

FRENEMIES

Missed you, love you, mean it

Halley Brandon had survived the impossible: two whole months away from her best friend in the world. But now she was finally home.

Her mom had barely stopped her champagne-colored Mercedes CLK convertible before Halley was out the car door, racing through her family's ultramodern living room toward the backyard that bordered Avalon Greene's property.

She slipped through the sun-bleached wood gate and tip-toed along the edge of the Greenes' sparkling infinity pool, the water shining like a smooth aquamarine gemstone in the warm Southern California sun. Avalon was reading in her usual spot beside the mosaic-tiled patio table—her long, straight blond hair shielding her face like a veil. Up until this summer, Halley had spent every June, July, and August right here, sipping Snapple Peach Iced Tea and challenging

Avalon to swim-offs. But last spring she'd applied to UC Berkeley's Inkubator Art Program and couldn't *not* go once she'd been lucky enough to get accepted to California's most exclusive art camp. At first, Avalon didn't get what an honor it was for Halley to get in and tried to convince her not to go, but eventually she understood and was totally happy for her friend.

Halley silently sank into her favorite chaise lounge and let out a sigh. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"Ohmygod!" Avalon leapt up from her chair. "You're *here!*" She ran over and dove onto Halley, smothering her best friend with a monster hug. Both girls giggled as Halley tried to blink back the tears that were beginning to well up in her intense blue eyes.

"So!" Avalon stood, reaching her arms out to Halley. "I can't believe you're really back!"

"I really am!" Halley laughed and quickly ran a finger under her bottom lashes before letting Avalon pull her off the chaise.

"I missed you like crazy." Avalon shook her head dramatically and cast her deep Hershey Kiss-colored eyes down at her perfectly French-pedicured toenails. "It was *awful* without you."

"I know, but—" Just as Halley was about to tell Avalon every detail about every minute she'd spent in Berkeley, she heard a bark and turned to see the girls' golden retriever-mix

puppy, Pucci—named for the favorite designer of Constance Greene and Abigail Brandon, a.k.a. “The Moms”—rounding the back of the Greenes’ saffron-hued Spanish-style house. In a replay of Avalon’s tackle from a minute ago, Pucci leapt onto Halley and covered her with sloppy wet kisses.

“Oh, Pucci! I missed you, too, my little Pucci-poochy-pooch!” Halley wrapped her arms around the puppy and sank back onto the lounge chair. “I can’t believe how big you’ve gotten!”

Pucci woofed at Avalon, and Halley looked up at her best friend again.

“Ohmygod—Pucci’s not the *only* one who’s bigger!” Halley practically screamed, staring at her best friend’s chest. Avalon’s A-cups had practically doubled in size since July.

Avalon grimaced. “Hey, leave ‘the girls’ alone.”

“I think it’s more like ‘the *women*’ at this point!” Halley stifled a laugh.

“Uh-huh.” Avalon’s face clouded over slightly.

Halley sensed she’d accidentally stepped onto an Avalandmine and figured she should start backing out. Quietly. “Well, with or without the new *developments*, you look totally fab!” Halley grinned, relaxing back into the chaise. “You’re *so* tan, and that skirt is *awesome*. Where’d you find it?”

“Thanks. It’s Stella McCartney. I know we’re not discount shoppers, but I heard about this crazy influx of Stella pieces at Nordstrom Rack in July. I couldn’t resist!” Avalon tilted

her head. Her eyes traveled from Halley's long, wavy dark locks down to the tips of her vintage lavender leather boots. "Are those . . . *cowboy boots*?"

"Yup!" Halley waited for Avalon to ask her more about her ensemble: a silky gray camisole and black Bermuda shorts with a wide wine-colored belt. The shorts actually belonged to Chad Rollins; stealing them out of the graphic design instructor's room had been her ultimate art camp Truth or Dare moment.

"Wow . . . cute." Avalon wrinkled her nose.

"What?" Halley asked. "Don't you think I'm a complete Yes?"

"Um, sure." Avalon nodded her head and widened her golden-brown eyes innocently.

"Why do I not believe you?"

"Well . . ." Avalon turned to look out at the pool and then spun back to face Halley. "Okay, truth?"

"Of course." Halley and Avalon always told each other the truth—that's what best friends are for, right?

