



WHEN

WE

BLINKED

A NOVEL

STEPHANIE MACK

PRAISE FOR STEPHANIE MACK

Memorable and heartfelt. . . . an engrossing second-chance love story between a couple you can't help but root for as they find their way back to each other. Mack is an impressive and engaging new voice in women's fiction.

DEVON DANIELS, author of *The Rom Con*, on *When We Blinked*

When We Blinked oscillates between perfectly imperfect Sera and Connor [while delivering] an unapologetic message: The ability to love fully and freely can arise from the ashes of our deepest hurts and shame. Mack . . . flawlessly marries the wit and charm of Sophie Kinsella with the spiritual depth of Francine Rivers. I immediately wanted to know the conclusion but never wanted it to end.

JENN MCBRIDE, former managing editor of CBS Los Angeles

A captivating story that delves deep into complex matters of the heart and leaves you wanting to discuss the issues it explores with friends. This is relatable women's fiction!

RILEY COSTELLO, author of *Waiting for December*, on *When We Blinked*

I literally could not put this book down. *When We Blinked* is both an engrossing love story and a thoughtful journey of self-discovery. Author Stephanie Mack explores big themes—marriage, motherhood, faith, and friendship—with authenticity, grace, and oh-so-relatable humor.

NATASHA BURTON, author of *101 Quizzes for Couples*

Asking a question many of us have pondered—What if life took a different turn and sent us in an entirely different direction?—this novel is both distinctive and clever, plucky, and entertaining. A must-read!

T. I. LOWE, internationally bestselling author of *South of Somewhere*,
on *Twenty Something Else*

Twenty Something Else is the most beautifully, aching real story I've read in ages. The fantastical elements sure make for a fun ride! The result is a one-of-a-kind gem that sparkles with wit and wisdom that feels uniquely millennial but will undoubtedly appeal to readers of all ages. Equal parts comfortingly wholesome and refreshingly frank, this one straight-up knocked my socks off.

BETHANY TURNER, award-winning author of *Brynn and Sebastian Hate Each Other: A Love Story*

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Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Previously published in 2021 under ISBN 978-0-578-85533-2. First printing by Tyndale House Publishers in 2026.

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Cover design by Sarah Susan Richardson

Interior design by Brandi Davis

Published in association with the literary agency of Browne & Miller Literary Associates, LLC, 52 Village Place, Hinsdale, IL 60521

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When We Blink is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 979-8-4005-1459-3

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

PART ONE

ASK

1

SERAPHINA



I tapped the toe of my nude suede pump on the elevator floor, willing us to move faster. Piano music leaked from the ceiling, with zero calming effect on me. *This thing keeps glitching.* One day I'd be truly stuck, in the guts of this glass corporate castle. I breathed. If only we would rise at the rate of my blood pressure.

There. At last. Ascent.

I knew the meeting had started without me, and I was as tardy as I was jittery. I had failed to predict that my four-year-old would make herself a breakfast-time “beard” with the glitter Silly Putty Santa gave her for Christmas. Glitter would be the death of me. What had Santa (I) been thinking?

“Mommy, *it won't come off!*” Coco had cried, clawing at her cheeks, her anxiety heating up like the skillet. I'd been too busy reminding myself it had to be *exactly six* pancakes to avoid them being thrown back at me. Hot breakfast was my new practice,

my way of saying, *We're still a family. I'll keep you warm. We're going to be okay.* I used to pour us all cereal and call it a morning.

You never knew what you had until you stood alone over a small open flame.

This morning, Coco wore a sloth nightgown, sloth slippers, and sloth eye mask pulled up onto her forehead—all Santa's fault, again. The sloth was her favorite animal of the moment. It changed every few months, but I was glad sloths were having their time in the limelight; it was easy to find paraphernalia. Lately, Coco loved to snuggle me in the early mornings and tell me she was my sloth, wrapping herself around my back like a cloak. It was the very best part of my days—the groggy moments before the dawn, when we both knew just who we were. Before she flipped and turned on me. Before my temper could flare. Mother and daughter, primal and pure. Come what may, as it would.

