LIFE IS STRANGE™

Steph's Story

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For everyone who marches to
the beat of their own drum
And for those who can't yet,
but still want to

The Timeline – Author's Note

Life is Strange is a world of choices. Some are small and others are downright cosmic. None are inconsequential. Though Steph's life exists outside Arcadia Bay and Haven Springs, she is greatly impacted by events in both. *Steph's Story* occurs in a timeline where Arcadia Bay was destroyed but Chloe Price was not, one of many possibilities in the vast multiverse. Whether your choices mirrored these or not, I hope you choose to read *Steph's Story* with an open mind and continue to bring your creativity to the infinite universes of *Life is Strange*.

Spring



One

They say home is where the heart is, but I've never been in love. Sure, I've had my crushes—some attainable and others… not so much. My childhood bedroom used to be covered in posters of Kristen Stewart and Avril Lavigne. Not anymore.

I stand before the plain wooden door to my bedroom. Or what will become my bedroom the second I walk across the threshold.

Changed my mind. You think Lia will notice if I sleep in her studio?

I tap out a text to Jordie, fingers too jittery to spell anything right. Luckily, autocorrect has my back. He replies almost immediately.

I bet all the yarn in there would make a good nest

Right??? COZY!

So... that bad being back at your dad's?

My chest clenches and my throat closes up a bit. Dad's cleared a room for me in his new house. It's not really *new*. He's lived here since we moved to Seattle five years ago. I've managed

to stay away as long as I can, between college dorms and couch surfing. But it's time to say goodbye to mooching off friends and hello to mooching off my father, since I've got my diploma and a knot the size of a small country under my shoulder blade.

Maybe I'll hang that on the wall. The diploma, not my shoulder knot.

No. I'm just being a baby

Well, grow up and then get down here. I'm bored out of my skull

I tuck my phone into my back pocket and take a deep breath before turning the knob and letting the door swing open.

Dad's put in his best effort to make it feel like a real room. There's a plaid duvet covering the bed and it's not even an ugly color—blue and yellow, my favorites. Plus he's built an Ikea dresser and some shelves all by himself, like he doesn't realize I'm a lesbian.

"You got everything, Steph?" Dad calls up the stairs.

It's strange, hearing his voice. We've lived in the same city all this time, but I can count on one hand the number of times we've actually been in the same space. Mostly we email. It's not that we don't get along; it's just that we thrive in text format. Guess it would be weird to email him my response to such a simple question, though.

"Yep. I'm all set!" I glance down at my belongings. It's a meager showing. Just my trusty purple suitcase and backpack. Commence: the great unpacking.

It should take me a grand total of ten minutes to unload my clothes and toiletries and so on. I cut way back on all my stuff when I graduated. It just wasn't practical to be lugging around full-size shampoo bottles or my boxes full of vinyl. Only the essentials for me. The one exception I made was my art supplies.

They're the first thing I unpack—a sketchbook with a tattered cover and a plastic bag full of colored pencils at various lengths. My favorite color is near the end of its life—RIP Unmellow Yellow—so I'll need to scrounge up some more before starting the next issue of my zine. For now, I stow them in the top drawer of the desk and turn back to the rest of the room.

The walls are bare in this sanitized way that makes me nostalgic for DigiPen. Back in my dorm room there wasn't an inch of wall to be seen there behind all my posters, concert tickets, and concept art for my senior project—a fully realized tabletop RPG set underwater that culminated in a battle between mecha mermaids and an undead legion of shipwrecked sailors. It got a little overwhelming near the end there, but now I actually miss those drawings of zombie pirates.

Organized chaos. That's my jam.

This room is huge

Jordie's reply takes a few seconds—he must have customers at the shop.

Yipee!

No, like too huge

Cry me a fucking river

I groan. He's right, of course. Never thought I'd complain about having too much space, but it feels like this bedroom was put here specifically to mock me with its white walls, clean floor, and empty surfaces.

What am I even gonna fill this place with? I don't have any stuff

Omg girl, buy some with your adult money

Lol what adult money?

Even if I had cash to burn, I'm not sure what I'd want to display. My life these days is mostly working at the board game café and figuring out whose couch I'll be crashing on. Now that I don't have to worry about the latter, it's like there's this void to fill. Like if I don't figure out who I am, I'll disappear against a backdrop of eggshell paint.

My gaze snags on some loose papers on the dresser by the window. On top is a brochure for a coding boot camp. Snore. If I wanted to sit behind a desk all day, I'd have actually applied for jobs in the video game industry with that fancy game-design degree of mine. Maybe someday I'll see the appeal, but for now I want to be on my feet in the world, not staring at a screen. Underneath the brochure is a flyer for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival down in Ashland. I know it's famous and a tech job might be fun, but I can't see myself going back to Oregon. Besides, I lost my taste for the bard after doing *The Tempest* back in high school.

Turns out storms really aren't my thing.

My phone buzzes, but it's not Jordie. I have a new email—from Dad. I roll my eyes, but it's not like I have room to judge since I considered doing the same thing just a few minutes ago. We really are hopeless at communication. Maybe we'll get better now that we're cohabitating.

