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**KARINA HALLE**

# **The Pact**

**A Novel**

by Karina Halle

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*To my husband, Scott, for making my thirties such an adventure –  
onward!*

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## PROLOGUE

“So, do you want to get married?”

I’m so wrapped up in what went wrong with my date tonight that I barely hear what Linden is saying. And that’s saying a lot because he usually has my rapt attention no matter what’s going on. I guess tonight’s dinner with Mr. Assface was just too much for me. I mean, what kind of guy wears an ascot *and* picks his nose in front of you?

“Steph,” he repeats in his light Scottish brogue and I finally tear my eyes off the bubbles in my beer to look at him. Sometimes he makes me wonder why I even bother looking at anyone else, he’s just that fucking handsome.

He’s also my best friend. And I’m pretty sure he just asked me to marry him.

“What?” I ask, trying to make sure I heard him right.

He grins at me. I wish he wouldn’t. Sometimes his smile rips the air from my lungs. It’s not an exaggeration. It’s messy, violent and abrupt and I wish it wouldn’t happen because, fuck it, I like breathing.

“I said, do you want to get married?” he says and I realize that perhaps some extremely important conversation has gone on without me knowing about it. Also, Linden...marriage...these things don’t exactly gel together.

“Uh,” I say, and I wish I didn’t feel the heat creep onto my cheeks. “Get married? To you?”

He shrugs and takes a sip of his beer in his easy-going fashion. The bar is dead quiet at this time of night except the music, Faith No More’s aggressive *King for a Day* that James always puts on when the night is over and he wants people to leave.

James Dupres, the owner of The Burgundy Lion, my ex-boyfriend and Linden’s best friend, is puttering about, cleaning up the tables and shooting passive-aggressive looks at the group of four who is gathered in the corner, the only other people left in the bar at ten minutes to closing.

“Yeah, to me,” Linden eventually says, casually, as if we are deciding which movies to see this weekend. “But I also meant in general.”

I stare at him for a few beats. He looks self-assured as always, rubbing his fingers along the length of his beard as he stares at me right back. Linden and I are close – as close as you can be for a purely platonic man

and woman scenario. But even so, we'd never really discussed topics like this. Our shitty dating lives, yes. But marriage and the future, what we really wanted from life? No.

"Let me get this straight," I say but I can't find the words to continue. I take in a deep breath. "You're asking *me* to marry *you*?"

He sighs and sits back in his chair, one strong forearm hung over the back, his fingers toying with the ends of my newly dyed jet-black hair.

"Baby Blue," he says, his own personal nickname for me stemming from the fact that when we first met, I had blue hair the color of Caribbean waters. "Tell me about your date again."

I give him a look. "I'd rather not, cowboy." My nickname for him since he has the chiseled looks and furrowed brow of a young Clint Eastwood. Also, sometimes he's a bit of a chauvinistic asshole as most stereotypical gunslingers can be.

"Right. And I'd rather not get into why the last five dates of mine ended with me jerking it in the shower."

*Pleeeeeeease don't make me think of you jerking it in the shower, I think, or things are going to get really inappropriate, really fast.* At least in my head. Then again, my head is usually always inappropriate. It's like a Pinterest page of hot, barely dressed men 24/7 up in there.

"And so," he goes on, forcing my attention back to his words and not naughty images, "don't you start wondering if this is going to get any easier? You're beautiful, smart, I'm beautiful, smart..." he pauses and smiles to himself, "obviously. We're turning twenty-five this year...what if we have to keep dealing with this? All this shit, never going anywhere."

I raise a brow, not really sure what to do with this side of him. Is he pulling my leg or being genuine? He always has that dickish smirk no matter what kind of shit he's saying and he's pulled the rug out from under me more than a few times.

"Well, I like to think my life might take more of an optimistic path," I tell him.

He smiles and nods. "And it should. It really should, I mean look at you."

*Look at me?* I think, wondering what exactly he sees.

"But what if the planet is full of fucking morons? Then what..." he trails off and looks around the bar before he leans in and only then do I look



close into his dark blue eyes and see that he's drunk. "We're good for each other. You know this makes perfect sense."

I don't know what I think. "You're drunk, Linden."

"I'm a man with a plan."

"Since when have your life plans ever involved marriage?"

He shrugs and runs a hand through his thick, mahogany hair. "You may be one of my best friends, Baby Blue, but you don't know everything about me."

"Apparently not."

His mouth quirks up into a half-smile. "But when we're married there will be plenty of time for that. Also, sex."

Okay, now I can see this is kind of a joke for him, as most things in life are. "What if I never want to get married?" I point out, putting the image of us having hot, sweaty sex out of my mind. "When have I ever waxed on about marriage or babies?"

"Never," he admits. "But it doesn't mean you don't think about it. Why else would you always be dating?"

"Because I like to get laid."

He laughs. "Another reason why we're a perfect match."

I purse my lips, staring at him. I think I need another drink.

Linden reads my mind. He gets up off the bar stool and walks behind the bar. James isn't paying attention and even if he was, he wouldn't say anything. Linden and I were twenty-one, James twenty-three, when the two of us first started working with James at The Burgundy Lion. Linden and I eventually went on to bigger and hopefully better things, while James ended up buying the place. There's still a bit of an employee mentality for us – I don't think James has ever charged us for a drink.

Linden takes two bottles of Anchor Steam out of the fridge and slides them to me. It's our annual autumn heatwave in San Francisco and Linden has the sleeves of his rumpled grey dress shirt rolled up, showcasing his strong, tanned forearms and the Charles Bukowski quotes he has tattooed on the insides. He's wearing a pair of khaki knee-length shorts that highlight his toned ass. On his feet are his worn black Keds that I think he's had ever since we first met, but it suits him.

If it's wrong to occasionally ogle your best friend, I don't want to be right.

“So what do you say?” he asks as he sits back down beside me. “How about if we don’t find anyone by age, I dunno, thirty, we marry each other?”

“You’re actually serious?”

“Aye.” He nods and nudges the beer towards me. “Drink up and then maybe you’ll say yes. I have to say, you’re bruising my ego a little bit here.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” I tell him and I mean it. Linden McGregor is funny, kind, smart, handsome and ambitious. He’s got a BA in business and is almost done getting his helicopter pilot’s license. He’s one hot package that any girl would be lucky to snatch up.

But he’s also egotistical, cocky, arrogant and a player. It’s hard to get any real emotion out of him other than intensity – he’s got this way of looking at you, at life, like he’s trying to spear you alive. He lives his life on the selfish side, can be passionate about something (or someone) one minute, then indifferent the next. He’s a complicated guy and one that I am honored to call my best friend.

Yet, marriage – hell, a relationship – is a whole new ballgame when it comes to him and not one I’m ready or willing to play. Yes, I think he’s gorgeous, yes the way he looks at me sometimes does foolish things to my stomach, yes I have often thought about sleeping with him.

I mean, more than I should.

But this kind of agreement – marrying him – wouldn’t work.

Luckily, I know Linden is just joking around.

I take a long sip of my beer, making him sweat it out a little bit, push my thumb into that bruise on his ego, before I nod and say, “Fine.”

“Are you serious?”

“I guess so?”

He smiles broadly enough for those secret dimples to pop up. “You’ve made me a very lucky man, Stephanie Robson.”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll see about that. With any luck, we’ll both be in serious relationships by age thirty and I won’t have to entertain the thought of doing your laundry for the rest of my life.”

“Or doing me,” he adds with a wink which only prompts another eye roll from me. “Pinky swear on it. You know I don’t break those.”

And it’s true, he doesn’t. Maybe he’s more serious about this than I thought.

I swallow and hold out my pinky finger. He swiftly wraps his around mine, his skin hot and soft to touch.

“If neither of us are in a serious relationship by the time we are both thirty,” he says, looking me so dead in the eye that I can’t help but hold my breath, “then we agree to marry each other. Agree?”

I find my voice. “Agree.”

He then pulls my hand toward his mouth and kisses the top of it. Even more air is taken from my lungs.

“I think I just made the best back-up plan ever,” he says, his lips moving against my skin before he lets go of my hand and picks up his beer instead, clinking it against mine. “To us.”

I mouth the words but they don’t come out.

“Damn, it took them forever to leave,” James says as he comes over to us. “How many times can I say ‘we’re closing soon’ before they get the hint.”

“Maybe you oughta start pulling a gun out,” Linden says. “Or better yet, start singing.”

“Shut up,” James tells him. “I sing back-up once and I never live it down.” Linden and James used to be in a local band together, with Linden on vocals and lead guitar and James on bass but although they were good, they weren’t really good enough to keep going. San Francisco has a pretty competitive indie scene.

“Oh guess what?” Linden says, his eyes sparkling.

“Do I dare?” James asks with a sigh as he moves behind the bar to start wiping down the counter for the millionth time.

“Steph and I are getting married,” he says brightly.

James pauses and looks up at me to gauge Linden’s validity. “It’s true,” I say, though it doesn’t sound sincere.

“What?” he asks, now looking at the both of us. I want to say there isn’t a hint of hurt threading his brow but I can’t be sure. Sometimes I forget that we used to be lovers, which is kind of ridiculous. It was only a few days after I started working at The Burgundy Lion, when James and I hit it off and ended up dating for a year. Linden was his best friend and that’s how I got to know him.

Obviously the break-up was fairly amicable because James and I are still good friends, but when it came down to it, I broke up with him and

though he acted like it was more or less mutual, I always wondered if I'd hurt him more than I thought.

"You know I like my back-up plans," Linden goes on. "So we made a pact. If neither one of us are in a serious relationship when we hit thirty, we get married."

James blinks at us before tucking a strand of his shaggy black hair behind his ears. "This is the stupidest idea I've ever heard of."

Linden raises his chin. "Aw, don't be jealous, man."

James scoffs. "I'm not jealous. The two of you in a marriage? World's pickiest woman with the world's biggest manwhore? Yeah, have fun with that."

"Hey," I say indignantly. I'm not *that* picky.

But Linden takes no offense. "Oh we will. So why don't you pop open some champagne to celebrate with us?"

James gives him a pointed look. "Are you the one buying?"

He shrugs. "It's our pre-engagement present from you."

James sighs heavily, like he has some weight on his shoulders, but concedes. He always concedes to Linden. "Fine," he says, and brings out a bottle of sparkling wine from the fridge. It pops open with a flourish and he pours it into Mason jar glasses.

We cheers to the pact once again and then lapse into our normal conversation about the latest bands, movies, TV shows, hockey (James and Linden are huge fans of the San Jose Sharks).

I sip my drink and can't help but feel the slightest bit relieved. In five years, all the dating and the strife could be over. In five years, there's the tiniest possibility that I could marry my best friend.

I wonder if five years is long enough to change my mind.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 26

The sun is streaming through my bedroom window, highlighting the dark hair on the arms and legs of the man next to me. I'm all for hair on a man, but he didn't seem like that much of a gorilla in the bar last night. Then again, I was pretty drunk. I think I had been doing the robot until monkey man grabbed me and kissed the dance away.

I groan and roll over away from him. He doesn't move an inch and I'm having a hard time remembering his name. I'm not even sure we had sex, until I spy a discarded condom halfway between the bed and the trashcan. Gross. Responsible, but gross.

It had been my birthday party last night at the Tiki Lounge downtown, which explains not only my one-night stand and raging headache but the flower leis tossed over the edges of the bed. I feel a pang of disappointment – I had wanted to usher in the new age with some new rules (aka, stop drinking so much on the weekends, stop sleeping with random guys) and it seems my first day of twenty-six was a total failure.

I slowly make my way out of the bed and grab a nightshirt from the drawer, throwing it on and then cinching it with a robe. The hairy dude continues to sleep and for a moment I fear that maybe he's actually dead until I see his back rise up and down.

Once in the bathroom I take a good long look at myself in the mirror. I know I probably look the exact same to anyone else, but something in me has changed. My face has a golden glow leftover from summer but it's a bit bloated and puffy, my eyes are blue and round but a bit crinkly at the corners. My hair was cut into a sleek dark red bob the other day, but now looks greasy and limp. Most of all, I just look tired. And not because I had spent most of my night drinking Mai Tais, drunk leaning on my friends and dancing with strange dudes, but because I *am* tired.

I'm so fucking tired of working toward a goal and never really getting there. I thought by twenty-six I'd finally have my shit figured out but it only feels like I'm halfway there.

By twenty-six I had wanted to be living in my own place, but I still share an apartment with my friend Kayla. Let's face it, San Francisco is

obscenely expensive and without the second part of my plan, I can't really afford to live on my own.

The second part of my plan is that I would have quit my job running the All Saints clothing store downtown and finally branched out on my own, opening my own clothing boutique.

That hasn't happened. In fact, my dream has never seemed so out of reach. I'm scared of taking the leap – securing rent, signing a lease, doing all my own buying, my marketing, my promotions, my hiring. Even though having my own store has always been a dream, the thing that I'll do when I'm older, it seems that the older I get, the scarier it is to finally do something about it. Daydreams become dollar signs and a million ways you can fail and still have to pay for it.

I don't want to fail. But I can't keep coasting along in life like this either.

I'm out in the kitchen, brewing a huge pot of coffee even though I know in my hungover state I'll only get through one cup, when my cell rings. I answer it quietly and on first ring, just in case it wakes the slumbering ape.

"Hey old lady," Linden's charming accent comes in over the phone. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Ugh," I say, even though I'm smiling. "I feel like a piece of turd."

"I figured you might," he says. "Speaking of turd, who the hell was that guy you were with last night?"

I sigh and place my forehead in my hand, leaning over the counter. "I wish I knew. He's in my bed at the moment, sleeping like I fucking drugged him."

There's a pause and then Linden says, "What happened to 'no more sleeping around' and 'twenty-six is the whole new me'?"

"Well what did you do last night? If I seem to recall, you had your tongue down some tiny chick's throat half the night."

"Tongue in the throat, cock in the cunt, it's all the same," he says while I make an exaggerated sound of disapproval at his choice of words. Truth is, it always sounds sexy coming from him. Call it Scottish slang or whatever. "Besides, when it was my birthday I never made such foolish claims as you."

That's true but then again, Linden has never needed to change anything about his life. He now has his helicopter pilot license and is working on a contract for a local charter company. His parents are wealthy big-shots and I

know they bought him his apartment on Russian Hill, where he lives alone, and he's never once said that sleeping with chicks is a problem for him. In fact it seems *not* sleeping with chicks seems to be a problem.

"Anyway," he says, "want to get a wee bit of breakfast? Brunch? Lunch?"

"Sure," I say, quickly calculating how fast I can get ready. "I can be ready in a half-hour but I'm not sure how fast I can get rid of the dude."

"Leave that to me," Linden says and then hangs up.

Ah shit. I fear what Linden has planned. He's been diabolical on more than one occasion.

I make my way over to the bedroom and peer inside. The guy is still sleeping and snoring lightly. I grab a pair of black jeans and a long, studded t-shirt and head into the bathroom. When I get out of the shower, I comb my wet hair back into a bun and do a light dusting of makeup on my face. I still feel like crap but at least my cheeks and lips have color.

When I step back out, I'm surprised to see the guy standing in his boxers and looking out the window to the street below. He turns around and smiles at me in surprise. He's cute, I'll give him that, but not cute enough for me to want him to stay.

"Oh, hey," he says. "Great view you have." He gestures to the window.

I frown. My window looks across at a rough-around-the-edges Mexican restaurant and a rusted bicycle that has forever been chained to a utility pole.

"Uh, thanks," I tell him, totally conscious that I don't know his name.

"You were quite something last night," he says with an eager smile and takes a step toward me.

"Like a hot mess?" I supply, taking a step back.

"Like a hot fuck," he corrects.

Charming.

"How about round two?" he asks, reaching out to grab my hand.

Aw, hell no.

"Honey I'm home," I hear Linden's voice break through the moment and I give a small sigh of relief. The guy frowns in confusion just as the door to my bedroom opens and Linden appears.

"Wow, who is this one?" Linden asks, smiling as he looks the guy up and down. His tall build, broad chest and wide shoulders overwhelm the

doorframe as he leans against it, looking casual but completely masculine in his black t-shirt and dark jeans. As usual, the Keds are on his feet.

I look to the guy, waiting for him to fill in his name since I can't.

"I'm Drake," the guy says, glancing between the two of us. He's scared. It doesn't help that Linden is a lot bigger than him.

"Drake," Linden repeats then turns to me. "So, are you done with him? Is it my turn yet?"

"What?" Drake spits out, total fear rippling through him.

"Yeah," Linden says, folding his arms. "See, Steph and I have this thing where we like to share. She has a go and then I have a go. You don't mind, do you?"

The guy turns beet red and stammers, "Uh, uh, I think I should go."

Linden raises his palms. "No, no, stay. We can both have you at the same time if that's easier. As long as you don't mind being on the bottom."

Now Drake is grabbing his jeans and yanking them on. He doesn't even go for his t-shirt, he's panicking that much.

"Linden," I warn and Linden grins, stepping to the side as Drake scurries past him and into the hall. I hear him grab his shoes and the front door shuts behind him.

"Rude," Linden says. "The wanker doesn't even say thank you."

I roll my eyes. "You know, I could have gotten him out of here just fine."

"Aye, but where would be the fun in that?"

The funny thing is, Linden rarely has to do anything to scare away the men in my life other than just show up. A lot of the guys I've dated had big, serious issues with Linden being my friend. They just couldn't comprehend how we could be so close and yet never have anything happen between us.

I can't really explain it either, other than the fact that I went out with James first. Although I worked with Linden, I only really got to know him through James and well, once you know your boyfriend's best friend, they stay in that box. Even now, with the years between me and James's demise, pursuing Linden would be wrong.

And of course, he's my friend and I don't think of him that way. Just the occasional ogle, remember?

"So where to?" I ask him when I've grabbed my purse and chucked Drake's t-shirt in the garbage.

"Did you feel like taking a helicopter ride?"



I cock my head, caught off guard by this idea. “Are we going to call James, because if we don’t, he’s going to be really hurt.” James is always complaining about how Linden hasn’t taken him up in the air yet. He hasn’t taken me either but it doesn’t feel right to do it without James. We’re the three amigos, though lately it feels like it’s been splitting into two.

“He’s working, baby blue,” he says lightly. “You know he always is. It’ll just be you and me.”

I wish I could bury the fluttering in my heart. I clear my throat. “Okay.”

An hour later we’re in Marin County where Linden flies from. Unfortunately, we’re grounded. There are no choppers available at such a last minute notice, so we end up at seaside bar in Sausalito. I admit I’m a little disappointed at not seeing Linden in action first hand, but I’m happy just to nurse a Bloody Mary with great company and a beautiful view.

“You know when we’re married,” Linden says after we’ve sat there for a while, watching the waves lap the shore, the city skyline in the background, “I’ll take you up into the sky anytime you want.”

I can’t help but smile. “Oh, are we still getting married?”

“Thirty is coming up soon.”

I glare at him. “Hey, I just turned twenty-six. Give me a break.”

He shrugs. “Just reminding you. A pact is a pact.”

“Right,” I say, taking a long swig of the Bloody Mary. I wish the rest of my life followed such a pact. I give him a sidelong glance. “You’d take me up anytime I wanted?”

“Of course,” he says. “You’d be my wife. And you’re bound to love a C&C.”