What did those wizards put into glitter Silly Putty? It would not peel off. *Makeup remover pads?* No luck. *Nail polish remover?* Too risky.

Hot water, I heard Connor say. *Rub it gently away with a washcloth.*

These were the moments when I sensed his absence the most. He always knew what to do in the face of a kiddo catastrophe. Sharpie on our new vinyl floors? Magic Eraser. Gum in the hair? Creamy peanut butter. Lipstick smeared into our master bedroom rug? Folex, forever. I cringed now at comments I used to make about being a “single mom” when Connor was away on a golf trip. It was not funny and not even part true. Living alone, *being* alone, was cavernous and excruciating.

I was doing better, though, much better. My stomach didn't hurt every day. My appetite was back for the most part. I could face my family again. I had resumed my full face-wash routine. I was going to spin class.

Fine. I was going to spin class, *sometimes*.

I still reached to twist my wedding band when I was nervous or lost, as if it would comfort or guide me.

It just seemed like an eternity since I'd had an empty hand. Or exercised like I used to. Or done much to take care of me.

My progress was slow. But I was in motion.

Hey. *Like a sloth*. You know?

Gripping Coco's cheeks in one hand, scrubbing her chin with the other, I watched the hot water work. Her face shined clean within seconds, spurring a billow of hope. *Maybe I really can do this*, I thought. I needed the reminder, each hour, especially here at the office, a planet away from my baby girl.

Finally, the elevator doors opened up to my floor and the rest of my life.

God, get me through this day.

Please don't let the team kill me.

May I slowly but eventually forget how it felt for Connor to be my sloth.



"You're late, Ser. *Again*." He didn't even have to say it, my faithful work bestie. I could see it in the flat line of his mouth against his perfectly groomed hipster beard. Connor had grown one just like it, in fact, per my specific request. I'd always had to acknowledge

that Beckham was objectively nice-looking, and always ahead of the trends, even if he drove me insane and felt, sometimes, like a little brother I could never keep up with his antics. Or his women, for that matter.

"Love your tie," I mouthed, taking my seat across from him at the front of the conference table. Morning light poured into the window and onto its mahogany shine. My punctuality was a growth area, and this bugged me, too. I vowed in silence to work on it. *Allow time for glitter.* "I'm so sorry I'm late, everyone."

Still, Beckham had missed me in my four years away as a stay-at-home mom. He had missed me, and we both knew it. Quarterly lunches and occasional phone calls simply were not the same. But we were back; *we were back!* The Dream Team! The Word Wizards! The Hotel Heroes of Syntax!

Even if he was my boss now, and still rolled his eyes at my names for us.

My ego had suffered worse hits lately. I was just thankful to be here.

He straightened his plaid lavender tie, jerking his head toward Phoebe and her presentation, as if saying, *Be here, right now. Sit up, Seraphina Lorenn.*

"Ahem!" Phoebe, in her expensive-looking black skirt suit, shot up a brow and continued addressing our staff. We were a ragtag group of writers, designers, interns, and brand executives. "As I was saying, since Beck became national brand design manager and I took the global role, Mr. Hamilton has secured five new acquisitions across the US to close on within the next year."

"Mr. Hamilton? Is that what we're calling him now?" chided Sage, my intern, between chomps of peppermint gum. She

helped us with writing and social media. I still couldn't believe I had my own intern, to keep me young and show me how to keep upping my Instagram Stories game. It was hard to keep up with the features. She was fresh out of USC. *Wasn't I still fresh out of USC?* We liked to compare the differences between my PR degree program and hers, the decade between them a chasm of digital evolution. My schooling felt practically obsolete—but we did still write actual press releases, as I learned to do back then. Well, Sage wrote them, if we were being technical. I made them sparkle and shine.

“Yes, we are calling him that,” confirmed Phoebe. “And when you become one of the world's youngest billionaires, you can be called *Ms. Anderson*.”