"It's a Maybe at best," Avalon said. "I mean, it *is* like eighty degrees outside—not exactly boot weather—and, hello? You need a little more than purple footwear and accessories to pull off all that gray and black."

Halley couldn't believe her best friend had just Maybe'd her. They'd been playing *Yes, No, Maybe* with virtually every outfit they'd ever seen since the third grade, and Maybes

happened only in extreme fashion emergencies—which this was *not*.

“Whatever.” Halley shrugged off the style citation. If she knew one thing about her best friend, it was that Avalon didn’t like anybody to start a trend before she did. She was probably just jealous. Besides, Avalon was skating dangerously close to a Maybe herself, the way her new boobs were tempting fate under her white halter top.

“*Anyway . . .*” Halley placed her hands behind her head and stretched out on the chaise, eager to move on, while Pucci curled up at her feet and gave her cocoa butter-moisturized calf a lick. “Tell me *everything* I missed while I was gone.”

“Ohmygod, *so much!*” Avalon squealed, clapped her hands twice, and began pacing along the edge of the pool in debriefing mode. “We’ve already got about twelve bat mitzvah invites, and Becca Krasnoff is apparently having Gwen Stefani design her dress. Can you even believe?”

“Seriously?” Halley gasped. “Ohmygod, that’s so crazy because—”

“Seriously!” Avalon cut Halley off before she could finish explaining that L.A.M.B. was one of her new favorite labels. “I guess Becca’s dad used to work with Gwen’s older brother or something. How cool is that?”

Halley grinned and resigned herself to the fact that her art camp stories would have to wait. Avalon was clearly on a

roll. She pulled off her boots so she could burrow her bare feet into Pucci's soft blond fur.

"But even cooler?" Avalon continued, barely pausing for breath. "Courtney had her sweet sixteen last week, and since she's style-dyslexic, I totally designed the whole thing."

"It's unbelievable that your sister can actually drive now! Was the party beyond amazing?" Halley separated her dark waves evenly and then twisted each side into a pigtail before tying them together in a knot at the nape of her neck.

"Beyond," Avalon confirmed, pursing her glossy lips in an exaggerated pout. "But I was *so* sad you weren't there. Everyone was."

Halley felt a pang of guilt for having left Avalon alone in La Jolla while she had the greatest summer ever in Berkeley. But at least Avalon had found somewhere to channel all her social energy. Avalon *lived* for parties. Or, at least, for *talking* about parties.

After about twenty minutes of nonstop dishing about her big sister's birthday, Avalon took a deep breath and raised a pale blond eyebrow. "So?"

Halley inhaled, preparing to launch into her moment-by-moment art camp recap.

"Best part?" Avalon went on. "I've decided it's time for *us* to throw a major bash."

"Really?" Halley asked, a little confused, since neither of

their birthdays were coming up and the next partyworthy holiday was Halloween.

“Totally.” Avalon ran over to a light pink folder off the patio table and raced back to Halley, standing tall, as if she were delivering an oral report. “Okay! The name of our fabulous fête will be Friendapalooza.” She handed Halley the folder emblazoned with sparkly purple letters. “The theme will be fashion—*obvs!* We’ll invite all the cutest boys in school, and *you* can design the invitations!”

“Hmmm.” Halley tried to hide her uncertainty in the face of Avalon’s over-the-top excitement.

“Or we can just do Evites.” Avalon grinned, sitting down next to Pucci. “I already started playing around with a few ideas online, and—”

“It’s not *that* . . . ,” Halley said, still pondering the idea.

“Then *what?*” Avalon demanded. “We’ve been best friends our entire lives, and what could be more worth celebrating? Plus we’ve just spent our first summer apart and are, like, seriously independent women now. And finally, as everyone knows, thirteen is the new sixteen.”

“Hmmm,” Halley said again. It made sense. Sort of. It just seemed a little . . . lame?

“*Pleeeeeease!*” Avalon grabbed Halley’s hand to give it an urgent squeeze. “I am *so close* to getting The Moms to say yes . . . but I *need* you to convince them, too. They’ll be so happy you’re back that they’ll do anything you ask.”

Pucci barked. She seemed to agree that a party was in order.

Halley let out a loud sigh and shook her head as she grinned at her best friend. If anyone knew how to get her way, Avalon, daughter of two lawyers, certainly did. She was a master manipulator—in all the best ways, of course.

Of course.