“C&C? Like the sailboat?”

“Chopper and cock,” he says. “Cock in the cockpit. Blow job while flying. Can’t be beat.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve already had this done before,” I tell him and I cringe at the thought of him getting head by some bimbo in the air.

He reaches across the table and pats my hand. “You’ll be the first.”

“You’re so romantic,” I say dryly to which he laughs.

Here goes another year.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 27

I think I'm in love with Owen Geary.

In fact, I *know* I'm in love with Owen Geary. Even the sound of his name does this thing to my blood, boils it up a little, makes my head feel all swimmy.

Twenty-seven is going to be the best year yet.

It's mid-October and San Francisco is going through yet another heatwave. I'm wearing black leather shorts to my job at All Saints, trying to ignore the small traces of cellulite that appear on my upper thigh in the wrong light. I'm still in my twenties, life is still good. I can get past the fact that my own fucking skin is turning on me.

Sometimes I wonder if I need to become a vegetarian, maybe eat more kale and nuts and less cupcakes and fruity cocktails. When I turned twenty-seven yesterday, I made the conscious decision to start using night cream and serums and fancy sunscreens. My father may have darker skin because of his Mediterranean heritage, but I knew I wasn't exempt.

I also decided I needed to start doing yoga and training for marathons. The city's one was a few weeks ago and all the fit, lean ladies were doing their effortless runs through Golden Gate Park or their sprints up the stairs to Twin Peaks. I used to be able to coast through life without lifting a single weight but now my body is starting to add extra fat to my thighs, stomach, and boobs. The boob part I can live with, but I feel like if I don't do something soon, I'm going to be a blob. A blob with big boobs.

Part of me wants to just keep on keeping on, as I always have. But I can't do that. I have goals. Sure, I'm still a manager at All Saints, but I feel like my own store is just within my reach. And my love life is finally where it should be.

Of course there are things about Owen that aren't perfect. He's an accountant at a major firm downtown, so he's extremely successful but he works long hours and he doesn't really have that dreamer's mentality about him. He's handsome in that clean-cut all American boy way, and it's great, though his ears are a little bit big and pointy. And he loves to talk about golf when I'd rather him talk about hockey.

Despite all of that, it's hard to find fault. I mean, other faults. Plus he's good enough in the sack and we have plenty of things to talk about. Most of all, he's dependable and dependable is what I need right now, especially when the rest of my life is kind of hanging in the balance.

My parents are separating and probably getting a divorce, another blow to the past year and a total surprise. I always thought of divorce as something that ripped apart my friends' families in grade school, and that had lasting effects in high school. But I never imagined that it could happen beyond that tumultuous realm of adolescence. Yet suddenly, or at least it seems sudden, my father decided he wanted to be free of my mother. He packed up and moved to Oklahoma.

I still don't know why. My mom doesn't know either, or so she says. I've asked her if dad fell in love with someone else, I've asked my dad if he found someone else but the answer is always the same: change. He needed change.

I just don't see how you can be married to someone for thirty-five years and then suddenly need change. Why at thirty-five? Why not thirty? Twenty? After everything my family had gone through with my brother, Nate, and the years and years of having to cope and move on...why *now*?

So now I spend my weekends with my mother in Petaluma, out of guilt. My father rarely calls or emails. Maybe he feels guilt too. I hate seeing how sad my mom is, how empty the house is, how jaded she's become about life.

Maybe that's why I really hit it off with Owen – to show her that I could have someone and make it work even if she couldn't. The dependable men, those are the ones that stick around, the ones you marry. Not the playboys. Not the dreamers. Not, apparently, someone like my father.

Besides, it doesn't matter what she thinks. I love Owen Geary.

Since I started dating him a few months ago, I've seen James and Linden less and my friend Nicola Price more. I actually went to grade school with Nicola, though we were never friends back then, and reconnected when we both went to the Art Institute for a year, both of us in fashion merchandising. Owen likes Nicola; he doesn't like James or Linden. James, I'm going to assume, because he's my ex-boyfriend, and Linden because he's a guy who's close to me. And he's Linden.

But finally, *finally*, because it was my birthday, I was able to make plans for dinner with them. I get through my shift – only four hours today,

most of it sorting out the clothing on the racks and flipping through paperwork – and then rush right home, glad that I drove instead of taking the bus.

Owen is already at my apartment pouring himself a glass of straight vodka. I'm not sure why he drinks it like that – a glass of straight vodka has to be the shittiest drink ever – but he's thirty-three and I guess you know what you want by that age.

He's wearing a pinstriped shirt, slim-cut pants, and shiny shoes. It's all designer, it all looks good on him. He's on the thin side and seems to be getting leaner as I get fatter, but at the moment we're a nice balance. I've toned down my tendency to dress edgy and I find myself covering up my tattoos on my wrists (my brother's name on one, the word "believe" on the other) more with long sleeves. We look like a good couple, especially now that my hair is dyed a nice auburn brown that nearly matches his.

We are good. We are dependable.

I slip on a silk tank top over my shorts and fix up my face just in time for James and Linden to come to the door. I don't realize how nervous I am until I gasp at their knock. I wish my roommate was coming with us, or was at least home. Kayla has this way of diffusing the tension and I have a feeling things are going to be a bit awkward tonight.

Or a lot awkward.

And it is, at least from James and Owen. James comes in and gives me a curt nod, wishes me a happy birthday and then nods at Owen. His jaw is tense and he's acting a lot like Owen is, full of antagonistic suspicion. They eye each other like two lions over the remains of a meal and I'm kind of surprised to see that coming from James. Usually James is a subdued figure in the background.

Maybe it's because James looks like he has this antagonistic way about him to begin with. He's got shaggy black hair, tattoos, a slim, pale build and a few piercings. He's not as tough or rebellious as he appears to be – in fact, he's a giant softie who cares deeply about what everyone thinks – but you have to get to know him to know that.

I'll admit, that's what attracted me to James in the first place – the person I thought he was. The reality of us didn't work so well together.

Linden, though. He bursts into the room and scoops me up into a giant bear hug, holding me tight. He smells like sage and woody stuff. His arms

feel like hot steel. He feels so unbelievably safe that a part of me suddenly mourns the fact that I haven't seen him for a long time.

"Happy belated, baby blue," he murmurs into my neck and I briefly close my eyes. When we break apart, I'm aware of James and Owen both staring at us. The suspicious looks have only deepened.

"Thanks," I tell him, clearing my throat as if I've briefly come undone while he strides over to Owen with his hand out.

"Nice to see you again, aye," Linden says to him. It takes Owen a moment to react and shake his hand right back, quick, light and impersonal.

"You too," Owen says, then his lips clamp into a hard line.

We go to a speakeasy in Japantown. Linden apparently "knows" the hostess and was able to secure us a reservation when we would normally have to wait for weeks. We find the unmarked door beside a dingy diner full of green lighting and sad faces. There is no secret knock but there is a phone number you're supposed to text.

A few minutes with the four of us standing around outside rather awkwardly while a few homeless men trundle past with their shopping carts full of blankets and beer cans, the door finally opens. There is the hostess in all her tall, leggy glory.

"Hi Linden," she says, batting her heavily made up eyes. The makeup is done tastefully though, so it looks sultry, not slutty, and I don't know why that bothers me more, or why it even bothers me at all.

Linden looks her up and down with that gunslinger squint of his, that half-cocked smile. "Emily," he greets. "How are ya?" I love the way his "R"s roll off his tongue.

She puts a hand on her hip, showcasing the cut of her dress over her slim thighs. No cellulite on her. "I've been just fine. Not waiting for you to call me or anything."

I rub my lips together, suppressing a smile. Who actually says shit like that?

Apparently Emily does. Linden only grins at her. "Well, does this count as me calling on ya?"

Emily narrows her eyes, not impressed. "Come this way."

She leads us down a dark, narrow hallway that goes on for so long that I start to think perhaps this was all a clever ruse on her behalf, a way to attack Linden with her feminine wiles, until we hear muffled chatter and low bass. To the right of us a small rectangle of a room opens up, all gold skulls and

low white velvet benches and young, steampunk-ish bartenders slinging brightly colored drinks.

Not at all like the classic speakeasy I had in mind, but it's still pretty cool.

Emily leads us to a table in the back and Owen and I secure the booth side. You can take me to the shittiest restaurant or bar and I'll seriously be happy if I can sit at a booth. I don't even have to drink. Sitting is one of life's most underrated pleasures. The velvet cushions feel extra padded and I sink right in, laying my head back against the padded back before it disappears into the wall of skulls. I sigh, happily.

"I knew you'd like it," Linden says as he sits down across from me. "I thought these booths just screamed Stephanie."

"The skulls are pretty cool," James comments, looking around him. Actually of all the people here, he's the one who fits in the most, balancing that line between edgy rock and roller and calculated hipster.

Owen doesn't say anything for a moment then nods at the bar. "They have Perkele Vodka," he says, spouting the name of his favorite obscure Finnish brand. That's the most Owen will say about this place. It's definitely not his scene and his subtle glares have now changed from James to Linden.

An hour later, after Linden bought me two birthday (filthy, dirty) martinis, Owen has gone to the bathroom and James has stepped outside for a cigarette. We are alone.

I've missed this.

"I don't think your boyfriend likes me very much," Linden tells me after he has a swig of his beer and rocks the bottle between his large hands.

"Owen?" I ask. It sounds weird to hear him referred to as my boyfriend, especially coming from Linden's lips (which, after two filthy, dirty martinis, look far superior to Owen's).

"Do you have other boyfriends I should know about?" he asks with a raise of his perfectly arched brow.

"No. Anyway, none of the guys I see like you very much."

He smiles. It's a cocky bastard smile. "Is it because they all know we're getting married one day?"

I narrow my eyes as my heart kicks up a notch. "No. And don't mention that to Owen, okay?"

He looks surprised. "Why not? It's true."

I rub my lips together and reach into my clutch for lipstick.

“It’s true, Steph,” Linden repeats. As I swipe the magenta lipstick on, he frowns at me. “Don’t tell me you actually expect to be with this chump in a few years.”

I give him a look. “Look, I know he doesn’t seem like a...well, a *me* kind of guy, but I’m in love with him, so yeah, I do expect to be with him in a few years. Don’t call him a chump.”

He blinks rapidly and the muscle along his chiseled jaw tremors. “You’re in love with him?”

“Don’t act like this is terrible,” I tell him even though the look on his face is making me feel something terrible inside. “It was bound to happen. It’s good. Really, it’s good. I’m happy.”

“Are you?”

I tilt my head as I examine him. Before my eyes the pained look on his crinkled brow disappears, the tick on his jaw stops. He relaxes. He becomes my best friend Linden again. I’m not sure who that other guy was. But I think I wanted him to stay for a moment longer.

“Nevermind,” he says quickly. “You are happy, I can tell. Well, then fuck it, I’m happy for you baby blue, I really am. And he’s a lucky fuck.”

I’m still watching him. “Did you really want to marry me?” I ask. “Or did you just want to get married?”

A trace of a smile forms on his lips. “Now you’ll never know.”

Owen comes back from the bathroom and I sit back in my seat and give him a broad smile. I feel like I’ve been doing something wrong, even though I haven’t.

Linden smacks his palm against the table, excuses himself and gets up. I watch his tall, muscled frame as he leaves the room, presumably going after James. I notice most of the women’s heads turn as they also watch him go.

There is a jellyfish sting in my heart but I swallow it down and look at Owen.

Owen’s a cute guy. He’s dependable. He’s the solid rock in my life. He’s not going anywhere.

I am in love in Owen Geary. Twenty-seven will be the best year yet.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 28

#### LINDEN

“Hey fuck face,” my brother’s voice chirps though the phone.

“Hey fuck face yourself,” I tell him, clearing my throat. I can tell I’m getting sick, my throat feels like it’s been scraped with barbed wire. This is not what I need right now. “What do you want?”

“Well, I thought I’d wish you a happy fucking birthday, you damn git.”

“Right,” I say with a nod he can’t see. I get my keys out of my jeans and open the door to my Jeep. In the background one of the choppers is taking off and I quickly get inside the Jeep so I can hear Bram better.

“Are you at the airport? Don’t tell me you’re working on your birthday.”

“Most people have to work on their birthday,” I point out to him. Of course, Bram doesn’t fucking work at all, he just tools around Manhattan like some over-privileged playboy. Some might say I’m no different, but at least I have a bloody career. Bram has coasted by on my parent’s money and status for his whole life. The funny part is, he’s the older one; he should have set an example for me.

I guess in some ways he did. When I finished high school, I vowed to become the opposite of Bram.

“You should take the day off,” he says. His words are punctuated by a yawn and I can just imagine him with arms stretched over his head. “Have you talked to mum and dad yet?”

I sigh and lean back in the seat. It’s April and it’s cold as hell. Even though I moved to San Fran in my early twenties, I still haven’t adjusted to its bipolar weather. In New York, you got the full four seasons in their proper order. In Aberdeen, Scotland, where I grew up, you got the same on a milder scale. Here, it’s hot in the fall and cold in the summer and foggy most days of the year. I’m tempted to run the Jeep and put the heater on but I can just imagine Stephanie making fun of me for that.

“No, I haven’t talked to them for a few weeks,” I tell him. And by that we both know it means I haven’t talked to my father in a few weeks. My mother never calls and that’s a fucking good thing.



“I hope they don’t forget your birthday,” Bram says in a way that he means he hopes they do. “At least you have a good brother.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah.”

“Listen,” he goes on and from his tone I immediately know that my birthday wasn’t the real reason he called. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

I tug on my ear in surprise. “Do you a favor?”

“Yes, Linden, it’s what brothers do for each other. I’m going to be in San Francisco next weekend and I’ll be bringing my girlfriend. She loves Alcatraz. Do you think you could give us a ride there?”

“Give you a ride there?” I repeat, dumbfounded. What the fuck?

“Yeah,” he says, as if he hasn’t said something completely ridiculous. “You know, on the helicopter.”

I let out a long, exhausted sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to gather my wits. “Bram, look. I work for a charter company. I don’t actually have my own helicopter to fly you all over the place.”

“So we’ll charter one.”

“And you can’t just fly over to Alcatraz. It’s a protected area. You can’t just land there without permission. I’m not even sure if there is a landing pad there.”

“So get permission.”

I sigh again. “Not going to happen. Why are you even coming over here anyway? You never come to the west coast.”

“I’m bored,” he says. “And Azurra has family in the Bay Area.”

“Azurra?”

“My girlfriend.”

“Of course that’s her name.”

“At least I have a girlfriend.”

“Nice, Bram. How old are you again, thirty-two?”

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty-eight, as of today. But that’s not my point.”

“So can you take us or not?”

“Hold on,” I tell him, exasperated, and scroll through my phone to my appointment calendar. I have a flight in the morning but nothing in the afternoon. I tell him I can book it for him and ensure I will be the pilot that day, private flight. But there will be no bloody Alcatraz.

As soon as I’m off the phone, I immediately text Stephanie.

**What are you doing next weekend? Want to go for a ride?**

She knows what that means, she's been up a few times already and absolutely loves it. My other best friend, James, loves it too but I don't get quite the same thrill watching him as I do watching her. Her whole face lights up and she wriggles in her seat like a little kid. Besides, she would make a great buffer between my brother and I and I'm sure she could find something to talk to Azurra about. Steph gets along with everyone – for the most part – whereas James can be an emo little fucker.

It doesn't take her long to answer.

**Sure, is James coming?**

Now I feel a bit guilty that I'm not inviting him. It's a matter of space though.

**No, my brother will be in town with his girlfriend so I thought it would be just the four of us.**

A beat passes before she answers: **Like a double date?**

**I don't know, do you put out?** I text back.

**Shut up, she answers. Fine, that sounds good. Are we still on for the Lion tonight?**

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the seat rest. I can't imagine celebrating anything at the moment. In fact, I just want to go to sleep.

Finally I text back: **I don't think I'm going to go.**

She answers: **But it's your birthday.**

**I'm aware. But I think I'm coming down with something. I'm just going to stay at home, watch a movie and take it easy.**

**You're getting old,** she texts back. She might be right. In the past I would have gone out and pounded back the beers whether I felt sick or not. But now, that sounds a wee bit hellish.

What I would actually like is to invite her over to watch a movie with me.

And normally I would do just that but my invitation has always included James and sometimes her high-maintenance friend Nicola. But I don't want them there, I just want her there.

A few years ago, I made a pact with Steph that we would marry each other if we weren't in serious relationships by the time we were thirty. She doesn't turn twenty-eight until October and we've got a few years on top of that but Steph ended her relationship with her cheating turdsniffer

boyfriend, Owen, a month ago. I haven't been seeing anyone for the last two months.

I want now to be thirty. I want now to finally put something in motion.

The thing is, I know Stephanie thinks the whole pact is a joke, something I made up for fun and would never actually follow through on. And why would she think otherwise? Romance, even sex, has never been a possibility for us. We've been nothing but good friends from the moment we first met.

Actually, that's not true. The moment I first laid my eyes on her as she wore her tight jeans, layered ripped tank tops that showed off just the right amount of flesh, her hair this crazy color of blue, being her friend was the last thing on my mind.

I wanted to fuck her, bad.

But it was James who she went out with and that was the end of that. I became her friend instead.

The desire to fuck her never went away though. But I try my hardest to keep that to myself. Going after your best friend's girl is unspeakable. You just don't do it. Even when their relationship crash lands and you find yourself torn among the wreckage, it's still something you can't even think about.

Especially since we've become such good friends.

Especially since sometimes I think James is still in love with her.

Especially since she thinks I'm the world's biggest player.

She's not wrong. But if I ever made a play for her, she'd no longer think that.

In some ways the pact is stupid – it's just putting something off that I could take care of right now. But I'm afraid to act on it in case James really is still in love with her. I'm afraid that she'd turn me down, tell me she's never thought of me as more than a friend and that she doesn't want to ruin our friendship. I'm afraid I could fuck up two friendships at once.

So the pact goes on the backburner.

Two more years and then I'll face it.

Just two more years until everything changes, for better or for worse.

My throat feels even worse now, scratchy and thick. I drive home to my flat and by the time I get in through the door, I have the chills.

I take a hot shower, trying to get warm, then wrap myself up in a sleeping bag I pull out from the closet. It smells like bug spray and pine

needles and a memory of James and Steph and her roommate Kayla floats into my head.

We were camping up by Muir Woods and Steph and I were collecting kindling for the fire. I was drunk in that way where you can't censor anything you say, where the truth comes rolling out before you can stop it. It's a dangerous drunk and I was so fucking close to coming onto Steph, to telling her how I really felt.

I think she noticed something was happening too because our conversation abruptly went to Kayla.

"You think she's hot, don't you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Of course." Because Kayla is hot. Fit and tiny with creamy Japanese skin and long black hair. She's a nice girl, too, if not a wee feisty. But she wasn't Stephanie.

"I think she likes you," Steph had said.

"What are we, in grade school? Did she tell you this at recess?"

Steph watched me for a moment before she rubbed her lips together and said, "Fine, I think she wants to fuck you. Does that help?"

I couldn't understand what she was doing. Was she baiting me, wanting me to say I wasn't interested? Or was she actually trying to get me and Kayla to hook up? Did that not bother her at all?