It wasn't necessarily out of reach. Sage had over five hundred thousand followers on Instagram for her fashion and lifestyle account. She was twenty-three years old. I was proud to call her my sidekick if not perplexed by her desire to work for us.

But there was nothing perplexing about Graham Hamilton. The Prince, we called him, though not to his face—head of the great Hamilton Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., headquartered here in Orange County, California. Graham was appointed CEO after his grandfather's death last year. Graham's parents died in a plane crash when he was young, and he was essentially raised at the company. He was also not far out of college—an Ivy League, naturally. Corporate Communications loved to remind us of his pedigree at every turn. I mean, he had *four years of real-world experience* and was now earning his MBA, so of course he was fit to be chasing mega-million-dollar properties and high-profile magazine covers.

“Coeur d’Alene, Cleveland, St. Louis, Chicago,” Phoebe continued.

“Well,” quipped Beckham, “is The Prince going Middle-America happy on us?”

Giggles rippled around the room.

“You know he’s not the closer,” I said. “He’s just the new face. He looks so much like his grandfather. Those handsome genes. Plus, the people trust Yale.”

“Harvard,” corrected Corey, Beckham’s new assistant, about whom I still couldn’t decide. “I did the research for that business feature you wrote. He graduated magna cum laude. He’s fun to tease, but he’s wicked smart.”

Shoot. I was still easing in. Thank you for reminding me, Corey.

“Understated big cities, resort towns,” Phoebe went on. “*Small America is the new black.* He coined that phrase on a conference call. But you might’ve noticed: That was only four properties.”

Phoebe poised her thumb on the remote in her hand, scanning our group with her ivy-green eyes. Her thick red hair was chopped blunt at her clavicle and extra glossy today. Even in these awful overhead lights, she appeared fresh off a runway. “Meet our newest crown jewel, team—The Bentley at Jackson Hole. Now part of the Hamilton family.”

Known by anyone in hospitality with half a pulse, the familiar dramatic mountain retreat filled the projector screen. The expansive wooden château was set beneath snow-slathered mountains dotted with pines. Were those actual . . . moose? In the distance? It was hard not to gawk at the old-world majesty.

The high slanting roofs caked in white, the countless original windows, certainly a jacuzzi and fireplace in every room.

I gulped. Connor and I had always talked about seeing The Bentley someday.

Someday. I hated that word.

Ooohs and *aaahs* emitted in chorus. Our senior graphic designer, Georgina, reflexively flipped to a blank page, beginning to sketch. Sage's eyes filled with visions and tweets. I locked stares with Beckham. We knew this was huge. Our National Brand Design Band was back together, and we were taking the stage. I practically fist-pumped right at him.

"Hamilton will be undertaking extensive renovations to the property, but we're keeping the historical bones," Phoebe explained. "You'll have the planned updates soon. We'll need the whole nine, ASAP, and this will be top priority. Full creative branding, taglines, website, brochures, press release drafts, the works.

"We need your maximum game, everyone," she proceeded. "The very best you all have. This is big for The Prince, it's big for us, and it's big for the whole company. This isn't just about a new property. This is the next generation. Everyone out there's got a hawk-eye on our every move."

We nodded.

I liked her more for referring to him as The Prince.

"Oh," she said. "One more thing. You two"—a wild gesticulation in the air between Beckham and me—"you have to go see it. Next month. We can't catch this vision blind. February will be freezing, but there needs to be snow. Go the full week of Presidents' Day, so it's one less workday out of the office."

No. *No, no, no, no, no.* Coco's fifth birthday. I already knew it fell the Wednesday after that Monday because I'd started planning the party. My insides fizzled and churned. I couldn't leave her. Not yet, and not on a milestone birthday. Children were not invited on Hamilton trips—the ironclad rule, nonnegotiable. The trips were delightful and key, but always a full week, and also, frankly, exhausting. The dinners, meetings, writing, research, the really-hunkering-down. All of the local tourism. Even if I could wrap my mind around missing my baby's birthday, I hadn't left her for that long since she'd been born. I wasn't ready.