The email is a forwarded job listing for an IT position at his work.

Thought of you, sweetie! Let me know if you apply and I'll put in a good word.

I sigh and type out a quick reply.

Thanks, Dad!

What I don't say is I'd rather eat my own hand than have him get me a job, especially one I don't want. You couldn't pay me to exchange the freedom of my hourly barista job for corporate IT. Not for all the health insurance and 401(k)s in the world. I'd much rather be slinging coffee beans on my feet all day than repeatedly telling people my dad's age to stop using Internet Explorer.

I check the time. Still a few hours before I need to be at my actual job, the one I got all by myself, thank you very much. But one more glance around this room that feels more hotel than home sends me out the door. I can always unpack later.

It takes me thirty minutes of fast walking downhill, across the Ballard Bridge, then through a sketchy parking lot to reach Save Point from my dad's house in Queen Anne. Not a bad commute to the board game café I've worked at for the past six months. I shove open the door with my shoulder and the electronic bell announces my arrival with the victory music from *Final Fantasy*.

Jordie Abdullah's round brown face covered in fresh black stubble pops up over the counter. He's wearing a rumpled button-up with a purple morning glory print under his apron and a pained expression. "Steph! Oh my god, I could *kiss* you!"

"Yeah, but you won't." I amble over and lean my elbows on the laminated menu.

"Ollie didn't show, and Amy couldn't find anyone else to take the shift, so I've been working a double."

"Wow, so we hate Ollie today, yeah?" I slip around the counter and grab an extra apron.

"Nah, he's out sick—time of the month." Jordie sighs and wrinkles his nose. "Can you cover for a sec? It's T-time, plus I have to pee."

"Release the river!" I shout in the deepest Treebeard impression I can manage as Jordie does a little skip over to the bathroom.

It's afternoon, so the shop isn't very crowded. A guy in a flat cap sits by himself, sipping a house coffee—or 'homebrew' as we call it at Save Point—while typing furiously on a laptop with a proudly displayed 'Plant Dad' sticker in the corner, and over by the window, a small group of teenagers are playing *Codenames*.

There will be a rush any minute with school letting out at three, so I set up the grinder and unload the dishwasher while I wait for Jordie. A John Mayer song plays over the speakers and I eye the store's tablet plugged into the wall. I may not be technically scheduled, but if I'm working, at least the music isn't going to suck. I sneak over and swipe to a different playlist.

'Cherry Lips' by Garbage blares from the speakers and I shimmy my shoulders to the beat. The techno intro is punctuated by a single rendition of victory music as the café door swings open and closed, and I turn to greet our new customer.

And there she is. A windblown white girl with long black hair, blunt-cut bangs, and an ear full of gold rings and studs stands opposite me, clutching a stack of loose papers to her chest.

I extract myself from my one-woman dance party and meet her at the counter. "Welcome to Save Point. What can I do ya for?"

The girl's gaze sweeps over and past me, her brown eyes lined with sharp black and purple liner. "Is Jordie in?" she asks.

"He's on break." I jam my thumb behind me toward the back of the store. Jordie hasn't been gone long, but I know it can be a bit of an ordeal to take his testosterone at work and I'm not about to be the asshole who interrupts his legally mandated fifteen minutes. "It'll probably be a bit if you want to wait."

She nods, glancing over at the empty tables, but doesn't move to sit.

"Can I make you something?" I gesture toward the espresso machine.

"Uh…" her eyes find the menu on the counter. "I'll have a cinnamon roll for initiative and… I guess an Eldritch Baja Blast?"

"Long or short rest?" I say, pointing to the ceramic mug and to-go cup on display. At the lost look on her face, I add, "For here or to go?"

"Here."

"On it!" I give her my best smile, and turn to make her drink—a pineapple and mango smoothie topped with blackberry cream. My gaze drifts from the blender full of fruit chunks to follow her movement as she sits on a stool at the bar, carefully guarding her papers like a windstorm might come along and blow them all into the air—which, to be fair, isn't outside the scope of normal for Seattle. "Whatcha got there?" I ask, nudging the papers with my pinky as I slide her cinnamon roll across the counter.

"What? Oh." She looks down at the stack in her arms as though she's only just remembered she's carrying them. "Flyers."

I start up the blender, letting the loud sound fill the space between us. Working here, I see all types of people—shy, loud, weird, rude—but I've never encountered this exact combination of nervous and cool. I can't tell if she's blowing me off because I'm obviously a nerd or if there's something else distracting her. It's strange to see someone so clearly confident in who they are be so uncomfortable in a space as normal as a coffee shop.

"They're for my band," she offers after the blender whirs to a stop and she holds up a flyer for me to see. "We're playing at Bar-None this weekend."

The page is filled with art deco lettering on a black background spelling out the words 'Vinyl Resting Place.' Beneath is a drawing of a drum kit with records instead of cymbals and a dark gold sound wave.

"Jordie said I could stick one of these in the window."