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I told her, because it was true.

I took a step closer to Stephanie. She has these big blue eyes that go as wide as the moon. They went wider than that.

"I think you'd make a cute couple," she said quickly and then turned on her heel and went back to the fire.

Later that night I fucked Kayla up against a tree, then fucked her in my tent the next morning, after James had vacated to make breakfast.

We hadn't made a cute couple. Kayla and I only fooled around for a few more weeks until I broke it off and then had to avoid Steph's flat for a while.

Aside from fucking Kayla, I felt like I fucked something else up. It was that moment where I think any possibility of something between us finally vanished. After Kayla, I made a conscious decision to get Steph out of my head. I fucked more girls, became the player she always thought I was. I did what I could to just focus on her as a friend.

And it worked. But then life got in the way. At twenty-five, I was already sick and tired of just a string of girls who meant nothing to me. I

didn't want that in my life. I had grown up with that, with a vacant, pill-addicted mother and a cold father who never showed any love to each other, let alone to their two sons. I grew up with high society and dead hearts, lazy morals and cruel ambition.

I didn't want to become like them. I wanted something real and pure and true and fuck it if it sounds like pussy-whipped bullshit because I needed something in my life that made my life worth sharing.

I wanted Steph. My best friend. She was my baby blue and I was her cowboy.

So a pact, a foolish, naïve pact, was born.

I take the sleeping bag over to the couch and curl up on it. I'm about to switch on the TV but the sickness pulls me under.

When I wake up later, it's because my cell phone is ringing. There is drool everywhere.

I quickly wipe my mouth and answer it. It's Steph.

"Hey Steph," I say but it comes out in a muffled slur.

"Linden? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry," I say, coughing lightly. "Just fell asleep for a bit."

"How are you feeling?"

"Sick as fuck."

"Need me to come over?"

*Yes, I fucking need you to come over.* I find myself sitting up a little straighter. "Are you going to wear a slutty nurse's uniform?"

Pause. "You're a pig."

"Oink. But seriously. Nurse's uniform?"

"Do you want me to come over or not?"

I grin. "Yes, yes. I'll be on the couch."

"Please be wearing clothes."

"No promises."

Forty-five minutes later, I hear Steph's spare key in the door and she appears holding two bags of groceries. She looks flustered, her face a bit red, her long dark blonde hair a mess. She looks like she just had sex and I have an image of her dropping the bags and coming over to the couch, flipping up her fringe skirt to straddle me.

I try to adjust my pants under the sleeping bag without being too obvious about it.

“You look like shit,” she says before she takes the bags over to the kitchen. I can hear her rummaging around in there like it’s hers, things going in cupboards, the kettle being switched on.

When she comes back out, she has a small plastic cup filled with blue liquid.

“Are you drugging me?” I ask her.

“Yes, Nyquil,” she says. She shoves it in front of my face. “Drink it or die.”

I warily take the cup from her. “If I recall correctly, the last time I took Nyquil I pretty much died.”

“That’s because you chased a six-pack with it. Now drink it.”

I knock back the obnoxious blue syrup and relax back into the couch. I have to say, it’s kind of nice to have someone take care of you, especially someone with an ass as nice as hers. It seems to get better every day.

She disappears back into the kitchen and then comes out with mug full of steaming hot tea. “It’s got lemon and honey in it,” she says. She’s about to turn around again and head back to the kitchen but I reach out and grab her hand.

The movement shocks her still and she stares down at my grip around her wrist.

“Just relax, baby blue,” I tell her and tug her toward me. “Stop fussing over me.”

She smiles and her cheeks go a bit pink. “Sorry. Old habits.”

I give her a sympathetic nod. Poor Steph. When she was young she had a younger brother with some autoimmune disease. She rarely talks about it, in fact it kind of surprises me that she hinted at it right now, but what I know is that he was the shining star of her family, a boy genius, but only got sicker over the years. He died from pneumonia when she was eighteen and he was fourteen. I guess she’d spent a lot of time taking care of him.

I let go of her hand, aware that I have been holding it longer than I should. “Sit down, that’s an order.”

“You know, maybe your mail order nurse is my birthday present to you.”

I cock a brow. “Then where’s the uniform?”

She sighs but relents, sitting down at the end of the couch by my feet. A strand of bronze hair falls across her cheekbone and I watch it for a few moments, wondering if she’ll brush it away. I don’t like how it obscures her

face but she does that a lot, hiding behind her hair sometimes. Her face is so expressive, it makes her easy to read.

“What do you want to do?” I ask her, placing my calves and feet across her lap.

She stares down at them in mock disdain. “I’m not rubbing your feet if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not thinking anything. What do you want to watch? TV? I’ve got *Simpsons* on DVD, all seasons, *American Horror Story*, some weird shit starring Clive Owen.”

Steph turns her head to look at me and gives me a curious glance. It’s only then that I realize that she knows exactly what I have – she’s been to my flat a million times before and we’ve had many DVD marathon sessions. It’s just James isn’t here now and I guess I’m babbling on like a fool.

I immediately reach for the tea in an attempt to busy myself. If the bottle of Nyquil was out here, I’d probably do another shot.

“Let’s see what’s on TV,” she says, picking up the remote and going through the channels. I stare at her hands, small and soft, her dark green iridescent nail polish applied with such precision. She’s such a chameleon with her hair, I wonder if she’s ever had it that color. Who knows what colors it was before I met her. Even though I’ve known her for years, there so much I don’t know yet about her and so much that I want to discover.

After a few moments I ask, “So have you found a building yet?”

She tears her eyes off a flashy infomercial. “Building?”

“For your store.”

She blinks a few times. “Oh. No.”

“Steph...” I begin.

“What?”

“Let me help you.”

Her brow furrows delicately. “Help me?”

I sigh and sit up. “Yes, help you. What’s holding you back from this? Time, money? I can help you with both of those.”

She lets out a small, acidic laugh. “No, you can’t. And even if you could, it’s not the problem.”

“Then what is the problem?”

She looks back at the TV, turning the remote over and over in her hands. “I don’t know. But I know I’m supposed to figure it out on my own.” She

rubs her lips together and finally pushes that strand of hair behind her ears. “Why is it out of everyone I know, you’re the only one who asks me about this?”

I cock my head. “Am I?”

She nods. “Yeah. My parents still think it’s some wild dream, everyone else just nods politely when I tell them I want to open my own business. But you’re the only who keeps asking about it, keeps pushing me to do it.”

“Well I guess we all need that person in our life, to remind us what we can do,” I tell her honestly. “I think you’re better than managing some clothing store that sells outfits that only some androgynous character on SNL would wear. You should have your own store. You care about clothes, you’re great with people, even with the ones you hate. You have great style, taste...” I pause. “I think it would make you happy. You deserve to be happy.”

She swallows and stares at me for a long beat. I hope my eyes are conveying everything that I just said, because I believe it. Stephanie is ambitious, strong and smart – she can go far. She just needs the right push and for someone to push her.

I want to be that someone.

It’s kind of amazing though that I’m the only one she has for that. It’s part flattering, part aggravating. What about James? When they were together, didn’t he encourage her to go for her dreams? After all, he ended up a small business owner himself. What about her other boyfriends, or friends? Didn’t they care, didn’t they see her potential?

She turns her attention back to the television without saying anything else. After a few minutes she settles on the Disney movie *Up*. It’s clear that she hasn’t seen it before, so I don’t tell her that I have and that it’s not exactly light-hearted fun.

It’s not long before the terribly tragic montage scene at the start of film is pulling at my heart strings and making me ache for the characters. Look, I can be a macho man and all, but that poor, old cartoon man always does a number on me. I’m surprised though to hear a sniff and look over at Steph to see tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh my god, you’re crying,” I point out. I know it’s kind of an obnoxious thing to say, but I’ve only seen her cry once and that was right after she and James broke up and she was drowning in guilt.



She turns her face away from me and frantically starts wiping away the tears with the heel of her palm. "I'm not."

"You so are." I can't help but grin. "You are so fucking cute," I exclaim and reach over, grabbing her by the arms and pulling her down on top of me.

"Stop it," she says, half laughing, half crying as she props herself up on my chest. I find myself wiping away the remaining tears, both my thumbs gliding softly across her cheeks. "That was sad," she mumbles, afraid to meet my eyes. She's both embarrassed and shy, around me of all people.

I don't say anything to that. I only stare at her. She looks so damn vulnerable, it's doing something to my chest now, not just my dick.

"Well it was," she goes on, frowning slightly as if she's not quite sure why I'm still staring at her. "The little old man lost his wife and now he has nothing."

"Aye," I say but it barely comes out more than a whisper. I'm not thinking about the movie at all.

Her eyes are so blue and wide, like the morning sky, her mouth so perfectly full. I contemplate running my thumb over her lips before I kiss the salt off of them.

I should just do it. I should just fucking do it.

I swallow hard, my throat feeling closed up but I know it's not from my cold. It's from want and it's from fear.

"What are you staring at?" she asks me and her voice warbles slightly.

*Just fucking kiss her.*

"I'm seeing double," I whisper. It destroys the spell.

She almost looks relieved. "Oh," she says. "You're high as a kite."

I give her a disappointed smile. "Nyquil."

She straightens up and gets off of me, settling back on the end of the couch. "Well, if you pass out, I'll leave you be."

*I'd rather you didn't*, but I don't voice that to her. I lean back into the pillows as the movie plays on at a happier note. Soon she's giggling and it's doing more things to my heart. I wish I had more drugs to bury these feelings but it's not long before I find myself dozing off anyway.

Two more years.

But a lot can change in two years.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 29

#### *STEPHANIE*

I did it. I finally did it.

Fog & Cloth is *finally* alive.

It's literally taken me a week to come to terms with the fact that the doors have been opened, people have come in, and they have bought stuff, fucking *bought* stuff. From me!

I actually fucking did it. I own and operate my own god damn clothing store.

And it was done just in time.

At least, that's what it felt like. I somehow timed the opening to coincide with my twenty-ninth birthday, albeit a week before it. For the last year it's like I had a fire up under my ass and I was finally putting things in motion. If it hadn't been for Linden's badgering, I don't know if it would have happened or not.

I think part of the push was the fact that he kept offering money to help me out with the business. Money wasn't the entire problem. I had saved a lot over the years and my father had given me a large chunk when I finished high school, thinking I would go onto an expensive college degree. Instead I went to art school for only a year and put the rest away.

But Linden's offers were extremely sincere and heartfelt. At times it was like he was the only one who reminded me to chase my dreams, I guess because he chased his dreams so hard. It was nice to have someone you wanted to make proud. My family had different dreams for me, the ones that they had wanted for my brother. They seem to forget sometimes that those were his dreams and his dreams alone, and they died with him.

A clothing store was never part of that agenda. But it's what I wanted, even if they didn't. And ever since Linden started harping on me about it, I decided to go at it full-on, tits out, and all that jazz. I wanted to show him that I could do it, without his money but with his support.

I wanted to show my parents that I was still alive, still here, and doing something worthwhile.

And I did. It was hard. I worked full-time at All Saints as I usually did and my evenings were filled with research and planning and saving. I rarely went out. I became an anti-social hermit most nights and when I wasn't, I was schmoozing with people in the industry – buyers, designers, merchandisers, fabricators, models. I was filling every spare minute of my life with things and people that could be of service in the end.

Somehow though, the days of hard work turned into weeks of hard work turned into months of hard work.

And then it was here.

I had never been so afraid as I was on opening day. Afraid that no one would show up, that no one would care. That the clothes on the racks wouldn't move, that my cash register would stay closed, that the finger foods and champagne I had put out wouldn't even attract random people walking past.

I felt like all that work, all those dreams, were resting on that single day. Of course, it's more than that. The day went fine – people showed up, they drank my cups of champagne and cheap appetizers. Clothes were bought. My window displays were admired. I was congratulated. It wasn't the opening day of my dreams but it was the opening day of the start of my dreams.

That was something.

Linden and James had come of course. Linden brought his girlfriend.

Yeah. Girlfriend.

Nadine Collingwood.

I still don't really believe it, despite meeting her already. She's lovely, which surprised me, and seemingly normal. The line-up of ladies Linden has had over the years all seemed to be the same – tall, achingly thin with long, lean limbs, shampoo-commercial worthy blonde hair, fake smiles full of veneers. The opposite of me, really.

And Nadine is nothing like that either. She's average height and while she's thin, she's also athletic, with straight red hair and a smattering of freckles on her milk-colored skin. She dresses in jeans and flannel shirts, nothing very fun but it suits her tomboy style.

She looks Scottish when you think about it. Maybe Linden misses his home country. He'd only moved over to the states in high school when his father got a job at the United Nations in New York.

He seems happy though. I'm happy for him. Really, I swear I am. And she's nice too, which means she's going to treat him well. I guess now that we're getting older he's starting to see the appeal of settling down, you know, with someone who isn't me.

Maybe that pact of ours won't be needed after all. Maybe it'll just be me, single at the finish line while Linden and Nadine go on to have an extravagant wedding and mini Gerard Butlers.

A knock at the store window brings me out of the disgustingly sweet wedding taking place in my head. I look over and see James waving at me from the other side. He holds up a large tote bag full of stuff and smiles sheepishly.

I walk over to the door, curious. I was supposed to go home an hour ago and get ready for the night – James supposedly had something planned at The Burgundy Lion – but time had slipped through my fingers. It was doing that a lot lately. Sometimes I never even left the store until ten o'clock at night.

I unlock the door and am met with a cool breeze off of Sutter. The fog is starting to roll in and the tops of the buildings across the street are disappearing in its wash.

James smiles brightly as he peers down at me. "I thought you'd still be here."

I'm a bit surprised still to see him but I open the door wider and gesture him to come inside. "I know, I'm sorry. One day I'll get the hang of closing. Or I'll just get successful enough to hire employees to do it for me."

He comes inside. He smells like rain and his shoulder-length black hair is wet, sticking to his neck and the collar of his denim jacket.

"Raining up top?" I ask. He lives in the Haight, near Golden Gate Park, where the weather is always a bit different than down below.

He nods and strides across the room with his long legs before he sets the bag down on the counter, right on top of all my paperwork.

"So what's all of this?" I ask him, folding my arms.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a bottle of red wine, the expensive French kind with all the fake dust on it, a plaid blanket and a few small plastic take-out boxes. "This is your birthday."

I frown. "I don't understand."

"Linden is with Nadine. They aren't coming," he says and then eyes me carefully.

“What?” I say, feeling a stab of hurt in my gut.

He raises his brow at my reaction. “She might have appendicitis. They’re at an urgent care clinic getting it checked out.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling the hurt turn to guilt. “God, that sucks. Is she okay?”

He shrugs. “Probably not but I’m sure if it’s a problem, they’ll just take it out. So it’s just you and me. I thought this might be a lot more fun than being at the Lion.”

I eye what seems to be the workings of a romantic picnic. Never in our dating had James ever done something as nice as this for me. I have to wonder what’s going on now to change all of this.

Also I’m not really sure if being alone with him *is* more fun than being at the Lion.

“Don’t look so suspicious,” he admonishes and looks away, troubled. “It’s your birthday, isn’t it? I can do something nice for you.”

Ah, yes. Now this seems more like the James I know. Moody and easily bruised.

“Of course you can,” I tell him. “I’m just surprised, that’s all. I don’t remember the last time the two of us did something, just you and me.”

“I know. That’s why I thought it would be cool.” He takes the blanket out and lays it on the floor beneath the counter, right between a display rack of jewelry I had spent months foraging for and a tray of impulse buy items, like Band-Aids with mustaches on them and leopard print hair scrunchies that are somehow having a moment again.

He sets out the wine and brings out two glasses and opens the lids to the boxes. He points at the blanket. “You can sit, you know.”

I do so and eye the spread. One box has chocolate-covered strawberries, the other has a bunch of cheese and compote. Bacon-wrapped scallops are in another. All my favorites.

“Wow,” I say. “I’m impressed.”

“It’s the last year of your twenties. You should go out with a bang.”

I give him a quick smile, not used to him being so thoughtful. Obviously James and I have had a very different relationship since we broke up. “Well, thanks.”

“No problem. That’s what friends are for right? Here, let me,” he says and pours me a glass of wine, then places a small fork in my hand and nudges the box of scallops toward me.

“Did you make this?” I ask, staring down at the elegant arrangement.

He shakes his head, looking sheepish instead. “No, I picked it up from Whole Foods.”

I have to say I’m kind of relieved. I’m sure James is a good cook and all, but the idea of him cooking something specifically for me, even as just a friend, doesn’t really seem right in the little mould we’re in.

I have one of the scallops and delight in the balsamic glaze. “It’s tasty.”

He beams. “Good.”

I sip the wine and tell him it’s good too. Is it just me or is it getting a little awkward in here? No matter. There’s nothing wrong with two friends just celebrating a birthday together. That’s all this is, even if it is a bit weird.

And soon it gets easier. Maybe it’s the glasses of wine or just talking to James about business qualms, but it starts to feel like old times. After we finish the scallops and move onto the cheese, the subject switches from music to something a little more personal.

“You weren’t really serious about that pact you’d made with Linden, were you?” he asks in an off-hand way. But when I look at him, his jaw is set in a determined line.

“Serious? No. Not really.” Not more than I would admit to him, anyway.

“Good.”

“Why?”

“Oh, you know. I just didn’t want to see you get hurt, you know, in case you actually put some stock into it.”

“Why would I get hurt?”

He shrugs. “Linden is a player, you know that. He likes you Steph, but as a friend. I wouldn’t want you to start, I don’t know, thinking of him in some other way and ruin what you guys have, just because he likes to flirt and pretend all the time. He was never serious about that pact, you know that. Nadine, though, he’s serious about her. I wouldn’t be surprised if they are married even before thirty hits.”

I feel like all the air has been pulled out of me. I rub my lips together and catch my breath, shocked at how this all makes me *feel*. “That would be moving pretty fast for Linden. They’ve only been together about a month.”

“Yeah but they were sleeping together for a few months before that.”

My eyes bug out. This is news to me. “They were?”

He nods and eyes me like I’m too stupid to live. “She works reception at the charter company. Of course they’ve been boning. From day one.”

“I had no idea,” I say quietly. My heart is doing slow, sick thumps in my chest.

“Well, maybe you two aren’t as close as you think,” he says and it’s another spear into my heart. He quickly pours me another glass of wine. “Here, drink up. You should be smiling, not giving a shit about Linden.”

“He’s my friend.”

“He’s as much of a friend as I am. Who he dates isn’t really any of your concern, so as long as she’s not a total psycho hose beast. So far, she seems to be fine. I approve.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t you?”

“Of course,” I say but the words come out on auto pilot. I know James didn’t mean any harm because, honestly, what he said shouldn’t have hurt me at all. It’s true. Linden is a friend, that’s all he has been and all he will be. Who he dates shouldn’t be my concern, not in that way.

But I guess I’ve been lying to myself for too long because I’m kind of bleeding inside, right in front of James’s face, and trying hard not to show the blood.

He’s watching me, closely, as if he’s suspected something all along. Then he leans back, apparently satisfied and says, “Now I suppose the real mystery is why you’re still single.”

I laugh, nearly spilling my wine. “It’s not a mystery, James. You of all people should know this.”

Something flickers in his eyes. “I liked being with you.”