I can't do it. I couldn't.

"Um—" I began.

"Oh gosh, Phoebe," said Beckham, an apologetic lilt to his voice.

Thank goodness. My Beckham. My person. *He's going to take this one for me.*

"My twin brother's getting married in Hawaii that week, remember?" he finished. "Can we do March? I'm so sorry."

Disappointment flashed on Phoebe's sharp features, but they just as quickly refroze, an easy feat given the amount of Botox in them. "No, we can't wait. It's the only week I can fly in for a day." She paused. "You, Sera. You're ready. Take an intern if you want. Beckham, start setting her meetings."

I held in the sigh that would surely betray my panic. I mustered the weakest of smiles and fakest of rah-rah-team gusto. Apparently this was happening, and I had to speak before Phoebe had reason to doubt me.

"Will do!" I exclaimed. "I'm on it. This is incredible. We've got this, Sage. I'll need your eye for social." She nodded her

balayage layers, round cheeks aglow. She was, per usual, utterly darling and eager to please. I knew I was lucky to have her, if only three days a week.

The meeting continued, all of my teammates elated, while I sank lower into my executive chair. Plans for Coeur d'Alene and Chicago also sounded amazing, but those trips could wait until summer.

I get to write for a living. I get to write for a living. I get to write for a living.

I'd returned as a senior brand writer after a career gap smack in my prime. I should be purely grateful.

But my high-pitched mom guilt thrummed loudly and cruelly over everything else.

I would miss Coco's birthday.

But I needed this job more than ever.

God, this is bad. There's no way out. It really is only me now.

I once missed this place so much.

But in that moment, I couldn't believe how desperately I missed being home.



I yanked my office door shut behind me, harder than I intended. Not like I could hide with these fishbowl windows that insisted on being so modern. When I used to sit in here, belly swollen, ankles thick, secretly wearing UGG slippers under my desk, I'd imagine my return to work after Coco was born—which we now know didn't happen—and I'd wonder how I might hang a blanket over that pane so I could breast-pump in private. I

cringed at the box of a nursing room down the hall, provided by corporate, and at email-requesting my time slots for something so sacred and personal.

Coco now beamed at me from the portrait on my office wall, chestnut eyes above her pink cheeks, lips pulled into a grin full of toddler teeth, sandy tendrils framing it all.

Coco. *My baby*. The motherless birthday girl. *Ugh*. I was the actual worst.

Rap, rap, rap. “Ser?”

I only ever closed my door when I was dealing with something personal (but only that which troubled me greatly) or deep in my deepest writer zone (which I could be, right now, if I were already dreaming of making The Bentley sing with my words, three minutes after our meeting, which I was not).

Beckham knew this. He didn’t wait for permission to enter. “I am *so sorry*, Ser. I got to my desk and looked at the calendar. How could I ever forget the week you left me forever and never came back? It’s Coco’s birthday. You’re freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out.” I exhaled, sliding into my chair.

I was about to fold my arms on my desk and bury my head in their crook—for utmost effect—but the latest issue of *Forefront Magazine* stared right back up at me. At least it wasn’t Graham Hamilton, but rather, a young woman, svelte and blonde. She looked like a sorority president, in the best way. Confident. Classy. Connected. “What’s this? *Million-Dollar Romantic Opens Our Eyes*. Is this a hint? Have I really become that depressing?”

Beck had a habit of leaving things on my desk for me. Sometimes fantastic things. Never subtle things.

“Not depressing,” he corrected. “Just—a little doleful at times.”

“Those are synonyms.”

“Well, there’s nothing *dolefully depressing* about Piper Maddock.” He fell onto my plush royal-blue office couch, grabbing a handful of peanut butter M&M’s from the crystal bowl on the side table, crossing his ankles above camel Gucci loafers. I tried to keep it cozy in here for when the hours grew bleak, and for Coco’s occasional visits. “Have you heard of her? I thought you’d find her inspiring. The article is amazing. If I liked blondes, I’d track her down.”