"Definitely!" I rustle in one of the drawers and pull out a roll of tape. "That's rad. I love music!"

"This your playlist?" she asks, pointing to the speakers while I make room by tearing down a poster for a haunted corn maze that definitely isn't still going in April.

"Oh, yeah. Just threw something fun on to liven up the place." I press a line of tape to her flyer and stick it to the window before turning back to find her gaze on me. I catch her eye and hold it for a beat too long. They're bright and brown like a whole planet lives inside her irises. Maybe I won't bother unpacking at Dad's house; I'll just move to whatever solar system she's hiding in there.

At that moment, the song changes and 'Rebel Girl' by Bikini Kill fills the room.

"I like it—old school."

Relief knocks my shoulders down a solid inch. I'm an equal opportunist when it comes to music, so it just as easily could have been Weird Al or the *Wicked* soundtrack. I don't get embarrassed by my taste in music as a rule. I like what I like, and if someone has a problem with it, that says more about them than me, but for some reason I really want this girl to think I have good taste. Whatever *good taste* is, anyway.

"Izzie!" Jordie returns quicker than expected. "You made it! Glad to see you found the place." He gestures to our surroundings with a flourish.

The girl's—Izzie's—demeanor changes immediately. Her shoulders straighten and her eyes brighten. Jordie reaches out to hug her, and for a second I wonder if there's something he forgot to tell me. Like that he's suddenly into girls. I give him a look, but all his focus is on Izzie.

"It's like a two-minute walk from my place. I'd have to be decapitated to get lost," says Izzie, pulling back.

"Could be cool, though, right? You could carry your head around under your arm and freak people out, headless-horseman style." I return to the counter and throw a mint sprig on Izzie's drink before sliding it over to her.

"Izzie, this is Steph. Steph, Izzie—she was the coolest French tutor I ever had."

"Did you have more than one French tutor?" Izzie's voice has lost some of its restraint and her lips upturn in a smile.

"Nope! Doesn't make you less cool!" Jordie tears a piece off Izzie's cinnamon roll, then says through a mouthful of pastry, "You two have that in common."

"He's right," I say, tipping my head just a bit closer to Izzie's and sliding forward on my elbows. "We are exceptionally cool."

Jordie leans in conspiratorially, a twinkle in his warm brown eyes that almost always precedes some mischief. "You're also both lesbians. Discuss!" He hops up and ducks behind the counter to clean the blender, leaving me face-to-face with Izzie.

"I, um…" Izzie glances up at me, expression entirely unreadable.

"Jordie!" I swear he is the worst wingman in the history of wingmen. Honestly, for a fellow queer person, Jordie should know better. Being into girls is the bare minimum requirement for my dating pool, and as much as I'm all about Izzie's vibe, if she's accepting girlfriend applications, it probably won't be from the barista at the game café. I know I should say something else to save Izzie from having to reject me here and now, but before I can think of a joke to cut the tension, she raises one eyebrow, the hint of a smirk on her lips.

"So, what kind of lesbian are you?" she asks.

"The kind that… likes… girls?"

She nods and sips her smoothie. "Same."

"Izzie's the rock-star kind of lesbian!" Jordie supplies helpfully. "Her band rocks—pun not intended."

"Liar!" I say at the exact same time Izzie says, "Yeah, right."

I catch her eye and scrunch my face in a way that is absolutely the least attractive I've ever looked, not counting the year I dressed up as a mayonnaise packet for Halloween.

Jordie just shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a pun gay." He turns

his glittering gaze on me. "And Steph's a gamer gay. A *gay*mer, if you will."

"I absolutely will not," I mutter.

"Oh, come on, you're an amazing GM." Jordie elbows me, mistaking my objection to his pun for self-deprecation. "Really, you should see Steph in action. Last week she had us fighting these giant gargoyles in dense fog with an acid pit on one side of the battlefield and steep cliff on the other."

"Sounds harrowing," Izzie says.

I'm not into judgment from anyone as far as my hobbies go. If people think I'm a nerd because of it, well, they're right. I am a nerd and proud of it. Still, something about Izzie has me checking her expression for signs of disdain. Thankfully, I don't find any.

"Harrowing is right! Steph's got a gift—really makes you feel like you're there." Jordie taps a laminated copy of our events calendar on the bar. "We play every Friday night if you want to check it out."

"Oh, I don't really know how to play."

"Hey, newcomers are always welcome at my table!" I fish for a copy of the calendar behind the counter and pass it over. "Plus it's really not that hard. Rolling dice, a little basic math, a vivid imagination… I bet you'd have fun. Think about it."

"Trade you." Izzie slides one of her own flyers into my hand, smooth as can be. "Gig's on Saturday. Maybe you can add something new to that playlist of yours."

I fold the flyer and tuck it into my pocket, but all through the evening rush it lurks at the back of my mind. I don't forget, even as a classic Seattle spring rain pelts my face on the way home. And when I get there, I don't bother to finish unpacking. The last thing I do before flopping into bed is jam a thumbtack through the top of the flyer and pin it to my wall.

I knew it wouldn't stay empty for long.