“That’s not what I meant, not exactly,” I correct him. “I just mean with the both of us being small business owners now. I remember how hard you worked to own the Lion. You didn’t really have a lot of time for Linden or I or anyone else. It’s kind of the same with me. I just don’t have the time.”

“True. But before that, you still didn’t seem to...be with anyone. Not in a serious way. Other than that Owen douche.”

I don’t bother correcting him on that one. Owen had turned out to be a giant douche – and a cheater – and not at all the dependable rock I wished he was. “And you,” I point out.

He smiles and for a moment I’m transported back to when we had first met. James was cleaning pint glasses and I swear there was a spotlight from the small stage inside the Lion that was shining right on him. He was everything I had always wanted post-high school but couldn’t really find, or didn’t have the guts to approach: Tall, slim build with tight muscles, long black hair with a slight wave to it. To top it off, he had gauges in his ears, a

septum ring and black, drastic tattoos. He screamed bad boy and a bad boy was a dream come true for this quiet Petaluma girl.

James, being a couple of years older than me, was the acting manager of the bar at the time. I handed in my resume to him and stood there awkwardly while he looked it over. I remembered Linden coming by to get someone a drink and I almost did a double take at his muscles, the intense look on his brow, his ultra-masculine swagger and dead sexy Scottish accent. I couldn't believe my luck that two hot guys were working there.

I was sure by that fact alone, I wouldn't be getting the job. No girl is that lucky.

But James just looked up at me and smiled and I was a goner. His smile is almost too wide for his face and it does something to his brown eyes, makes them almost sparkle. I would later find out that it hides the indignity he has deep inside.

He said, "Looks good. When can you start?"

And that was that. My first shift was the next night and a week later, James and I were dating.

He really was everything I was looking for in a boyfriend at the time. Aside from his edgy looks, which I showed off like a badge of honor, he was a musician and the band he was in with Linden was pretty good, even if they mainly played at the Lion and did covers.

He was smart and funny in this quiet way. He was also very good at keeping me on my toes. He was temperamental and would fly off the rail easily and usually over nothing. Some days if a guy just looked at me wrong, he would accuse me of liking him. Later those accusations would become more grandiose and it seemed like, to him, I was having an affair with half the city.

In the end, James was just too needy and too possessive. I mean, I like a guy who gets jealous, don't get me wrong. But he was that way with my girlfriends too. The only person I was really allowed to be friends with was Linden, but that's because Linden was always around the two of us and under James's watchful eye.

So I broke it off with James. He had some issues with his childhood he needed to take care of – he had a drunk and abusive dad who abandoned him – and I couldn't be the girl on the leash. I wanted my own life and to be myself without stepping on eggshells all the time. Being with James had



tired me. And yes, the sex was good – he has a cock piercing that seemed to hit the right spot every time – but sex wasn't enough to save us.

He was hurt. I know he was. And because of that, I was so certain I was going to be fired. I thought I wouldn't even fight it because I felt so terrible over it all. But to James's credit, he didn't fire me. He acted like the break-up had been mutual. Maybe in some ways, it had been – we had been struggling, fighting, for some time.

I kept my job. It was an awkward couple of months but during that time Linden really stepped up as a buffer between us. I finally got to know him a bit better, though we didn't start hanging out together until James seemed to be over us. Until then it was a lot of texts and funny Facebook messages.

Time heals all wounds, or at least it causes them to scab. James was able to move on and, slowly but surely, the three of us were back to being the three musketeers. There were some growing pains, of course. I made a conscious effort not to talk about other guys and James seemed to do the same with regards to whatever women he dated (and there weren't many). But in time, everything found its groove.

It has been nearly seven years since James and I stopped being a couple and became friends. It's taken seven years for us to hang out alone again.

James clears his throat and pours himself a glass of wine. "You say there is no mystery to you, but I don't believe it."

"Okay," I say, sitting up and folding my legs under me. "Why have *you* been single for so long? There was only...what was her name, Laura?...that I can remember."

He tucks his hair behind his ear and shrugs. "I dunno. I'm busy."

"So am I. And maybe you're a bit picky."

He shoots me a sharp look. "So are you."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"No," he says, looking down at the blanket. "Not if it doesn't prevent you from moving forward."

My forehead scrunches. "I'm moving forward, James. Finally, actually. This," I gesture to the store, "is everything I've always wanted."

"And love?"

I roll my eyes. "Love can show its face whenever it wants. Until then, I'm happy with the way things are."

"What about sex?"

I give him a look. “What about sex? That’s totally different. I’m not a prude James, you know this yourself.”

“No, you’re not,” he says, smiling to himself. Then he glances at me and his eyes seem to have grown darker. “You can have sex and not love.”

Before I have a chance to say anything to that, he abruptly leans forward, knocking over the glass of wine, and kisses me.

I’m too shocked to do anything but I still let him. His lips and tongue are both familiar and jarring, his hands on my face bring me back in time. I have to admit, even though I’d not thought about James that way for years, it’s not terrible.

It’s actually kind of nice.

But I still want to know what’s going on.

I pull back, mindful now of the wine seeping into the knee of my jeans.

“Whoa,” I manage to say, catching my breath. I quickly busy myself by pressing napkins into the spreading red stain on the blanket.

“We’ll deal with it later,” James says hurriedly and his lips are on mine again. His kiss is desperate and probing, fueled by something I don’t understand.

Or maybe I do.

Loneliness.

“James.” His lips move quickly along my jawbone and down my neck. “I’m not sure if this is a good idea.”

“Sure it is,” he mumbles against me, his hand on my breast and squeezing, my flimsy lace bra providing no barrier. “I want you, you want me.”

That wasn’t exactly true. I place my hand on his chest and look at him. His eyes are glazed over with lust and can barely focus on mine.

“James,” I say again, my tone harder.

“What?” He anxiously brings his hair off his face. “Steph, look...it’s just sex. Nothing more than that.”

I frown at him.

“I’m serious,” he says, running his fingers through my hair and tugging me closer. “Just sex. We had a good thing at one time. Why not have it one time more?”

“Because it could change our friendship,” I point out. I mean, it’s kind of the obvious. I don’t care how common it is for people to sleep with their

exes, it makes things messy, *especially* when you're still hanging out with your ex on a weekly basis.

"One night won't change anything for me," he says. "Will it change anything for you?"

I'm not sure. I know how I feel about James. I also know that sleeping with him might be as comfortable as a warm, old sweater.

And I like cozy sweaters on cold days.

"No," I tell him, feeling myself relent. "It won't change anything for me."

He smiles at me, that wide grin that lights up his dark eyes like firecrackers. "For old time's sake, then."

Then he gets up and turns off the lights to the store before coming back to me on the blanket. We fall back into the food and wine. I don't care what the movies tell you, it's not as much fun as it sounds. While he's ripping my shirt over my head, I'm praying he doesn't throw it on the wine, when he's sucking my nipples into his mouth, I'm worried about the brie and blue cheese becoming stuck to my backside. I fear my skin and clothes are being stained with a Frenchman's dream.

It isn't until I'm stark naked and flipped over onto my hands and knees, that I'm able to relax. It probably helps that his dick slides into me like second skin and that fucking amazing piercing of his hits all the right spots. No other guy has been able to activate the G-spot like he has, and even though the piercing is probably a form of cheating, I don't really care at this point.

I come wild and hard and in my most freeing moments my mind is not thinking of James at all...

...but Linden.

It takes everything I have not to call out his name, even though it's his face that I see clearly, his rough but slender, oh so manly hands on my waist, his muscled thighs and wiry hair pressing up against mine.

But it's thin, quick, heavily tatted James in my fucked up reality. Someone who any woman would give their left boob to be with, but he's not that for me.

Only one man is.

And I wish he wasn't.

After we're done, I take my clothes into the small washroom at the back of the store and wash the crap off my skin. I'd bought a new sage and

lavender hand soap from a pricey line just for this little room and I find myself giggling at how I'm using it.

I just christened my store.

I pat myself dry with a fluffy hand towel and then put my clothes back on. My shirt has a bit of a wine stain that I'll have to attack with enzymes tomorrow. For now though, I'm kind of drunk on Syrah and orgasms. And the reality is starting to seep back in like mold in a dark place.

I just slept with my ex-boyfriend *and* my current-friend, James. He may have said it was just for one night but the scallops and cheese and wine and the strawberries (OMG, we still have chocolate-covered strawberries!) say something else. Maybe I'm reading too much into the whole night, but I'm really hoping that everything can immediately go back to normal.

I need normal. I don't need another dose of myself at age twenty-one. I turn thirty next year and I'm not going to slide backward, especially not onto James's dick, no matter how expertly pierced it is.

When I come out of the bathroom, I feel a bit like a skittish colt, unsure how to act around him now. I want to just move on like nothing happened but James can be so volatile that I can't bet on anything.

He's standing over the blanket, shirt off but jeans on, and staring down at the mess.

He gives me a quizzical look. "I guess I didn't really think this through."

"I'm sure the cheese and wine will come off in the wash," I tell him and show him my bare arm as I run my other hand along it. "It came off me just fine."

Now he's looking proud. "I guess the moment overtook us."

Yeah. *Moment*. Or a lot of planning and wine. Either or.

I shrug. "That's what those moments are for." Then I clear my throat and stride over to the blanket, crouching down and gathering up the boxes. The strawberries, unfortunately, are crushed.

I toss everything in the trash and give James an expectant look as he rolls up the blanket. "Well, thanks for coming by. That was fun." Perhaps it was a bit abrupt, but the sooner the expectations are halted, the better.

He pauses mid-roll and gives me a searching look, like he's not sure if I'm lying or not. And I'm not. It *was* fun. It's just the type of fun I'd rather not experience with him again.

I really hope I don't have to tell him that.

Shit. He's still staring at me. I knew this was a mistake.

Stupid loneliness and old, cozy sweaters.

"Yeah, it was fun," he says slowly. "Do you need a ride home?"

"Don't tell me you drove here," I warn him.

He shakes his head. "I cabbled it. Come on, it will be cheaper this way if we split it."

I pretend I have to think about it for a moment, then say, "I still have some work to finish up here. I'll probably take the last bus."

"I can wait."

No, you can't.

I give him a placating smile. "I'll be awhile. It's paperwork, you know how it is. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

It's like a rain cloud has settled over the store. His eyes stop shining and his lips twist insincerely. "Okay. Talk to you later." His words are hard and clipped.

And just like that, James and his tote bag and his blanket and his dick piercing and his shady motivations leave the Fog & Cloth.

The door shuts behind him.

I breathe out a giant sigh of relief.

It's followed by nothing but regret.

## CHAPTER FIVE

For my first week of age twenty-nine and second week of being a small business owner, I wonder if I've ruined one of the best friendships I've ever had.

No, not me and James, even though he would be the cause.

I'm talking about me and Linden. I sent him a text message about Nadine right after James and I slept together but I hadn't heard back from him. Then Monday rolled around and I tried again. No response. Facebook – good old Facebook – told me that he was online commenting on posts and Nadine's page said her surgery had gone fine ("nasty fucking appendix is out" – said her status) but I wasn't getting anything in response.

So I started worrying. I started to think that maybe James had told Linden what had happened, perhaps twisting the story around to make it seem like I had seduced him and ruined our friendship, that now Linden was no longer allowed to talk to me out of solidarity, that everything had gone to shit.

But on Tuesday, Linden called me out of the blue asking if I wanted to see a movie with him and James and get a bite to eat beforehand. He apologized about the texts when I brought them up, but he said his phone had died and he'd literally been with Nadine for the last few days. Also, she's an Android user.

He has an iPhone.

So do I.

They can't use each other's chargers. But we could. Not that that means anything.

I'm super on edge as Linden pulls the Jeep up to the curb. As I make my way down my steep driveway, the autumn heatwave coming back in and making me sweat in my olive leather buckle-boots (new to the store), jeans and dolman-sleeve top, I spy James riding shotgun.

This is going to be awkward.

To my surprise though, he gets out and flips back the passenger seat and climbs into the back, just as I get to the door.

"Thank you," I tell him, trying not to study his face to see how he's feeling and what, if anything, has changed between us.

“It’s cool,” is James’s response and it’s the same kind of response he would have given me last week, you know, before the sex.

Did that mean it *is* cool? Like, everything?

I get in and buckle up and look over at Linden.

He’s grinning at me, those dimples popping on his three-day old stubble on his face, his eyes twinkling in that Hollywood cowboy way that hinted he had a dirty secret life when the cameras weren’t rolling.

“Baby blue,” he says in that wonderful Scottish, panty-melting, how-am-I-so-lucky-to-hear-this accent. “Happy fucking birthday. I am so sorry I couldn’t be there.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him, patting his leg. “I’m just glad Nadine is okay.”

He winces and starts the Jeep. “It was a tough few days, that’s for sure. But she should be sent home tomorrow. She practically forced me to leave her side.”

I smile, despite this news. “Well, she’s smart. You need to relax so you can be at your best for her, and she needs to rest.”

Total bullshit but it sounds good and it seems to work on him because he nods. He eyes James in the rear-view mirror. “I hope you took care of our baby on her birthday.”

My eyes widen, just for a moment, and I know I’m holding my breath as I wait for James to say something, to ruin it all.

But James just says, “I did. Man, Linden, she’s a real pain when you’re not around.”

And then I know that everything is fine. Linden doesn’t know we slept together. James doesn’t hold any grudges. We were able to sleep together and move on. Everything is back to normal.

*Everything is back to normal.*

It’s too bad my normal now has Linden attached to someone with no appendix.

But I’m adult enough now to push that aside.

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When a knock sounds from the storeroom door at fifteen minutes to ten (when I open), I can’t help the low growl that escapes from my lips. I’m

always rushing around at this time of morning and rarely tolerate early customers hoping to jump the gun.

But when I look up from the cash float I'm going through, I retract that growl.

It becomes something more sexual instead.

There's a male model outside my door.

At least, that's what he looks like. In fact, I've never been so sure of someone's occupation – or life purpose – in all my years.

I quickly glance at the ornate, jewel-lined mirror on the wall (just \$325, get it while you can) and deduce that while I still have sleepy morning face, I don't look half-bad. My hair was dyed an ombre color last week, platinum blonde up top with baby pink at the ends and all the spin-classes I've been doing to counteract my rapidly-expanding ass seem to give my face a healthy glow.

I walk over to the door and unlock it, opening it a crack.

"We're not open for another fifteen minutes," I tell the guy, my head craning back to stare at him.

Wide green eyes stare right back.

"Sorry," he says, "I know I'm hella early but I just wanted a chance to talk to you before you opened."

*Hella*, huh? He's definitely a Nor Cal boy.

"Okay," I say, making sure I'm not smiling like fool as I briefly take in his golden, lithe frame, the dark blonde hair that falls across his brow. He's got a bit of a Chris Hemsworth meets Matthew McConaughey kind of vibe. "How can I help you then? We don't actually carry men's clothing."

"But do you have any plans to?" he asks.

I shrug. "Hopefully. I just opened last week so I'm still not really sure what I'm doing yet." Then, feeling flirtatious I look up at him through my lashes and say, "Don't tell anyone."

He grins. His smile is crooked but it's cute. "I won't, don't worry." Then his smile fades and he anxiously rubs the end of his nose. "Well, my brother Mick, he's started a men's clothing line earlier this year so I'm just helping him out and going around to see if anyone wants to carry it."

He reaches behind him into a leather messenger bag I only just notice and pulls out a manila envelope. He tries to hand it to me but he drops it. He's a bit flustered, awkward, but I like that.



He picks it up and this time I take it from his shaking hands before he can drop it again.

“So your brother is putting you up to this?” I ask him, sliding out a catalogue and peering at it. It’s hastily put together but the shots are professional. They’re also of the guy I’m talking to.

I wave it at him. “You’re a model.”

I *knew* it.

He nods, looking a bit bashful. “Yeah. At least I’m trying to be one. I’m doing this to help both of us out, you know. He was thinking maybe if he found the right store, that they could do an exclusive line together. And I would be the model.”

The funny thing about being in your late twenties is that slivers of adulthood slowly find their way into your everyday life. Maybe it’s putting money aside in a 401K, staying home on a Saturday night because you want to wake up early so you can go to the gym, having meetings with your accountant, taking omega-3 and calcium supplements, making expensive night cream part of your daily regime, and so on.

It doesn’t happen all at once but when it does you’re hit with, “Whoa, I guess I’m a fucking adult now. Look at me!”

This was one of those moments. Granted, it was probably a delayed reaction from opening day, but this good-looking sunny boy was asking me if I wanted an exclusive men’s line in my newly minted clothing store and fuck it if I didn’t feel like I’d finally arrived.

That didn’t mean I knew what I was doing, though.

“So,” I say, trying to find the right words, “you’d model the clothes, the clothes I’d be exclusively carrying?”

“It depends if the other stores get back to us, I guess.”

My heart fluttered anxiously at the thought of the competition. “Who were the other stores?”

He shrugs and scratches the back of his head, looking totally adorable. “I’m not really sure. I gave them my stuff, not the other way around. The owners weren’t as pretty as you though.”

My cheeks grow warm and I find myself staring coyly at the ground.

“By the way, I’m Aaron,” he says, extending a hand. “Aaron Simpson.”

“Stephanie Robson,” I tell him, returning the shake. His hand is warm, fingers long and slender.

“Aaron and Stephanie,” he says. “Sounds good together.”

I raise my brow. Just who is this awkward, nervous yet bold model standing across from me? I'm not sure but I really want to find out.

And that means taking his offer rather seriously.

"It does," I slowly agree. While the whole "you're so adult" and "you have no idea what you're doing" feelings competing inside of me, I open the door wider and gesture inside. "We still have a few minutes before I open. Why don't you come on inside and we can talk."

His eyes light up. "Really?"

"For sure," I say. "I'm always looking to do business."

A heated look passes between us over that last word as he steps into the store.

I have a feeling that *business as usual* is about to take on a whole new meaning.

## CHAPTER SIX

### 30

#### *LINDEN*

“Do you know what time you were born at?” Nadine asks me before taking a sip of her gin and tonic.

“No idea,” I tell her. “Having that knowledge would mean I have a mother who would indulge in pithy little shit like that. Or a mother who pays attention.” I lean back in my chair and breathe in the salt air. It’s nice as hell out, one of those Aprils that sing with fresh air and spicy sunshine. There is no fog and the bay dazzles before us, the water lit from within.

It doesn’t feel like it’s my birthday. That’s a good thing. I’ve been dreading the countdown to thirty for a year now and feel like I’ve been dragged into it, kicking and screaming.

“Maybe you can ask her tomorrow,” she says but I only stare out the sailboats sluicing to and fro. I don’t want to think about the fact that my parents arrive in the city tomorrow morning and that I have brunch planned with them. I don’t want to think about the fact that I haven’t seen them in years and this is the first time they’ve been to the West Coast to see me. I don’t want to hear about their expectations and the wee ways I’ve failed them.

I just want to sit on this patio and drink all the beers with my pretty girlfriend and usher in thirty like it’s no big deal. That’s originally why I opted out of any “dirty thirty” parties and all that stupid shit. I want today to be just like any other day.

Yet I know it isn’t. Absolutely nothing should change by turning from twenty-nine to thirty but I can feel the churning, the conversion, somewhere deep inside, like I’m slowly becoming a werewolf or a non-sparkly vampire.