“Your confidence is astounding.” I hadn’t heard of her. Wide-eyed Piper could wait. She didn’t look a day over thirty. She probably hadn’t known anguish. How could she at, what, twenty-five? It was time to lower my forehead onto her face.

Wow, she was actually—*stunning*. There was also something centering about her, left hand on one hip, iPhone held out in the other. Set jaw, full lips, big brown eyes. Medium-length honey hair curled elegantly into waves. I also loved that she was wearing a hot-pink wrap dress, a departure from the iconic business pub’s typical male black-suit covers. Mental note: *Read this later*.

“I don’t mean to be a downer, Beck. Or late so often.” I sighed. “I’m still adjusting, I guess.” I’d only been back three months. And I knew I’d have to travel again. Just maybe not so soon.

“I’d go if I could,” he promised. “Best man. Twin. I kind of win. Sorry.”

“You only turn five once!” I pointed out. “But you might get married *twice*.” I held out my arms and pushed out my poutiest lip, pretending like I might cry.

He half laughed. He wasn’t budging. “You going to be okay?”

“Yes.” *Maybe* I would be okay. “Do I have a choice, Boss?”

“Can’t your parents take her for the week? Make it special? FaceTime you in?”

FaceTime me in? I swallowed the gut punch. “Maybe. But Connor and I agreed to check with each other first if we’ll be gone during our time with her. So. *Yay!* Extra communication with him!”

“I feel like he’ll do whatever you want. He’s, like, the dream ex-husband. You know that, right? Is this the worst thing ever?”

“It’s not the best!” I sighed. “Shared custody feels like a root canal that won’t heal. Her pink princess suitcase. My heart. A piece of it dies every time.”

“My parents split when I was her age, remember? I know, Ser. It sucks. But also? It will get better.”

I wasn’t so sure. “Thanks, friend.”

We sat in silence, comfortably, as we had many times before. Two friends who had learned side by side to convert our words into sales, to command respect for the marketing team, to lean on each other through highs and lows—life’s “peaches and pits,” as Coco called them. To rise through the ranks and form the strongest of ties, despite our divergent lifestyles and all of the goals we shared. He’d never been my rival; he’d only ever been kind. I squealed when he called to tell me about his promotion, when I was in line at Disneyland with my mom friends and all of our kids. He’d been my professional ally since the day we started as baby interns together a decade ago. He’d earned a place in my heart. Even if I occasionally wanted to hit him.

I jiggled the mouse to fire up my computer and start clicking through my emails.

“The Bentley, though—wow,” Beckham marveled as he stood up to leave. “I’m jealous—I hear their spa is unreal. And nobody writes a destination like you. I can’t wait to read your stuff. Was this the quote? *She can bring emotional appeal and wanderlust to a glacier.*”

“Something like that.” I smiled—though I never had quite understood that compliment, which came with the most prestigious business award I’d ever received. Weren’t glaciers inherently wondrous? I think our CEO was trying to play on the whole “selling ice in a blizzard” thing and fell a little short. But I wouldn’t hold it against him. He had us for the words. “Now scram! I’ve got a snow castle to sell.”

For a second then, I felt Beckham’s eyes dance briefly across my desk to the family picture I hadn’t yet put away. *Should’ve filed that one in the archives.* But I just couldn’t. I almost never loved pictures of myself, especially pregnant, but I’d cherish this one always. We three wore white. We frolicked the beach. Coco was two. I was eleven weeks pregnant. I’d announced the news with that photo on social media. You could see the small bump beneath my cotton gown, but only if you looked closely. Connor had never looked better—strong arms, cute smile, brown hair wavy and soft. *Gosh, I’d loved him so much.*

Gosh, and I loved that baby.

“Read about Piper Maddock,” Beckham added. “The best is ahead for you, Ser. And take a look at her product.”

Romance. Hot pink. *The old me.* “Okay.”

He shut the door with one final wink.