thank you for always having my best at heart! I love you!" She threw her arms around Paige.

"Awe, thank you. I love you, too, Hailey."

Thinking of Hailey gave Paige bittersweet feelings. She was really

happy Hailey was about to get married but sad that their relationship was about to change forever.

They had been roommates since college and always only been one door away whenever one of them needed to talk. Even after she had started dating Michael and she was out on dates in the evenings, Paige had always known that Hailey would be back home by 11 PM at the latest. But all that was about to change. In a few months, she would no longer be greeted by Hailey's happy morning routine. She would have to find a new roommate to cover the cost of the apartment or find something smaller. She needed to get another job quickly.

Paige decided to take advantage of this soon-ending time of sharing a place with Hailey by heading home. It would be so nice to have a chill evening, maybe gorge on some ice cream and watch some TV, but mostly just talk about her awful week with her best friend.

The neighbors must be having a party, Paige thought as she carefully pulled into her driveway, avoiding the badly parked yellow VW Golf partially covering her entrance. She checked herself in the mirror and realized the state she was in. The tears she had shed after quitting had wiped off the little makeup the water hadn't already washed off her eyes, so now her face was left with streaks of mascara. Not really the first impression she wanted to give Hailey, even though it would be accurate, so she decided to clean off a little before she headed upstairs.

* * *

Paige's breath caught in her throat when she saw the pile of shoes right inside her door. She heard a squeal that meant Hailey had spotted her. Paige slowly turned her eyes in the direction of the sound and there she saw Hailey quickly making her way towards her with a huge smile on her face.

"I'm so happy you're finally here! I tried texting you but I guess you were held up at work. Come, let me introduce you to everyone." Hailey's voice was high-pitched and rapid as she spoke. All of her was glowing. She wore a white flared skirt with black polka dots and a

white blouse tucked into it, and her blonde wavy hair was down but pinned loosely behind her ears like she so often wore it.

Paige couldn't help but be affected by her joy and give her a smile in response. This wasn't the time to go into the events of her day.

As soon as Paige had taken off her shoes, Hailey grabbed her arm and started pulling her into the room.

"Hey guys, this is my best friend and roommate, Paige!" Hailey expressed excitedly. "Paige, this is Michael, My fiance!" of course Paige already knew Michael, but Hailey took every opportunity she could to introduce him as her fiance. Paige giggled and gave him a nod.

"This is Joe and Vanessa, whom you already know." She made a sweeping motion over the reserved blonde guy sitting next to Michael and the lady sitting next to him with really tight pants, a loose spaghetti-strapped tank top, and wild curly dark hair.

Next to them sat a guy with a chiseled face and chest, perfectly outlined under the blue henley shirt. Paige had always been confused as to why everyone seemed to think that having that many muscles was supposed to be seen as attractive, it just caused her to feel uncomfortable. Like she was looking at something photoshopped but in real life. "Next to them you have Hunter. You might have met him before. He's into extreme sports and competitive snowboarding. We might even see him on TV soon…"

Hailey kept talking, but Paige wasn't listening anymore. Her eyes had moved on to the next guy on the couch, and Hailey's words melted into background noise. Their eyes were locked. She had to force herself to keep breathing. She had just enough time to think that her face must look quite similar to his, before being pulled back to reality by Hailey's hand on her shoulder.

Paige gave out a nervous laugh as she turned her eyes to Hailey, unsure of what was going on, but Hailey didn't seem to have noticed the strange exchange that had just taken place.

"Paige, I'm so happy to finally get to introduce you to one of the most important people in my life. This is Jake, my brother!" Hailey motioned towards the last guy in the room, with dark straight hair that fell into his eyes, that still had that confused look in them, and the scruffy beard that highlighted his slightly opened mouth in the shape of an O. "Jake, what's wrong with you?" Hailey asked, confused by the facial expression that she only now noticed on his

face.

"Oh, eh, that's Paige? I was not expecting you. I mean, you're not what I was expecting." Jake stumbled over his words as he spoke.

"What were you expecting? A supermodel?" scuffed the last girl, yet to be introduced.

"What? No, I mean—" Jake groaned.

Paige could see the cogs spinning around in Jake's head, trying to make sense of how Paige could be standing right in front of him after all this time.

"I just mean that I've heard a lot about Hailey's best friend Paige, but apparently I've never seen a picture of her, 'cause the image in my head was of a blonde, and Paige is clearly a brunette." He was looking squarely at the last lady now and spoke confidently.