It has absolutely nothing to do with a little pact I had set for myself. No, that shit is over now. I have Nadine and it’s serious. That whole clause of “if we are not in a serious relationship at the time we hit thirty thing”? Well, Nadine is my serious.

“Yeah,” I tell her, even though I know I won’t be asking my mother anything. Nadine is staring at me curiously, her brow furrowed and I can

feel a question building, the question that's been plaguing her ever since I told her they were coming.

"So it's going to just be the three of you?" she asks.

I nod and down the rest of the beer. "I'd invite you, but, you know. It's complicated."

I know she's been looking for an invitation or at least some explanation of why my girlfriend of six months won't be meeting my parents, but that's really all I can give her. The question is, I'm not sure what's more complicated – my relationship with my parents or my relationship with her.

Maybe we're not as serious as I like to think.

"I can handle complicated," she says and I can tell she's hurt. Actually, it's extremely easy to tell, she wears her feelings on her sleeve, on her face, everywhere.

I reach across the table and tap her hand. "Babe," I implore. "It's just easier for me this way. Don't worry about it, you're not missing anything worthwhile."

She crosses her arms in a huff. "I'd still like to meet your parents, you know, find out a little bit more about you, where you came from."

"You know where I came from," I remind her patiently. "I was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, my father was a diplomat. My mother used to breed horses once upon a time. He got a job at the UN. We moved to New York. End of story."

"Is it because I have to call him *His Excellency*?"

I give her a look. I've heard that all the time, especially when I was in high school. I got the shit kicked out of me more than once because of my father's job, until I finally learned to fight back.

"He's not the ambassador to Britain," I explain. "He's a few steps below that. No one has to call him His Excellency. Thank god."

Her eyes widen. "Still sounds major."

"I guess," I say and start looking around for the waitress. Another beer or six would be great right now. "I've gotten used to it. He was on some security council and was the deputy director of something or other before that."

"Something or other?" she repeats.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. If it makes my throat feel tight just to talk about them, I don't know how I'm going to survive tomorrow. "I don't know. I spent most of my teens drinking, having sex and riding

motorcycles. Whatever my dad was involved with was all the same to me. He was part of that world and I had my own.”

“And your brother?”

“He did the same. But somehow he’s the one who got away with it.” I shake my head to myself. “Still does.” I eye her warily and see that she’s just eager for more information. “Come on, let’s get another round. The food was great but the beer here is pouring even better.”

Maybe it’s all the talk about my family life or the two extra pints but when we leave the restaurant and weave our way through Pier 49 and onto the Embarcadero, I don’t really feel like going home anymore.

My phone rings and the moment I see James’s caller ID on the screen, I know I’m saved.

“What’s up, brother?” I ask him, sounding more jubilant than I meant to.

“Hey, you done dinner yet?” His voice is loud and I can hear music thumping behind him.

“Yeah, just finished. Where are you, the Lion?”

“Yeah but we’re heading up to Kozy Kar later. You should come. I mean it’s only your fucking birthday and everything.”

I slowly bring my eyes over to Nadine. She’s staring up at me expectantly, maybe even a bit viciously. She had been extremely happy when I said I wanted to spend my thirtieth birthday with just her and I know that if I deviate from the plan, I’m going to get it.

Fortunately I’m used to getting it from her and it rarely stops me from doing anything.

“All right,” I tell him. “We’ll go home for a bit and meet you there. Eight? I know that place fills up early and I really want to hang out in the shagging wagon.”

Nadine reaches out and punches me in the gut. I let out a small *oof* that James doesn’t seem to hear.

“See you then. Happy birthday old timer.”

“Fuck off, James.” I hang up and then look at her incredulously. “What?”

“What the hell?!” she exclaims. “You said it was just going to be you and me tonight!”

“Yeah, well,” I say, rubbing my hand along the heavy stubble on my jawbone and avoiding her eyes, “things changed. I feel like going out now.”

“This was supposed to be *our* night,” she says through clenched teeth.

I frown at her. “Give me a break, it’s supposed to be *my* night. We just had an amazing dinner Nadine, now we’ll head back to my place for some amazing sex before going out to see my amazing friends.”

“You can forget about the sex,” she sneers.

I raise my palms, immediately on the defense. “Okay, hold up. No fucking birthday sex? That’s not fair.”

“Your choice. Sex or your friends,” she says in a sing-songy voice. She sounds like she’s joking but I know she’s not. She hoards sex like an Italian fat kid hoards Nutella.

“That’s really not fair,” I tell her. “You know I’m powerless against sex.”

“Is that why you want to hang out in the shagging waggon?”

I roll my eyes. “Have you seriously lived here your whole life and never been to Kozy Kar? It’s an SF institution, like Pete’s and the Giants and Kirk Hammett. All the seating in the bar is in old waterbeds and actual cars and VW buses. The ground is made of porn mags. Porn mags!”

“Sounds delightful,” she says dryly.

“It is!” I exclaim. “Come on. I turned thirty, let it be dirty.”

“It can be dirty but it won’t be with me,” she huffs.

*Aurgh.* Sometimes she really makes me want to pull my hair out. And I don’t want to do that. I have very nice hair and I hear it’s easy to lose at this age.

“Fine,” I concede, knowing that I’m still going to try and leave after we get down.

And it works. Once we’re back at my place, I tear her clothes off and have my way with her. I go for the ass as I always do, thinking I may finally have a shot on my birthday, but she butt-blocks me and I end up coming all over her back. Oh well.

An hour later, when we’re on the couch and I’m rubbing her feet while we watch TV, my phone rings.

“Don’t answer that,” she says.

“It could be my parents,” I tell her.

“But does it say it’s your parents?” she points out and I can feel her glare.

“It could be an emergency,” I go on and answer.

I can hear her grumble “Why doesn’t he just text” to herself and I say to James, “Hey buddy.”

James tells me there are a bunch of people now waiting for me and to get my ass over there or our friendship is over. He makes as many threats as Nadine does, but being the good friend he is, he’s never serious.

I look pleadingly at Nadine. “Can we please go? My best friend would really like to spend my birthday with me. He’ll cry if we don’t. And visa versa.”

“What about your *other* best friend?” she asks and I note the edge to her words. Though she was friendly with her at first, Nadine has never really been a fan of Steph’s, despite the fact that Steph gives her clothing discounts and has tried to get to know her on numerous occasions.

“Is Steph there?” I say to James.

“Not yet,” he says, “but she’ll be here soon.”

“All right, see you in a few.”

“You fucking better,” I hear him say before I hang up.

“Linden!” Nadine yells, yanking her feet away from me like I’m suddenly radioactive. “I hate you.”

I groan. “No you don’t. And you don’t have to come, I’ll drop you off at your place.”

“Like I’d let you go without me.”

I squint at her, my jaw tensing. I remember to speak with calm precision. “Nadine, there is no letting me do anything. I am my own man, okay?”

I stare at her until she relents.

“Sorry,” she mumbles and I can see her bristling from it all over. Maybe some guys wouldn’t bat an eye at her choice of words but it always rankles me. Nadine has these controlling qualities that I’m really not a fan of. “Fine, let’s just go.”

Victory is mine.

Soon our brusque cabbie drops us off on Van Ness Ave and we briefly stand in the small line outside. The air is chilled now but I’m still warm in my cargo jacket and I don’t mind waiting. In the past I would have bribed the doorman or played some foreigner’s angle, really jack up my accent, in order to slide past the line but now I don’t feel the hurry. I’m content to just wait.

Maybe I really am getting older.

Once we reach the door, the bouncer wishes me happy birthday. Inside I see James and Steph at the bar. They turn to me, raise their drinks in the air with raucous smiles and suddenly all is right with the world.

Those two people. They're all I really need.

"It's about time!" James yells at us. He's drunk and he's a funny little bugger when he's drunk. Gets all ultra-emotional, leans on you, tells you how much he loves you. I expect a lot of that tonight – I'd be insulted if I didn't get it.

I grab his hand and slap him on the back, but true to his drunken ways, he pulls me into a big bear hug. I can feel the beer from his glass spilling onto my neck.

"You're finally old like me," he murmurs.

I pull away and say, "But the beautiful thing is that you'll always be older."

He glares at me. "Fuck you."

"Fuck you too, buddy." But as usual, I say it with a grin.

I'm aware that Stephanie is staring at me with those big Bambi eyes of hers. One of the things I love most about her is that she has no idea how fucking special she is. Even now she's here in the bar and though she's standing shoulders back and confident, in her acid-wash skinny pants and some crazy halter top that looks like it's been fastened out of a skinned shark, she's so much more than she thinks.

"Happy birthday," she says to me with a quiet smile. Normally she would hug me too but she's acting shy, showing restraint. I frown and then catch her eyes briefly trailing to Nadine and back. Nadine, who is standing behind me and probably not wearing the most welcoming of expressions.

"Thanks," I tell her warmly and it feels weird to just leave it at that.

I put my arm around Nadine and push her in toward them, forcing her to act nice. She says hello to them, gives them a smile, but it's still apparent that she doesn't want to be there. She likes to let people know when she's been inconvenienced, especially when it comes to me. It's like she expects to get a "Girlfriend of the Year" award just for letting me out of the house.

"Have you met Penny?!" James suddenly yells, like an afterthought.

Actually no and I've been waiting to for a few weeks now, ever since James told me he was finally seeing someone. He would remember that but he's drunk and from the way he's looking at Steph, I feel like he's asking her more than me.



Before anyone can say anything, James cups his hands over his mouth and hollers, “Penny!” loudly across the bar. The boy may not be able to sing, but he sure can yell. I think every head in the bar looked at us for one second before they carried on.

And out of the darkness of the porno magazine floors and shady-VW vans comes a chick that couldn’t be better suited for James.

For one, she’s covered in tattoos, her dark blood red lips sport a ring, she’s got orangey Bettie Page “fuck me” hair and a feminine sway to her toughened leather look. She’s also wearing sexy secretary glasses that show off her winged liner. The lenses look thick too, so she must legitimately need them, unlike all the hipsters in the city.

For two, she goes right up to James and slaps him on the butt, *hard*, with a loud, “Hey sex god, you miss me?”

James looks torn between being proud and embarrassed. I think he’s a little of both.

He gives us a quick, flustered look. “Linden, Steph, Nadine, this is Penny.”

She’s chewing gum now, her mouth wide and that gum just snapping away inside. But she’s smiling, even though she’s appraising us all. She’s already keeping me on my toes. I approve.

“Nice to meet you,” she says and I realize she’s got a Jersey accent. Even more fitting now. I have faith this rockabilly chick can pummel some sense into James when I’m not around.

“Likewise,” I tell her.

‘You’re the birthday boy,’ she notes.

I nod. “I am.”

Suddenly she yells. “Shots are on me!” and then slams her hands down on the bar, demanding the attention of the bartender. He looks at her warily as she yells something about Jaegermeister.

I shiver. I think that drink should be outlawed past your twenties.

“She’s darling,” I say to James with a faux-upper crust accent.

“She’s a handful,” he admits, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I can see that.”

I guess my no-Jaeger clause won’t kick in until I’m thirty-one. We all do a shot of the vile liquid before heading to the VW bus in the bar.

To my surprise, only Steph’s friend Nicola is there and Steph’s boyfriend, Aaron, is nowhere to be seen.

I hang back for a second and tug at her sleeve. “Where’s Aaron?”

Her delicate features look strained for a second, then she shrugs it off. “He’s in LA for the weekend. Modeling stuff, you know.”

“Oh yeah, I totally know,” I say mockingly. “All those days I spent on the circuit, showing off my nuts to strangers.”

She squints at me, not amused. “He’s a model. He’s not a porn star.”

“Sure, sure,” I say. I love bugging her about Aaron, it’s one of my new favorite hobbies. The guy is all right, I guess, but he’s not the smartest pig in the pen. In fact, he’s three years younger than Steph and has a lot of growing up to do. Not that I’m one to talk – I’m as immature as they come – but honestly he’s just not good enough for her. I’m not sure anyone is.

But that’s the overprotective friend in me talking. She *seems* happy.

While she punches me quickly in the arm, I nod at Nicola. “What’s she doing here?”

Steph lowers her voice, turning her back to her friend who is saying hello to Nadine as everyone joins her on the seats. “She needed a night out.”

Nicola is not only fairly prim and proper but she’s a single mom to a two-year old son. In the past, before she got knocked up and left hanging by her pussy-chasing ex, I used to see her quite a lot, even if we didn’t frequent the same kind of scene.

I catch a whiff of her flowery, fresh perfume as Steph leans in and whispers, “Also, she’s in love with her gynecologist. So I’m doing a pre-emptive strike before something happens in that department, trying to show her there are other men out there. Ones that aren’t paid to look at your vagina.”

I glance over at Nicola in her black silky looking dress and pulled back hair. She looks completely out of place in the shagging wagon but I’m grateful it’s she that’s here and not Aaron.

“Should I act like myself and dash her hopes that good men do exist?” I ask her, leaning in closer, hoping to catch her sweet fucking scent again.

Steph rolls her eyes. “Just be nice, cowboy.”

I can’t help but smile. Cowboy – she hasn’t called me that in months. It makes me feel warm, and maybe a bit hard. I want to bask in this feeling but I realize I can’t.

I never can.

I sit down at the table beside Nadine, ignoring the blaze in her dark eyes. She wants me to know she's pissed off for whatever reason, probably talking to Steph. Maybe she caught me trying to smell her. It wouldn't be the first time.

James hands me a beer from out of nowhere and I gulp it down. The draft here is pouring great tonight out of the keg and my thirties are starting to sink in a bit.

It's such a fucking relief just to be out with my friends, especially when we don't seem to do this as much anymore. With James with Penny and Steph with Aaron, and of course me with Nadine, I'm starting to worry if this is the start of things to come. As we get older, get more involved with our significant others, with our lives, and trying to make the most of those quickly ticking years, I think the ties that bind us will become more strained.

I don't want to be forty, married to Nadine with a couple of brats, and have nobody around me, just a couple of people I used to love, used to know.

I don't want to lose them. But as I look around the table, I'm wondering if that's just the way things go in life. Age brought us together, age will tear us apart.

Okay, now I'm just being drunk and overdramatic. I'm about to suggest we do another shot – no fucking Jaeger this time, sorry Penny – but Nadine suddenly turns to me and moans, “Linden, I have a headache.”

She does suffer from migraines from time to time, so I can't be sure that she's just making it up so I can take her home.

“All right,” I whisper back. I suppose she's saving me from a massive hangover tomorrow anyway. I look at everyone else, my eyes resting on Steph's only briefly. “Sorry you wankers, we have to get going.”

James lets out a cry of disgust. “What the hell man? You just got here.”

“Over an hour ago,” I point out. He's too drunk to notice the passage of time anyway.

“Was I too much?” Penny asks James, trying to be quiet but failing.

“No one was too much,” I tell her. “I've got to meet my parents tomorrow so I need to call it a night.”

“Your parents are in town?” Steph asks, surprised.

I quickly glance over at her and recognize the look in her eyes. It's almost the same that Nadine had when I told her it was just going to be me

and them. Hell, had Steph wanted to meet them too? She'd already met the pain in the ass that is my brother and now she wants to see the rest of my family? Suddenly my parents are the most popular people around. Well, with everyone but me.

“Yeah it was kind of last minute. For my birthday.”

“Well let me know how that goes,” she says and for a moment it's like we're back at my place, hanging out on the couch and talking about our families. She knows nearly everything about them and our relationship, just as I know the same about hers.

I miss that. Tonight has shown me that I'm missing a lot of things.

I can feel Nadine nudge me, wanting us to get out of there.

“Will do,” I say to Steph, sending her a knowing look. If it comes to me needing to vent, she will be the first I'll call.

Before James can attempt to squeeze out of the table and tackle me, I put my arm around Nadine's waist and usher her away. I wave goodbye to everyone over my shoulder and hear James call me a “pussy.”

Once back in the flat, after the cab has dropped off Nadine, I settle into bed. It still smells like sex from earlier, while my mouth tastes like beer and I already have a headache. I'm not prepared for tomorrow whatsoever and I as lie there in the dark, my mind races around and around on the same loop.

Everything is changing. I'm nowhere but I'm somewhere and it's not where I want to be.

I don't really know what I want.

But I know I don't have it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *LINDEN*

“Linden Stewart McGregor.”

Yes, my father, in his thick Aberdeen brogue, just called me by my full name. I don't think I've heard him address me that way since I was a wee fuck, playing with his heirloom wooden boats and breaking the masts for fun.

I manage a smile, just as phony as his is, I'm sure.

“Dad,” I tell him, not willing to do the same. He might try and be seen as a quasi-politician, authority figure to me, but he's still just my fucking father. I'm not Bram, I won't relate to him in the way that he wants, the way that everyone else does.

My father strides across the marble floors of the hotel, looking lean and healthy. He'd quit smoking a few years ago and took up a lifestyle that required a lot of tennis and racquetball and rounds of golf, all chased with too much Scotch. While I inherited his height, he's never been one to put on muscle like I have. Then again he runs like a wind-up toy – I doubt he could put on weight if he tried.

He shakes my hand, firm, and I return it even firmer. He doesn't even wince, just smiles like he's actually glad I'm here.

“Good to see you, son,” he says, his blue eyes nearly twinkling. His skin is bronze now, which means he's been taking more trips to St. Barts and other hoity-toity places where the rich and privileged pretend they won't get skin cancer. I wonder if he brings mum with him on these trips or leaves her at home.

I quickly scan the lobby and notice she's not here. I'm relieved but that familiar pang of guilt strikes my chest, as it always does when I'm glad she's not around.

“Where's mum?” I ask, not willing to return the sentiment.

His jaw tenses for a brief moment. “She's having a lie-down,” he says far too brightly and that smooth expression goes back on his face. Always the politician.

“You mean she's sleeping in? It's still the morning.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder and ushers me toward the elevators. “Let's have brunch, shall we? We have a lot to talk about.”

My chest feels tighter. This was what I was afraid of, that my father had something serious he wanted to talk to me about and that's why he came. I have no idea what he's going to say, all I know is I'm not going to like it and for some damn reason I have a really hard time when it comes to my parents.

It's part of the reason – or maybe all of the reason – why I moved to San Francisco to begin with.

We take the elevator to a restaurant on the top floor. It's not only on Nob Hill, but it's a tall structure to boot, so we have a crazy view of the city. Today there's fog moving in by the Golden Gate, covering the hills of Marin, but other than that it's sunny and beautiful.

We sit down amid fine diners picking away at their thirty-dollar eggs Benedicts and I realize I'm a bit underdressed. I'm in grey jeans and a black collared shirt with zippers at the chest pockets, something Steph gave to me one day, saying she had too many in stock and it was too late to send it back.

She was lying, which I loved. She'd just wanted me to have it. It's my favorite shirt now.

"You're looking happy," my father muses and I realize I'm grinning.

I quickly turn my mouth down and clear my throat. "Life is pretty good out here."

He raises a discerning brow. "Are you sure?" He didn't even need to ask that, I know what that damn eyebrow arch means.

I nod and busy myself with my coffee, black and unadulterated. "Aye."

"And you have a girlfriend now?"

"Aye."

"Nadia?"

"Nadine."

"I knew a girl named Nadia once," he said, getting this dreamy look in his eyes. I've never seen my father look remotely dreamy before. It's mildly disturbing.

"Yeah. Nadia," I say, not even bothering to correct him.

"Do you love her?" he asks, his expression turning serious.

"Of course I love her," I tell him as my throat feels like it's closing up. I must have burned it with the coffee. The truth is, I've never told Nadine that I love her because I'm not sure that I do. "I've been with her six months now."

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

I give my dad a look, not sure where he is going with this. Since when has he ever grilled me about my love life? If anyone needs grilling, it’s Bram.

“Well, anyway, I’m happy,” I assure him.

“How come she isn’t here now?”

I absently tug at my ear. “I just...it didn’t seem right.”

“I see,” he says and I think he’s reading way too much into it. Then he shakes his head. “Where are my manners, I haven’t even wished you a happy birthday yet. Happy birthday,” he says and pulls out an envelope from his jacket. He slides it across the table. “This is from your mother and me.”

Birthday presents shouldn’t fill me with suspicion but I have a bad feeling about this. I stare down at it, can see the shape of something inside. I don’t think it’s money, though it wouldn’t be the first time they’ve given me that.

“Go on,” he says, nudging it forward with a flick of his wrist, his cufflinks catching the light. “It won’t bite you. You only turn thirty once, you know.”

*Thank god*, I think to myself. I take the envelope and open it gingerly.

A key falls out and onto the table.

I raise a brow at my father. “What’s this?”

“Your new flat,” he says.

I’m not easily confused but this time my father has thrown me for a real loop. I’m starting to wonder if he’s all there.

“I don’t get it.”

He chuckles and takes an elegant sip of his tea, which he’s overloaded with milk and sugar. “It’s your birthday present. Your mother and I decided to make some investments. One of those investments is a flat, for you. It’s in the Upper West Side, on Broadway, near the Beacon Theater. You can move in next month.”

I can feel my confusion slowly morph into a simmering kind of rage. “I’m sorry, but...I live *here*. Right? I have a place here.”

He stares at me for a moment. “You can always sell or rent it out, it’s not permanent.” His words are clipped.

“Yeah, but *I* am permanent,” I tell him. “This is where my job is. Do you know how hard I fought to get that job? Do you think it’s just easy to

get a job flying helicopters?”

“There are more than enough places like that in Manhattan,” he says so smoothly, so patronizingly, that I’m seconds away from flipping over the table and storming out of here. “You’d have no problem securing another – better – job. I’d make sure of that.” He pauses to sip his tea and smacks his lips together. “And if that was no longer your calling, it would be for the best. There is a whole world out there, just waiting for the son of Stewart McGregor.”

My jaw is clamped together and it takes an effort to speak. “I am sure Bram will do you proud then.”

“Oh come on, Linden,” he says suddenly, his eyes flashing and that viper temper of his sneaking out, “you know as well as I do that Bram is useless. You’re the son we have a chance with, we have hope with.”

“Hope for what?”

“To be our son.”

My head jerks back in confusion. “I *am* your son.”

“But it doesn’t feel like it, does it? Now, eat your food, it’s getting cold.”

I don’t feel like eating. I just want to go a million miles away. I thought I had accomplished that by moving here but I guess I was wrong.

“Now before you start getting all upset,” he says, quietly now. “Just know how lucky you are. We helped you out with your place here while you were training. In fact, we have helped you with everything until recently. You’ve never said how much you’ve appreciated it, but I’m assured you did. And now, now this is helping you too. A large, beautiful flat in Manhattan, just for you. How many young men can say they have that? Only the privileged few and you are a part of that.”

I clear my throat, trying to get my heartbeat under control. “I’m not leaving. I do appreciate everything you’ve done, and I appreciate the flat, but I had no idea that those plans were being made. I have no desire to leave my life here. It’s home.”

His eyes glitter darkly. “All right. Well, the property is ours – yours – if you ever change your mind. Now, I don’t think it’s quite fair that we come all the way here to give you the good news and you don’t even thank your mother yourself.”

Here comes the completely unfair and out of left field guilt trip. “What?”



“When we’re done, we’re going to go up to the room and you’re going to thank her. You’ll also tell her that you’re honored to have such a privilege and that you’re seriously considering the move.”

I nearly shoot out of my chair. “But that’s a lie.”

“We all lie,” he says and then pushes his plate of barely touched eggs away from him.

Moments later, I’m stuck in one awkward elevator ride up to see my mother in their hotel room. As I suspected, the black-out curtains are all drawn shut with only one lamp on, but at least she’s not still in bed. Instead, she’s sitting primly on a chaise and nursing a glass of something dark. It looks like coffee, but I know it’s not.

My relationship with my mother isn’t much better than the one I have with my father. In fact, I think it’s a tad worse. Growing up, it was my nanny who raised me while my mother raised horses and raised glasses in toasts to nothing. When we moved to Manhattan, she replaced the horses with more booze and pills and that’s pretty much been the status quo ever since.

At least my father made attempts to parent me, to care about the persona I put out there, to want me to succeed, even if just in his image. My mother...I’m not really sure if she knows who I am half the time.

I don’t think she’s ever hugged me.

“Maura,” my father says as he walks right on front of her, obscuring her view of the void she was staring at in the middle of the room. “Linden is here.”

It takes her moment to look over at me and then another moment for her eyes to open wider in faint recognition. Despite the fact that she’s drunk, she looks beautiful. Maybe a little too thin, but pale, long-necked and elegant, even in silk pajamas.

“Linden, my boy,” she says. “Happy birthday.” She smiles and pauses. “How old are you again?”

“Thirty, mum. And thank you.”

She nods politely and takes a sip of her drink, her eyes going spacey again. Believe me, she’s much better this way, in her calm, mellow, morning buzz than she is in the Exorcist-ish, demon-possession kind of rage she gets in later when she’s drunk off her ass and hates the world.

“I was just telling Linden about the present,” my father adds and the produces the key, dangling it at her like she’s a child. “Do you remember?”

The flat? He's very interested."

Whatever outrage I felt about the lie is over. My mother isn't even going to remember this by the end of the day.

"That's wonderful," she says, her voice pleasant but monotone. She's saying the words, acting her part, without taking anything – including me – in.

I don't stay long after that. Uncomfortable small-talk turns into awkward goodbyes, all punctuated by promises to stay in touch, to "think about" things.

As I'm out the door, my father says soberly, "Son, just remember. If you're going to put your roots down somewhere, you should at least know what you're capable of growing."

I don't even let myself dwell on that. By the time I get back to my place, I am a complete fucking mess and it's only one in the afternoon.

I need to escape my mind, these damn shackles that have spread their rusted hold on me over the morning. I pace around the rooms, staring at the things I know they have bought me in the past. I text James and then seconds later dial him, but the phone goes straight to voicemail.

Tapping my phone against my thigh, I briefly think about Nadine. But I don't want to answer her questions, I don't want to spend a day with her pretending everything is all right and I'm the man she thinks I am, that toughened pilot who doesn't really care about anything. I don't want her to see my face and the mark I know my parents have stamped there even from such a brief encounter.

I go to text, think better of it, and then just outright dial Steph.

She answers on the third ring. "Hey!" she says brightly and something about the sound of her voice feels like a balm on the wound.

"Hey," I say, and clear my throat. "What are you doing right now?"

"I was going to go into the store and do some merchandising for tomorrow."

"Oh." Wow. Even on Sundays with the store closed, she's still working. I'm both proud of her and disappointed that she's busy.

There is a pause. "Do you want to come with?"

I swallow. "No, no, it's fine."

"You wouldn't have called me if everything was fine. I know who you were with this morning," she says. "Come on. I'll pick you up in a half hour."

Even though I don't want to impose on her day, I find myself saying yes and it isn't long before I'm standing on the street, waiting for her and anxiously drumming my fingers against my thigh. Her red Mazda 6 pulls up – something she bought the day she got the loan for the business – and she honks the horn despite seeing me there. I think she just likes the sound.

I open the passenger door to climb in, hit by her familiar smell, and see a bottle of Wild Turkey buckled-in the seat.

“Uh,” I say, nodding at it as I lean on the door frame. “I wasn't aware someone had shotgun already.”

“It's for you, cowboy,” she says. “I know you probably need it.”

I grin at her. “You're the best friend ever.”

“Don't I know it.”

I get in and she watches and waits for me to unscrew the cap and take a shot straight from the bottle before she pulls the car out. The fluffy skull she has hanging from her rear-view mirror swings back and forth as she expertly navigates San Francisco's one-way streets. There's nothing sexier than watching a woman drive a stick well. Wearing a short, pleated skirt that shows off glowing thighs helps too. My balls tighten as I imagine what it would be like to run my hands up that smooth inner skin.

I feel her eyes on me and look up just as she looks back to the road. A small smile tugs on her lips. She totally just caught me checking her out.

And she seems to like it.

It takes me a second to remind myself that this is inappropriate. You know, her being with Aaron, me with Nadine. And the fact that we're friends.

But I've never been anything if not inappropriate.

“Want to talk about it?” she asks me and for a moment I think she's asking about me checking her out and for a moment I almost *do* want to talk about it. Then I realize she means my parents.

I stare at the bottle in my hands. “Maybe in a bit.”

“Did you at least have fun last night?”

“I did while I was there.”

She opens her mouth to say something else but then closes it. Her lips have a soft pink sheen to it that makes me want to bite them. Actually she looks beautiful and radiant despite the fact that she was out late drinking last night too.

“You look good,” I find myself saying to her.

I could swear she blushes and that alone makes me want to say more nice things about her. I'm afraid if I start, though, I'll never stop.

"You know, despite the hard drinking and approaching middle age," I quickly clarify.

"Ha ha. So how does it feel to be older?"

I shrug. "It sucks."

"Back pain? Broken hip?"

"Something like that."

"Guess I have a lot to look forward to."

I sink back in my seat and stare out the window as the narrow houses and storefronts whip past. "October will be here before we know it. You know you have, let's see, six or seven months to change your mind about Aaron."

That gets her attention. She whips her head to stare at me incredulously. "What?"

"The pact. You remember."

She rubs her lips together, blinking a few times, looking so fucking adorable. "Of course I remember...I just..."

I shrug as casually as I can. "The offer is still on the table, baby blue. You're almost thirty, then we both will be. If you end up kicking pretty boy to the curb by then, you know where I am."

She searches my face for as long as she can before she nearly rear-ends the van in front of us. When she recovers, she asks, "What about Nadine?"

"I'd give her up for you," I tell her, staring at her relentlessly until she's forced to meet my eyes again, if just for a second. "I'd give up everything for you." Though I think I'm being completely serious about this, I'm not sure how much good it will do me if she knows that. So I smile at her, a big shit-eating grin, until she eventually returns the smile.

Now she thinks I'm joking. I wish I was. But at least I'm safe.

We're safe.

"How about you keep drinking your whisky there, cowboy," she says and just like that I can feel the door shutting on our conversation. It's for the best. It has to be.

And I was happy, I swear to fucking god I was, until my father started planting seeds of doubt in my head. Because what he said about my roots and having something worth growing, well that was kind of true.

Why stay in San Francisco unless I saw my potential here? Not just with my career but the bigger picture – love, marriage, kids, all that kind of shit you ignore your whole life just fucking away until you're forced to look at it.

A while later we're in her store. I'm leaning against the counter, taking small swigs of deliciously burning whisky, feeling loose, and flipping through a men's catalogue. Unfortunately, Aaron is the model on every single page. All this time later, I can't really figure out what she sees in him. I mean, I know he's good-looking, I suppose, or enough to be a model. But he dresses like a teenager, like he's halfway out the door to go surfing, he rarely wears shoes and he laughs like a hyena.

Steph is a hardworking, intelligent woman. They can't possibly have anything to say to each other on a daily basis, which makes me think that their relationship is based purely on sex. I know there's nothing wrong with that per se, but even entertaining the thought makes me want to be sick.

"So how did it go? How were your parents?" Steph asks, looking over a rack of clothes at me. She obviously caught the grimace on my face and thought I was thinking about earlier.

"Oh you know," I say. "Horrible."

Her brow furrows in concern. "That bad?"

I sigh and put my head in my hands. "You know what's funny? It's that when I was younger, I thought my relationship with my parents would change, evolve. You know, stop being full of bullshit. But it hasn't." I look up at her, knowing I can tell her almost anything. "I see them differently now. The way I think of them, relate to them, has totally changed. But they still treat me like I'm some fifteen-year-old punk. They still think I have no idea what I'm doing in life, that I need them every step of the way, that they have the bloody right to interject and control me."

"What were they trying to do?"

"Get me to move."

Her eyes widen. "Where?"

"New York. They bought a place and want me to live there."

"But why?"

"I guess because Bram isn't turning out quite the way they wanted," I say with a shrug. "I don't know. My father is one of those people who is very concerned about the image of family, about legacies and all that shit. He can recite to you our family tree and all the notable Scots that we've

come from. Everyone in this McGregor line seems to have some hand in politics or some other roles of power and whatever. My father obviously had hopes for Bram with him being the oldest, but he just pisses away his time. So now he's realizing that I'm all there is. He wants me to be like him."

She puts a jacket away on the rack and then comes over to me, folding her arms across her full chest. I try not to stare at her breasts.

"You know, most parents would be absolutely thrilled to have a son who is a helicopter pilot," she points out.

"Well I don't have most parents. They don't really think it's much of an accomplishment at all, to be honest. It's not distinguished or intellectual enough."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure you need your brain to fly one of those things."

"Steph, are you calling me intelligent?"

She shoots me a cheeky grin. "Crazy, huh? You better appreciate my kindness while it lasts. Speaking of..." she trails off and then disappears into the storage room in the back. While she's rummaging around, I entertain the brief fantasy of following her in there, locking the door behind me and cornering her up against one of the shelves. I want to press myself against her, just so she knows what she does to me, I want to slide my hands up under her flimsy top and cup her breasts, squeezing them until she moans, then take off her shirt and suck on what are sure to be perfect, pink nipples.

I want to tell her all the filthy things I think about, be real, raw and unfiltered. I want to make her cheeks flush from my dirty mouth and her body squirm with desire.

Jesus. I step back behind the counter more to make sure my erection is covered and try to ignore the building lust. I have to stop thinking about her this way, but I've also been telling myself that for years and years. One day I'm afraid I won't be able to help myself and it will probably ruin one of the best relationships – if not *the* best – I've ever had.

But fuck, what if she feels the same way? What if she wants me as deep inside of her, fucking her brains out 24/7, as I do?

For one heady moment, I swear I'm going to do it. I'm going to march right into that storeroom, kiss her madly, fuck her up against the wall and let her know how I really feel.

I take in a deep breath and ready myself.

I can do this.

She comes out of the storeroom, holding a large box and a sheepish smile on her face. The moment is gone. I won't do anything.

I am a coward.

A horny, fucking coward.

"Here you go," she says, placing the box on the counter with a *thunk*. "Your birthday present."

I lift it up. It's heavy. "You shouldn't have," I tell her, feeling both bad that she bothered and touched that she did.

She shrugs playfully. "Whatever. It came into the store a while ago and I just thought of you. Had it in the back waiting for your birthday to come around." I stare at her and she quickly taps the top of the box. "Hurry up and open it, would you?"

I open the flaps and peer inside. It's a black leather jacket.

"Holy shit," I say, slowly taking it out of the box like it's made of gold. I hold it up. It's pretty fucking dope and I'm not that much of a fashion kind of guy. It's moto-style with banded strips down the arms, just enough detail to make it interesting.

"Look at the back," she says.

I turn it over. At the back of the neck in small silver stitching it says "L. McGregor."

I eye her, feeling stunned at the personalization.

She blushes and looks away coyly. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" I whisper.

"Like this is a big deal. It's not. I saw the jacket and thought it was suited for a macho helicopter pilot. So I had it stitched with your name. I dunno, I think I was going for a Top Gun kind of look. Maybe we could start calling you Iceman."

She's trying to play this off and maybe I should let her but damn if this didn't mean a lot to me. My heart does a flip in my chest. This just made getting out of bed on this hellish day totally worth it.

How could I ever move away from this woman right here?

I swallow hard and try and think of something to say. But only the simple truth will do.

"Thank you. It means a lot."

She reaches over and slowly punches my arm. "You're welcome."

I slip into the jacket, admiring the way it fits like a glove, and do a shot of Wild Turkey to put my mind back in the right place.

I hope it stays there.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### 30

#### *STEPHANIE*

You know your day can't possibly go well when you wake up with water leaking on your forehead, like some form of Chinese water torture.

I open one eye just as another drop hits it.

"What the fuck?" I quickly wipe my face as I sit up and away from the droplets. I look up at the ceiling where a giant bulge has formed and water has started to run out from it, dropping straight down onto my bed.

Just fucking great. I bought the tiny apartment in the Mission district two months ago and already it's falling apart. Before I would have been renting so I would have just called up the landlord and let them deal with it. Now the apartment is entirely my own, entirely my problem, and bearing the brunt of the fall storms we've been having.

Happy fucking thirtieth birthday to me. Here's a new decade full of responsibility you didn't remember signing up for.

I sigh and get out of bed, wishing Aaron had stayed the night so he could help me. Then I remember his tendency to disappear when shit gets hard (as in, anything more than posing in front of a camera) and know that calling Linden would actually be a better idea. At least that's a man that gets shit done.

But I don't call him. I know his girlfriend hates my guts and I can't imagine my plea for help would go down well. Besides, it's my apartment, my responsibility. I'm thirty now. I just need to put on my big girl panties and handle it.

The surprising thing about turning thirty, other than having such a rude awakening, is that it's not as devastating as I thought it would be. I think twenty-nine was a lot worse, just as I think thirty-nine will be worse than forty. By the time that magical/terrible year approaches, you've already made peace with it.

I, however, can't seem to make peace with the fact that I've bought a leaky condo. I suppose it was kind of my fault since I went for the smallest, cheapest option in a somewhat dodgy area of the district, but buying property in San Francisco is ridiculous. If it wasn't for my mom co-signing

the mortgage (apparently the banks don't like the self-employed) and the fact that it was a private sale through my mom's friend's nephew, I wouldn't have been able to afford it.

It's home, though it's not exactly the type of home I imagined I'd have at thirty. It's 600 square feet, one bedroom with a box-sized den and an even tinier balcony that overlooks a pretty church and homeless people on park benches – a far cry from the historically revered, three-story Victorian done up in ice-cream shades, with backyard garden, that I hoped I'd end up in. I also hoped I'd have a bunch of kids running around the house and a husband and neighbors who would drop by all the time. Maybe my husband's hot brother-in-law would rehearse his underground band with The Beach Boys in the garage.

Come to think of it, I think my entire thirties were based on episodes of *Full House*. Not exactly realistic.

I quickly get a metal bucket out from under the sink and place it on the bed. The first drop falls in with a satisfying ping. This will have to do for now.

My alarm would be going off in a half hour anyway, so I take a shower and get ready for the day. It takes me extra-long to blow-dry and then curl my hair loosely, but since I'm going to the Lion later for birthday shenanigans, it's worth it. My hair finally has the best cut and color, something really sophisticated and (hopefully) sexy. It's just past my shoulders and this shiny thick chocolate brown color with red highlights that for some reason make my eyes seem bigger and bluer. It makes me look older but not in a bad way, although I have a feeling it makes my frowny, resting bitch face even more pronounced.