"Laurel, Paige. Paige, Laurel. My best friend from high school," Hailey said stiffly, "we were playing 2 truths and a lie before you got here Paige, wanna join us?" Hailey asked. She was trying to get back to her normal bubbly self, despite the awkward tension still lingering in the room.

"Eh, sure. I'm just gonna put my things away and grab something to eat," Paige said and excused herself. She walked out of the room fighting the urge to turn around to look at him one more time.

Having heard so much about Hailey's brother over the years, it was unfathomable how she had never put the pieces together. Clearly, neither had he. She dropped her things on the floor as she sank down on the bed. Throwing herself backward she covered her face with a pillow and let out a silent scream. *Today had already been crazy, and now this? What else was about to happen, an alien invasion?* Hearing her belly grumble, she sat back up and decided to head towards the kitchen before joining the rest of them.

Walking down the hallway, Paige was filled with the urge to peak out in order to see him again. Hearing laughter, she could tell they were all engaged in the game and would probably not even notice her. She was wrong! As soon as her eyes peaked around the corner, they were locked in his. It caught her so much by surprise that it took her several seconds before she could pull herself away and escape into the kitchen.

"I'm gonna get a refill. Does anyone else want something?" Paige heard Jake's voice say as the kitchen door closed behind her. Panic rose within her. She frantically looked around, but she knew there

was no other way of escaping the kitchen than the way she'd just entered from. Taking two deep breaths and making sure her back was towards the door was the best way she could think of coping with the situation at that moment.

Paige heard the door behind her open and then close again. She slowly turned around, and there he was, leaning against the counter with three glasses in his hands.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied.

After neither of them had spoken for a few seconds, Paige decided to say something, anything. "So, you're Hailey's brother?"

"You!" Jake said, baffled, "how are YOU here? How do you know my sister? Are you a stalker or something?"

"Wait, what? Of course, I'm not! We met in college, and we were assigned to the same dorm. If anything, Hailey's the stalker 'cause I was there first!" Paige said defensively.

"Sorry, you're right. I was just not expecting to see you here! Or ever again, for that matter. I didn't mean to call you a stalker. Will you forgive me? I'm just so confused."

"Okay, yes, I'm confused too. How can we have known Hailey for this long and never have met each other? I've even spent the holidays with your parents on a few different occasions."

"Ah, yeah, well, I don't really like spending too much time with them. They keep trying to micromanage my love life. Always wanting to introduce me to someone new."

"Oh, that doesn't sound very fun. Have you asked them to stop?"

"Eh, no. I guess I haven't." Jake looked perplexed as he processed what she had just suggested, and how dumb he felt for not having thought to do such a simple thing on his own. All those stories where Hailey's BFF had talked sense into her, that they had been words that Paige had spoken made so much sense knowing it had come from the lady now in front of him, the lady from back then. Of course, they'd be best friends.

He was glad to know that she was the same person he'd imagined so many times. Even though the thought of her possibly having been an angel had crossed his mind on a few occasions, he was happy to find out she was actually a human.

"Would you like something to drink? I'm already filling these," Jake said and gestured to the glasses he had brought with him.

"Sure," Paige said with her mouth full of pizza. With everything that had happened that day, she needed something to sustain her. She hadn't eaten since breakfast and she felt starving.

After the initial awkward meeting, Paige was glad Jake had ambushed her in the kitchen, because now she felt a lot better and more at ease around him.

They joined the others for a few games before Hailey gasped audibly.

"What's up, honey?" Michael asked, confused.

"Michael, come with me, the rest of you, stay right where you are! We'll be right back." She stood up and dragged Michael with her out of the room.

"What was that about?" Vanessa asked.

"Oh, she probably realized they haven't kissed in too long but didn't wanna do it in front of all of us," Laurel suggested with a grin.

"Nah, why wouldn't we be allowed to move if she just wanted to kiss him?" Hunter asked skeptically.

"I think it's best to wait until they're back and it will probably be explained," Paige suggested.

Laurel rolled her eyes at Paige's words.

Hailey came out with a huge smile on her face and three black boxes in her arms, followed by Michael with three white bigger boxes in his arms.

Laurel squealed. "Are those proposal boxes?" She stood up excitedly reaching out her arms to see if one of them was for her.