It's Thursday, so I head into work and look over my list of resumes. After just over a year of operating the store, I've finally decided to hire additional help. I would have done it earlier but I couldn't afford it while trying to save for a deposit for the apartment. Besides, I think I have a problem handing control over to other people.

But if I continue running everything myself, I think I'll end up running my health into the ground. I barely manage to hit the gym after work, so now my body bounces back between curvy and too curvy, I'm often eating at the counter during store hours, quickly wolfing down to-go food that probably isn't as healthy as it seems, and when I do get home I'm too tired to even fuck my boyfriend. I used to really like fucking, so that says a lot.

Also, Aaron is still a model. He is, as my friend Nicola describes, “hawt” – so hot you have to spell it differently.

He’s also been getting on my nerves lately but I think that’s because I’m just too stressed and overworked that I’m snapping at everyone and everything. It’s fucking tough when you’re working your ass off all the time trying to run a business and your life (and maybe they are one and the same thing) and your boyfriend doesn’t really have a clue what hard work means. He goes to photo shoots maybe once a week and the rest of the time he’s drinking and eating at exclusive parties and events and showing his handsome mug and shirtless body all over Instagram. Most days he sleeps in until eleven. I mean, he’s twenty-seven, not seventeen.

But I push all my complaints out of my head while I work on counteracting my resting bitchy face and try to lure in customers with all the markdowns I’ve put on pieces for the fall. I’m probably just nitpicking because I’m tired and no one likes working on their birthday.

Luckily, I get a barrage of Facebook posts to my wall and texts and messages from all sorts of people that make me feel all warm and fuzzy. There’s one from Penny, James’s girlfriend, and then one from James himself. Linden ends up texting me later, saying he wanted to call but wasn’t sure if it was appropriate. I’m not sure if he means whether calling me while I’m working is inappropriate or just calling me in general is. Considering how little I’ve seen him lately – and that’s partly my stupid schedule – I really hope it’s not the latter.

My mom calls me when the store is closed but my dad hasn’t even sent a text. I don’t voice this to her since it will only rile her up but it does hurt. I remember how much my father used to check in on me when I was younger because he was so overprotective and concerned about Oliver, and how much it used to annoy the shit out of me. Funny the things you later appreciate.

I’m almost back at the apartment, running late as usual and hoping I have enough time to fix my face and find something to wear before I head over to the bar when Aaron calls me.

“Hey sexy birthday girl,” he says. “Are you home yet?”

“Almost,” I say, running through a yellow light on Guerrero St.

“Don’t go to the Lion,” he says quickly. “Come to my place.”

I try not to sound annoyed. He lives all the way out by the zoo in a house he shares with two other model dudes. It smells like dirty laundry and

I hate going there, though I may have to more often if I don't get the leak in my apartment fixed.

"Aaron."

"Just for a drink. The guys want to wish you a happy birthday."

I roll my eyes. All his friends do is ogle my boobs and my butt. They probably want to gift me a free motorboat ride. "Why can't they come to the Lion like everyone else is?"

"Please, Stephanie," he says, sounding like a little boy. He then adds quietly, "I never see you anymore. It would be nice to have you alone before I have to share you with everyone else."

I sigh, not used to this guilt-tripping tactic from him, even though moments before he had mentioned his roommates being there. "Fine. I'll be there in forty-five minutes, I just have to freshen up."

"You're always fresh, babe," he says.

"Yeah, yeah." I hang up the phone. I go home, check the bucket on the bed and discover it's nearly at full capacity so I dump it out and replace it. That's all the handiwork I can do for now. Then I change into a bright yellow shimmering dress that shows off my tan and manages to disguise all the bits that are a bit too soft lately. My hair has somehow kept its shape and curl and so I spray a whack of hairspray on for insurance, quickly apply a strip of subtle but dark false lashes and a swipe of magenta lip tint. I find myself hoping that Aaron doesn't want sex so I don't have to go through the effort of getting ready all over again and then quickly feel ashamed.

Man, I thought a woman's sex drive was supposed to go up as she got older, not down. I cringe at the thought but still make my way to the car and drive through maddening traffic to Sunset, where I pull to a stop near 46<sup>th</sup> and Vincente.

Aaron's house is a simple two-story with a walk-up to the second floor and a garage underneath. It's plain – especially since a bunch of guys live there – but because it's so close to the zoo and the beach, I know the rent is phenomenally high, just like everything in Sunset. There have been a couple of times before I bought my place that I contemplated my future with him and if I should invite him to move in with me. It would help with mortgage and be cheaper for him in the long run, but honestly I don't think I could do it. It's not that I want to live alone forever. It's just I don't think I could ever live with him.

That thought sobers me a little and causes me to pause on the bottom step. Sometimes when I catch myself thinking like that, I wonder why I bother staying with him if I don't really see a future together. But then the idea of being alone again and in the city's dating scene, especially now, freaks me the fuck out and I hate to think of myself as a quitter.

I take in a deep breath, force myself to think happier thoughts, like the glass of wine I can't wait to have and my friends whom I'll see later, and head up the stairs.

I knock and he eventually comes to the door, holding a beer.

"You look fucking hot," he says as he looks me up and down. He puts an arm around me and pulls me closer to him. He's already drunk which pisses me off because it means I'll be stuck being the designated driver on my birthday. A cab ride from here would be crazy expensive and I don't think he'd pay for it.

He kisses me lightly on the lips and then takes my hand, leading me inside the house. It's dark with the only lights being from the kitchen down the hall.

"Why is it so dark?" I say, looking around the living room. "Where are Chuck and Adam?"

"Sit down," he says, practically pushing me down on the couch. "I'll get you a drink."

I watch him go as his silhouette disappears down the hall. "Nothing too heavy," I tell him. "I guess I'm driving now."

"No you're not," he yells back.

It's too fucking dark in here, even the curtains are drawn and none of the street lights can get in. I lean over the couch and turn on the lamp beside me.

There is a split second where my eyes adjust to the light and then I can't believe what I'm seeing.

It looks like every person I know is standing around me, some crouching, some with their backs against the wall. Linden, James, Nicole, Kayla, Penny. They are all smiling, frozen.

And then Linden bellows, "Surprise!" and someone else screams "Happy birthday, fucker!" and I'm suddenly enveloped by all my friends.

I also think I've had a minor heart attack. It takes me a moment to remember to breathe, then to let out a scream of, well, surprise.

“What the hell!?” I cry out, my hand to my chest, looking at all of them. I noticed Chuck and Adam are here, as well as Ben, Nicola’s new boyfriend, Caroline and Dan, who work at the Lion for James, and Aria, my co-worker from All Saints.

This is one of the most amazing things that have ever happened to me. Something so simple – gathering a bunch of people I know in the room – but it means the world.

Nicola pulls me into a hug. “Your face was amazing.”

James slaps my back. “That was so hard not to say anything, I can’t believe you fell for it.”

My heart beats rapidly in my chest from the commotion and Linden comes over. “Happy birthday, baby blue.” Before he has a chance to hug me – or perhaps that was never his intention – Penny grabs my wrists and pulls me toward her.

“Hope you didn’t piss your panties,” she says as she bear hugs me and I laugh.

“I was close,” I joke and then Aaron is at my side handing me a glass of wine. I stare up at him with bright eyes. I can’t believe he actually planned this all for me. I’m hit with a pang of guilt at the thoughts I was thinking earlier. I need to be better to him – apparently he’s full of surprises.

Someone puts on Led Zeppelin’s “Trampled Underfoot,” one of my favorite Zep songs, and the night swings into action. The Lion is out of the question now, here is where the party is and where it was always supposed to be.

I go into the kitchen to help Nicola and Aaron take some of the appetizers out of the fridge. Once Nicola leaves with a bowl of spinach and artichoke dip, I grab Aaron around the waist and hold him close to me.

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely as I peer up at him. “Thank you, thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

He gives me a bashful, boyish smile. “Don’t worry about it. I thought it was a good idea. It was all Linden’s though.”

Did I hear that right? “What?”

“Yeah, he called me a few weeks ago and said he had a great idea for your birthday present but he needed my help. He wanted to use my place because you’d be less suspicious that way and I was like sure, that’s cool. It was all him.” He reaches behind and squeezes my ass. “My birthday gift will come later though, don’t you worry babe.”

I'm too surprised to pay that promise any attention.

This was all Linden's idea?

*Linden* did all of this...for me?

I find myself pulling away from Aaron and staring at him with new eyes. He doesn't seem ashamed in the slightest or even jealous that another guy would do all of this. In fact, I've never seen Aaron get jealous over Linden, not even once. I used to really like that about him but now I'm starting to wonder if a little jealousy is a healthy thing.

"More wine?" he asks and brings out the bottle from the fridge, filling it up before I say anything. "Here's to fucking thirty, you cougar," he says jokingly. I glare back and am still glaring as he leaves the kitchen to join the rest of the party.

I stay leaning against the counter, sipping my glass for a minute, trying to wrap my head around it all. Linden had done this for me. I'm sure to some people it's not a big deal – their friends throw them surprise parties all the time and he *is* my friend.

But for some reason, it was cutting deep, and in a wonderfully warm way.

I decide to head toward the bathroom and as I go down the hall away from the party and round the corner, I literally bump right into the man of the hour. Linden.

It's amazing how my body brushing against his just unleashes this vat of butterflies right into my stomach.

"Sorry," Linden says with a cheeky grin, peering down at me.

I grab his forearm. I love a good, strong forearm on a man and his forearm game is on point. Skin still dark from the summer, just enough hair to make him manly but not a gorilla, the quotes tattooed on the inner side ("She's mad but she's magic. There is no lie in her fire") and muscles to burn, like you can imagine him either chopping wood with ease or gripping your hips as he takes you hard from behind.

I'm starting to think maybe grabbing his forearm was a bad idea. I let it go and then for what seems like the first time ever, I'm at a loss of what to say to him.

"Linden," I say and then stop, biting my lip like some moronic schoolgirl.

His dark blue eyes search mine. They can be so damn intense sometimes and I'm afraid of what he's looking for and what he's about to

deduce.

“Did Aaron tell you?” he asks cautiously.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t want him to,” he says, not taking his eyes off of mine.

“Why not?”

He shrugs, his brow furrowing. “I don’t know. It didn’t seem right. I wanted you to think that it was all his idea.”

I give my head a small shake. “Why?”

He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing on his thick neck and I briefly imagine what it’s like to bite him there, just a small nibble or two. I bet he tastes like sage and testosterone.

His eyes settle on my lips. “Because this is the sort of thing the man in your life should do for you. Not your friend.”

Something in my chest is growing warm, clawing through me. I don’t know if it’s all in my head or what but something in this dark hallway is changing. The air around us is becoming electric, like before a summer storm, and the tension feels thick enough to choke you.

“Then why did you do it?” I ask and now my voice is just a whisper. Whatever is happening, I’m afraid that if I speak too loud, it will go away and break the spell.

He stares at me so intently, he must feel it too. He looks at my lips like he wants to devour them. Perhaps he wants to taste me just as much as I want to taste him.

Of course, that would be impossible.

Then again, he is reaching for my face.

Oh, lord have mercy.

With that same searing look in his eyes, he puts his fingers along my cheekbones and slowly trails them up to push my hair behind my ears. His touch is like a torch, setting off fireworks, making my skin come alive.

“It’s too bad about the pact,” he murmurs as he slides my hair behind my ear, rubbing the strands between his fingers. I am so glad I conditioned the shit out of it this morning because from the smile teasing the corner of his lips, he seems to enjoy it.

I softly clear my throat, so conscious of everything now – how close we are standing, the way he’s just touching my hair, the way I’m getting lost in his eyes. “What about it?”



He smiles sadly and takes his hand away. But he doesn't step back and he doesn't stop staring at me. "You're thirty today. And you're with someone else."

"So are you. Where is Nadine anyway?" I ask and then instantly regret it. The mention of her name makes Linden stand up straighter.

"She couldn't come. She had other plans. I'm sorry."

I'm not. She didn't come out for my last birthday either. Granted she was in the hospital, but still.

He lets out a long sigh and runs his hand through his hair. "Listen, Steph..." he says and then he comes even closer. The heat between us rises and the tension turns into a strained rope.

"What's going on?" A voice booms.

We both whip our heads around to see James standing in the hall, his arms crossed. He doesn't look pleased. In fact, he looks ready to kill the both of us.

Immediately I feel like we were doing something wrong. Maybe because deep down, I wanted to do something wrong. Or maybe because James seems to be both hurt and disgusted.

"Nothing, man," Linden says. "Wishing the birthday girl a happy birthday."

James continues to eye us and I consciously take a step back. "Aaron told me that it was all Linden's idea. You know for the surprise. So I was just thanking him."

Linden shoots me a killer look and for a moment I have no idea what it means.

Then James raises his brows in shock and says, "It was your idea?"

Oh. So James thought it was all Aaron too. I wonder why the hell Linden didn't tell him.

Linden gives him an exasperated look. "It isn't a big deal." He gives me a quick look. "I'll talk to you later." And then he leaves, going back to the party.

Now I'm alone with James and I can't help but remember what happened exactly one year ago between us. I really hope he doesn't bring that up.

"What else were you guys talking about?" James asks me. He's trying to play it cool but there is this air of suspicion in his voice.

"Nothing," I tell him. "I was just thanking him, that's all."

He narrows his eyes at me, enough so that I go, “What is it, James?”

“I don’t know,” he says as he moves past me to the washroom and I remember that’s why I had come down here to begin with. “From where I was standing it looked like a lot more than saying thanks.”

I give him a crazy look. “Well, okay then. Stop being so weird.”

“I’m not being weird,” he says defensively and now I can see those wheels turning behind his brown eyes. He is thinking of my last birthday, I just know it.

“Good,” I tell him quickly before he has a chance to bring it up. I know it would be something along the lines of, “Always getting lucky on your birthday or something like that.” We’d never ever discussed what had happened that night and I want to keep it that way.

I forgo the bathroom, letting him have it, and scurry down the hall back to the kitchen where I promptly fill up on more wine before returning to the party. By the time my glass is bone dry, I’m feeling pretty good about age thirty and do what I can to shut everything else out of my head.

I don’t think about James.

I don’t think about Linden.

At least, I try not to think about Linden. But when I later find out that he also made the playlist we are listening to, with of all my favorite songs (heavy on the Zeppelin), I can’t help it.

I can’t stop thinking about him.

I can’t stop thinking about the pact.

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The next morning I wake up with a raging hangover. It’s not exactly how I thought I’d ease into my thirties but then again, it’s par for the course by now. Of course, I used to be able to polish off a bottle of white wine and some cocktails without feeling too bad but now I’m hurting. Maybe hangovers are more of a bitch to deal with in your thirties.

On the plus side, I don’t wake up to anyone I regret. Aaron is sleeping soundly beside me, his snoring soft, and I spend a few bleary-eyed moments staring at him as I try to wake up.

He really is a great-looking specimen. It’s as if God decided to create a man who was destined to model surfboards and swimwear and that’s how Aaron came to be. He is tanned and smooth nearly everywhere. He doesn’t

even manscape, though I know it's popular among his model friends, because his body hair is dark blonde and usually bleached from the sun, and his shaggy hair has all these perfect highlights. His eyes are the kind of green that make you do a double-take and they shine with the clarity of jade.

He's full of easy-going, boyish charm. He's full of fun and games. He's full of youth and possibility.

I am lucky, I really am.

Is it wrong that I have to keep telling myself that?

I slowly ease out of bed and go into the bathroom, the only en-suite in the house. I splash cold water on my face and examine my pores for a few moments before swallowing two Advil dry. I have a few beauty products stored in the medicine cabinet so I rub on some tinted moisturizer and swipe cream blush on my lips and cheeks. I still look like I was hit by a truck.

When I've slipped on one of his checkered shirts and pulled on a pair of boxers, I make my way downstairs and blink in surprise when I see a bunch of people passed out all over the place. The last thing I remember from last night was blabbing to Penny about how much I love Michael Keaton as *Batman* before someone must have ushered me off to bed.

Penny herself is sleeping on one of the couches, with James on the floor right beneath, lying on a bunch of coats. The other couch is occupied by Dan. I don't see Linden anywhere and wonder how he got home. I can't really remember him leaving except feeling acute disappointment when he did.

I have to say I'm a bit relieved. From the weird tension between us earlier it wouldn't have been very good if he did stick around. Maybe I would have been talking to him about Michael Keaton instead of Penny and then what would have happened? Drunk thirty-year old Stephanie might be a force to be reckoned with.

In the kitchen I put on a giant pot of coffee and am done drinking my first cup, between bites of a browned banana, by the time everyone else stirs. They all gravitate toward me like zombies, reaching with outstretched limbs for the coffee mugs, mumbling incoherently, their faces pale.

Penny's heavy eye makeup from last night is smudged all over her face but she's the most chipper of the lot.

"So, when are we going camping?" she asks me.

“What?” My brain turns over on itself to try and figure out what she’s talking about. It’s slow going.

“Last night, we talked about how awesome camping is and that we should go on a couples camping trip.” She looks at James. “Don’t you remember?”

He nods though he’s frowning much like I am. Man, I must have been pretty drunk to be talking about camping.

Penny goes on. “Anyway I was thinking more about it this morning-“

“You just woke up,” James tells her.

“And,” she continues, “I think I know just the place. Have you ever heard of Sea Ranch, just south of Mendocino?”

“Yeah, of course,” I tell her. Sea Ranch is like this rustic resort right above the angry Pacific. I’d never been but had often passed by the area on the few times I’ve gone up Highway One.

“My co-worker has a vacation rental there and we could easily use it for a weekend. I think we should all go.” She quickly eyes Dan. “Except for you, Dan, because you’re single and I don’t know you. But everyone else. You and Aaron, me and James and Linden and Nadine.”

Dan shrugs and pours himself a cup of coffee, seemingly glad to not be included in this messy bunch.

“I don’t know,” James says warily. His hair is sticking out from all directions, like it’s hungover too.

“Oh come on,” Penny says, elbowing him in the gut. “It would be really cheap, maybe even free, and fun.”

“It’s not really camping though,” I point out, not sure how I feel about the whole thing either.

She scrunches up her nose, displaying her septum ring that matches James’s perfectly. “We’re all beyond camping at this point. This is how grown-ups camp.”

“What about work?” James asks.

“Dan will cover your absence, right Dan?” she asks and Dan, silent Dan, just nods.

“But what about Stephanie’s work?” James adds and I know he’s right. It’s only me working and there is no way I could hire someone in a rush for this. Not only would I be stuck with someone that probably isn’t a good fit, but I’d have to leave them in charge of the store. Not happening.

“Sorry,” I tell her. “James is right. I’m the only employee. I have to work.”

“So close the shop for the weekend,” she says. “When is the last time you’ve had a proper break? Even a weekend?”

I try not to think about that because I know the answer. I go up to see my mom on some Sundays. Other than that, I haven’t gone anywhere for a year.

A whole fucking year.

“I know. But that’s the way it is,” I tell her. “The working man is a sucker.”