Hailey laughed. "Well, who knows, I guess you'll have to open one to find out."

They put the boxes on the floor behind everyone and swapped piles.

"Jake," Michael said, "this one's for you, man".

"Oh, please wait until all the boxes are handed out before opening them," Hailey instructed before calling out Vanessa's name.

"Can we open them now?" Laurel asked when she got the last of the boxes.

"Yes, go ahead," Michael said.

Paige opened her box and despite seeing all the little nicknacks inside, she went straight for the card.

Paige, the best friend anyone could ever have. You've always been there for me, and I know you always will be. You deserve the highest honor. Will you stand with me, on this most important day of my life, like you've stood with me on all previous occasions since we first met? Will you be my Maid-of-Honor?

Paige looked up at Hailey, as tears filled her eyes, and a smile covered her face, she nodded and whispered, "YES, thank you".

Laurel had been too preoccupied with the little gifts and was finally getting to the card as Hailey and Paige were hugging.

Laurel, we've known each other for as long as I can remember. We were inseparable in high school and often imagined our future weddings. Now, mine is about to happen for real and I couldn't imagine my wedding day without you. Will you be my bridesmaid?

"YES! Of course, I will, we have so much to plan. I remember everything we talked about back in the day, it's going to be such an amazing day!" Laurel said excitedly, as she crawled over the furniture to get to Hailey to give her a big hug. Paige barely had time to get out of the way and was almost knocked to the floor, but Jake saved her by reaching out an arm to steady her, as he was currently hugging Michael after having been asked to be the Best Man.

"You ok?" he asked, letting his hand linger on her back a little longer than necessary.

"Yes, thank you," Paige said and sat back down. *What was that hand about?* She glanced over at him, but he was engaged in conversation with the guys again.

There was a loud sob and Paige turned her head and asked "Vanessa, what's going on?"

"I never thought anyone would ask me to be a bridesmaid. I feel so honored and loved. Hailey, thank you for thinking of me! Yes, I'd love to join you on your wedding day!" Vanessa said through more sobs.

Hailey pulled herself free from Laurel and went over and held Vanessa as Paige grabbed some napkins and handed them to her.

* * *

Paige and Hailey joined everyone outside of the house to say goodbye. When everyone was finally gone, Hailey turned toward Paige with a serious look. "Now, tell me what's going on with you."

Paige broke down right there on the street. She hadn't thought Hailey would notice anything from being preoccupied with her joyous wedding bubble, but she knew better than to underestimate Hailey.

She told her everything that happened at work, how she ended up quitting, and how she had spent the rest of her day crying in her car.

"Finally!" Hailey exclaimed, "I've been waiting for you to come to your senses and stop working for that awful woman."

Paige paused mid sob and just stared at her friend. "You have? But why haven't you said anything?"

"Eh, oh, I'm not sure. I guess I thought you wouldn't like me saying something, since you seemed to enjoy the job whenever she wasn't there." Hailey was visibly nervous now.

"Oh, I really did like it. But you could have still said something. You're supposed to be my best friend and have my best at heart, like how I suggested you not go on a 2nd date with that one guy," Paige said and winked at her friend to ease the tension.

"Oh, but that was just because you wanted me to date Michael, and you knew he'd been thinking of asking me out."

"Yeah, so? Are you telling me the reason you didn't tell me to quit was that you knew I had no other work prospects out there? No other jobs that would want me?" Paige teased.

"Well, maybe," Hailey teased back before she got serious, "I do want the best for you, but I knew you loved what you got to do at that job, and I kinda thought you'd outlast that old snake and take over as manager, but I also didn't really like the idea of you being there for 3 more years. Especially not after she started escalating the abuse. So yes, I'm happy you quit, but I'm sad that means you don't have a job anymore." Hailey pulled Paige into a tight hug and didn't let go until Paige tapped her from lack of air.

The ladies headed back upstairs and spent half the night talking about the upcoming wedding and all the parties they wanted to fit in before the big day.

The next morning, Hailey stormed into Paige's room and jumped on her bed excitedly.

"What's up?" Paige asked groggily.

"Do you know what would be really fun?" Hailey asked enthusiastically.

"No, what?" Paige gave her a suspicious look.

"What if we brought the wedding party to a cabin for a long weekend away, where the eight of us could hang out, have fun, and get to know each other better?"

"Wow, I love that idea! Let's do it!" Paige said excitedly.

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