A few days go past and I’m just about to close up shop when I end up getting a text from Linden. I hadn’t heard from him since my birthday, not even the day after. I’d learned that Nadine had come to pick him up while we were all doing karaoke and I guess she’d been watching him pretty closely after that.

**Hey baby blue. Penny just messaged me asking if me and Nadine wanted to stay at Sea Ranch with her and James next weekend. I think you should come.**

This was news to me. I didn’t think they’d still go camping if I wasn’t going but there you have it.

**Hey yourself, cowboy. I told Penny I can’t go. Working.**

**She told me that. But I still think you should. Just close the shop for the weekend. Close early Friday and you only lose the Saturday.**

**Saturday is the busiest day here. I’d lose a lot of money.**

**It can’t all be about money. You have to have a life too.**

*Easy for you to say, I think.*

**I know but this is what I signed up for. I knew I’d have to make sacrifices.**

**You are going to work yourself into the ground, Steph. Please. I’m worried about you. You need a bloody break, a chance to relax.**

There is a pause and I see that he’s writing something else. I hold my breath and wait.

It appears: **It would make me very happy if you came. Please. I miss you.**

My breath gets sucked down my throat even more. Linden is not normally like this. He’s the solid, unemotional, unsentimental rock. He’s not the type to tell anyone, I don’t care who they are, that he misses them.

He doesn't say anything after that so I know he's waiting for my response. I don't really have a choice.

**Okay, I text back. I'll close the shop for the weekend. Only because you're right, I need a break.**

**That's all I wanted to hear.**

I exhale slowly and see the last person leaving the store, empty-handed. It's going to hurt me for sure to close it down for a day but I guess I could do more damage to myself if I work myself into an early grave. If I could get past the guilty feeling, maybe taking a break will be better in the long run.

I quickly text Aaron and tell him the plans, not even knowing if he'd be able to get off work. Naturally, though, he can. He just has to forgo another party. Poor boy.

So, I guess I'm going on a couple's trip after all. A ball of pin-prickling nerves forms in my gut and I realize my reservations have nothing to do with actually closing down the store but something else.

It's almost as if this trip is more than just a trip. This is a weekend where absolutely everything could change.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *LINDEN*

“Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

“Oh my god, it’s so pretty!”

“Fuck, we have to stop guys. Guys! Oysters! We need oysters! James, why aren’t we stopping?”

“Linden, remind me again why you didn’t fly us all in a helicopter? We could have avoided this long road to hell. I feel like I’m Chevy Chase in charge of some pain in the ass National Lampoon family.”

That’s Aaron, Nadine, Stephanie and James, respectively, yammering to each other as we cruise up the coast to Sea Ranch. The trip so far has been beautiful, even more so than when I’ve flown above it, but it’s a long, tiring, winding road and by the time deep azure of the Pacific meets the windswept hills outside of Sea Ranch, the six of us are dying to escape James’s Suburban.

We don’t seem to be so lucky with the weather but that was to be expected. Late October can be hit or miss on the coast and as we unload our stuff from the vehicle and into the modest, two bedroom rancher set back on a low cliff, the fog is as thick as my nana’s stew and obscures everything except a few feet in front of you.

“Fuck! It’s cold,” Steph swears as an icy, damp breeze riles up the hair around her face. Her nose is already a shade of red, which is just too fucking cute.

“Aren’t you glad we aren’t camping?” Penny yells, pulling her leather jacket close to her as she runs back to the car for something else.

My own leather jacket, thanks to Stephanie, is doing a fine job of keeping me warm even though it does feel like you’re walking through a winter cloud out here. I’m tempted to take it off and drape it over Stephanie’s shoulders but Aaron comes out of the house and tells her he’ll bring the rest in. For a moment I’m almost impressed because that has to be the most gentlemanly thing I’ve heard the young fuck say to her so far but I don’t let myself get carried away.

I still don’t think he’s the guy for her and I think after this weekend, I’ll have no doubts about that.

I don't know why I care though. There's nothing I can do about it at this point.

Once we all bring everything inside, there is the fight for the bedrooms and privacy. Aaron immediately calls one bedroom and I'm about to call the other when I decide Penny and James should have it since she's the one who organized this whole thing. The cottage is a co-worker's and we're staying the weekend for free.

Nadine groans loudly from beside me. "I can't sleep on a couch," she mumbles, gesturing to what looks like a really nice pull-out under skylights and before the wide expanse of the fog-shrouded Pacific. "My back."

She sometimes has back problems. They seem to have stemmed from around the time she had her appendix out, so I have no reason to believe she makes this shit up to get her way sometimes. You know, so she doesn't have to do the dishes or take out the garbage or go to her job. I can't count the number of times I've left her in my bed and gone to work while she stays at home and of course there's a scramble at the charter company because she's *my* girlfriend and now they have to hire another temp to cover reception.

Nadine didn't even want to go on this trip. When we'd first started dating she'd been very adventurous and sporty. We did a lot of road trips to go hiking, went stand-up paddle-boarding, we even got into weekly rock-climbing at a gym. But in the last couple of months, she's changed a wee bit.

I want to say it's for the better but...it's not. She's more suspicious of me and what I do, especially when it comes to other women, especially when it comes to Stephanie, and her nag-o-meter is turned to eleven. She badgers me more about the future and the more that the future approaches, the less certain I am about it.

I want to make this work. I don't want all this time I've put into this relationship to go to waste. I'm at an age now where you're not supposed to still be finding the one. Hell, aside from my core group here, most of the people I know are already married with children.

I don't want to break it off with Nadine and discover that we could have worked through it, that it was just a rough patch, that she could have changed back to the way she was, to the happy, fuck-filled days we used to have. I don't want to give up.

Not without a reason.



My eyes trail over to Stephanie and I know what she's going to say to Nadine's complaints. I want to tell her no, she doesn't need to do that.

"That's okay," Stephanie says, smiling at Nadine. "Aaron and I can take the couch, we don't mind."

And even though Aaron is the one who called the room, he really doesn't look like he cares. He shrugs in his slacker way and says, "Yeah, no worries, man."

"Thanks," Nadine says quickly and without really looking at her. Stephanie knows that Nadine doesn't like her and is usually trying to bend over backwards to fix that. I want to tell her there is no point, that Nadine is jealous of our relationship and no amount of sucking up and being nice is going to change anything.

The funny thing is, Stephanie isn't really sucking up either. She just wants people to like her. It's one thing I've watched with her over the years, something she still hasn't really grown out of. She has confidence in so many things but she's still screaming for approval. Sometimes I just want to pull her aside and tell her that she doesn't need to be the daughter that's filling the void that her brother left behind, or the best business on the block, or the best looking girl in the room. She is already all of that and more and her own approval is the only one she needs.

I try and meet Stephanie's gaze but she's busy bringing her metallic duffel bag over to the couch. She plops down on the cushions and bounces up and down, smiling at Aaron as if to say the couch was a better option anyway. Her breasts, which are looking more spectacular every single day, jiggle all over the fucking place and I avert my eyes before anyone notices. They're more hypnotic than a lava lamp.

When we've all settled in and put our stuff away, we gather around the large table beside the kitchen and crack open the beer and wine. It's already dark outside – we had to leave the city right at five thirty p.m. since Stephanie had to close up her shop. The nearest grocery store is in Gualala, which is only about ten minutes away but no one wants to move out in that cold, thick fog.

Thankfully we all got take-out on the way up here, so we're happy with just the jars of homemade salsa that Nadine prepared and bags of tortilla chips.

For some reason, maybe because all three couples rarely hang out together like this, but it's sorta awkward just sitting around the table and

drinking. Usually James and I can shoot the shit but he's being weird and quiet too. Maybe he's just tired and worried. He rarely leaves the bar for the whole weekend and I know he's thinking about the staff he left in charge.

"How about strip poker?" I suggest brightly.

Nadine rolls her eyes. "No one wants to see you naked."

"Excuse me?" I raise my brows. That's a new one.

"I do," says Penny eagerly.

I grin and tip my beer at her. "There's a good girl, thank you Penny."

"You have nothing to worry about," Stephanie says to Nadine with a wry smile. "Linden is the master of poker. He'll be getting your clothes off if anything."

Nadine seems rankled by that. I know it's because she feels she should know me better than Steph does.

"I'm down," James says and he heads over to the stack of games they have on one of the shelves by the fireplace. "Or we could try Monopoly?"

"Only if you want everyone to turn against each other," says Penny and everyone murmurs in agreement. So many fights started and friendships tested over the movement of little metal hats and thimbles.

I look to Steph and waggle my brows. "Too bad there is no *Happy Days* game," I say to her and she giggles. When we were twenty-three or twenty-four, she'd broken her ankle and had been more or less on bed rest. I'd come by with James a few nights a week and we would just binge watch the show *Friends*, going through all seasons even though we'd both watched the show religiously when we were teenagers. One of our favorite episodes (along with 'Pivot' and Ross's leather pants) was the one where Joey suggested they play strip *Happy Days* game because they had no cards.

Alas, James does have cards but as he throws them down on the table, nearly knocking over a beer, he looks at all of us and says, "Actually, this is kind of like a *Friends* situation right now. Three girls, three guys. Most of us great friends."

"Well, we all know James and Stephanie had a little affair when they were young and stupid," Penny says but she's not bothered by it. She smiles her big gap-toothed grin at them and then turns her bright eyes to me. "What about you, Linden? You tap that too?"

Normally when someone questions the platonic validity of my friendship with Stephanie, it's easy to laugh it off. But here, tonight, it's fucking awkward. I can feel Nadine's eyes boring into me, Steph is actually

blushing and looking away and James has that same murder face as he did when he caught me and Steph talking at her birthday party.

“You mean James, right?” I manage to joke. It’s a safe joke.

Penny isn’t impressed. “No. Though I do wonder about your late night talks sometimes,” she says and then wiggles her fingers in James’s direction before turning back to me. “You and Stephanie never hooked up?”

“No,” I tell her, then I scrunch up my face. “She’s gross.”

“Shut up,” Steph lobbies back. “You couldn’t get with this even if you tried.”

Okay, now I’m tempted to play a little ball here. “Is that so?”

Steph raises her chin and looks to Penny. “We’ve never hooked up. I do have some standards, you know.”

“Ouch.” I grab my chest dramatically. “Cuts like a knife.”

“I love Bryan Adams,” Aaron remarks, because of course he would.

“Maybe you’re just not his type, ever think of that?” Nadine says snidely. Steph’s mouth drops open briefly but to her credit she manages to shake it off. I’m all for my girlfriend sticking up for me but there was an undertone to her words that bordered on bitchiness.

“I am completely not his type,” Steph says smoothly before taking an everlasting gulp of her wine, as if she’s trying to bury whatever else she wants to say.

I catch her eye for a moment and something passes between us, something along the lines of an apology from me about Nadine. I also wish I could tell her that she *is* my type. My only type. But I focus on the deck of cards instead. “Well, that could have been potentially awkward.” James snorts but I ignore him. “So, why not make it more awkward and play strip poker?”

“No fucking way,” says Nadine. “We’re all adults here, we shouldn’t be playing board games.”

“Just because you’re an ‘adult’,” Steph says, making quotes in the air with her fingers, “doesn’t mean you can’t have fun. Hell, I don’t feel like I’m thirty. Granted, I just turned thirty, but still. I feel like I’m twenty-five. Actually, no, I feel like I’m some indiscriminate age. And that’s okay. I would hate to feel my age if that means I can’t have fun anymore.”

“You’d probably sing a different tune if you had children,” Nadine points out with a tilt of her head.

Steph laughs. “I wouldn’t. Just because I’m one of the few among my female friends that doesn’t have children, doesn’t mean I’m any less – or more – mature than they are. Age doesn’t really mean anything these days anyway. Thirties are the new twenties, forties are the new thirties and so on and so on. We’re all still just human beings on a learning experience that I don’t think will ever end.” She catches herself and pauses, taking a breath. “I’m a lot different from the person I was ten years ago and yet there are so many things that stay the same. My brain is the same, my thoughts can be too. I’m sure in twenty years I’ll look back on my thirties and feel like I haven’t grown up in some ways and in others I’m sure it will seem like I was nothing but an overgrown child.”

“We all feel like that,” Penny assures her. “I’m thirty-three and I don’t act my age. So be it. And it has nothing to do with the fact that I don’t have kids or I’m not married.”

“And it’s not like you have children,” I say to Nadine, pointing out the obvious and feeling bad that she seems to be picking on Steph.

She gives me a level look. “Not yet.”

Oh, fucksticks.

“Okay, now things are awkward,” James says, almost gleefully.

I couldn’t agree more. We all reach for our drinks and it’s thanks to the obliviousness of Aaron (who won’t stop humming “Cuts like a Knife”) for breaking up the tension when he says, “Okay so are we playing Monopoly or what?”

For once, I find myself saying that Monopoly is an excellent idea and soon we’re all being greedy wankers fighting for the best real estate. Like most games of Monopoly, this one drags on for hours and hours. Penny is the first one to lose everything so she just turns to drinking and trying to strategize on behalf of everyone.

Nadine is the first to give up.

“I’m going to bed, it’s late,” she says as she stifles a yawn and gets out of her chair.

I eye all the houses she has lined up on the properties and the giant wad of colorful money. “But you’re winning. You’re totally Donald Trumping it.”

“I’m tired,” she says sharply, yawning again. She does look tired, her hair even more coppery red against her pretty pale face, and I guess it is eleven at night.

“Can I take over your holdings? I mean, if this was real life...”

“*This* is real life. You’re coming to bed. Now, Linden,” she shoots a look at Steph as she emphasizes that last word.

It still really bothers me when she orders me around and especially in front of my friends. I know it’s a bit caveman-esque and maybe stupid to have so much pride in such small things – like the way you’re spoken to – but I guess there is a wee bit of my father in me after all.

I can feel everyone staring at me, wondering if I’m going to get up and follow my girlfriend. I swallow hard and then look her in the eye. “I’m not tired. Think I’ll stay up for a bit. I won’t be too late.”

I hold her gaze because I’m not a man who backs down. But damn, she makes it hard. Her lower jaw is so tense I’m quite certain she’s going to take a bite out of me if not grind her bottom teeth right out.

“Fine,” she says and she whips around heading to the bedroom. To her credit, she doesn’t slam the door.

James is watching me with a “what’s up her ass?” expression on his face. Lately Nadine and I haven’t been hanging out with him all that much, so he hasn’t been a witness to the current downfall of our relationship.

This is the downfall, right? Fuck it, I don’t know anymore. I wait until the game resumes until I put my head in my hands and try to think.

I’m too drunk to think.

When I look back up, I see Steph watching me. She doesn’t look away. I can’t seem to read her eyes, even though they are so big and blue that they beg me to try and understand her. It could be that she’s pitying me, feeling sorry for me, that I’m with someone like that. It could be that she can see just how damn unhappy I really am underneath it all.

Or it could be something else. It could be regret. Her own regrets for me and for herself.

I know that’s wishful thinking, but that’s what I want to see.

I want her to realize we’re both not with the people we should be.

And if she already knows that, I want her to know it’s not too late.

Or is it?

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The next morning we’re all greeted by piercing sunshine and the promise of a better day.

It had turned out more promising for me, especially when Nadine woke me up with a morning blow job to say she was sorry for the way she was acting the night before. It's hard to say no to a good BJ and even harder to ignore a heartfelt apology. She hasn't exactly been very forthcoming with them – we both have a lot of pride to contend with.

Unfortunately, though the fog has been whisked away and by noon the sun is blazing on the all mighty Pacific, the good vibes don't last. Stephanie and Penny want to drive up to Gualala to get some groceries and I say I want to go with them. It's a nice drive and I guess I'm a bit overprotective of the girls, even though I shouldn't be.

Nadine doesn't want to go and there begins the problem. She doesn't want to go and by default thinks I shouldn't go either.

“Why are you always wanting to be around *her*?” she asks, barely keep her voice to a hush as Steph and Penny head out the door.

“It's not like that,” I tell her, ignoring the stab of guilt. It feels like its spearing my kidneys.

“You know most guys aren't friends with girls like that.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Like *what*, exactly?”

She stares at me for a beat and then looks away. “Nothing. Go, have fun.”

I get behind the wheel since I'm the one most used to driving James's Suburban while Steph takes shotgun. Penny is in the back, her head hanging out the open window like a sun-happy dog.

There is a brief, shining moment where I look over at Stephanie and feel like it's just her and I against the world. I can pretend that Penny isn't even here. It's just Steph's beautiful face and those large, searching eyes as she takes in the rolling, wild hills around her. In another life, in a dream, I would have pulled the car over and fucked her in one of those fields, letting the feral coast take hold of us and bring all those hidden desires out into the open.

But this isn't a dream and my fantasy has to stay just that.

We stay longer than we mean to in Gualala. There's nothing to the town, just a bunch of buildings on either side of Highway One, but it possesses that quaint, tired, windswept quality that most hamlets on the coast do. We get enough groceries for a dinner, a breakfast and two lunches, plus all the beer and snack provisions, then poke around at the stores. Most are closed for the upcoming winter.

I barely ate breakfast considering all we had was a loaf of bread and some leftover butter so when Penny starts grumbling about how starved she is, we head into Bones' Restaurant to get a quick bite of the smokiest brisket and drink a few beers. Even through dirty, salt-sprayed windows, the view over the houses and cliffs leading to the ocean is staggering and before we know it time is slipping through our fingers.

When we get back to the cottage I can tell the atmosphere has shifted a little. Though the bags of groceries and booze we plop down on the counter seem to satisfy Aaron, who digs into them like a ravenous squirrel, James and Nadine are pissed off.

"What took you so long?" James says. I thought he was talking to Penny but he's actually looking at me.

"We had a bite to eat," I explain with a shrug, not sure why he's being so pissy. Is it because I had his girlfriend *and* his car?

"You could have called." He's squinting at me, like he thinks I'm lying.

"Okay, *mum*," I tell him. "There was no reception out there. Jeez. We brought you food and drinks, how about you have some and chill the fuck out."

He raises his hands and grabs a beer out of the box, as if he wasn't acting irrational. "Just asking."

Nadine, meanwhile, is silent, which is a terrifying thing. I know at any minute she's going to blow. I also know it won't happen while we're around the others, so I also grab a beer and pull up a bar stool, planning to never leave this seat for as long as I live.

I put up with her silent treatment for the next hour while Aaron fries up some hot dogs for him and James but then I have to go to the bathroom. I'm two beers in and at the breaking point. I wait until I see Nadine talking to Penny outside on the patio, their faces turned to the sun, then I get up and go.

I can piss real quick. You learn that sort of thing when you grow up with a brother like Bram who would preen the hours away in the bathroom and torment you with the toilet plunger if you tried to get in the way.

I'm zipping up as soon as I'm out the bathroom door but there she is, hand on her hip, plaid white and pink shirt knotted at the waist, red hair scooped up off her face, showcasing the line between her brows and the slight sneer to her lips.

"Hey babe," I tell her, giving her my easy smile.

It only rankles her more. She lays into me, rather loudly, that I'm avoiding her and acting like she's a burden to have around and that I never show her any respect. I'm not sure which parts of that aren't true, but one of them has to be. And because of that, I kind of feel like an ass. And I don't protest too much either.

"When we get back home, we need to have a talk," she says before she storms away, her ponytail nearly slapping me in the face.

I can't argue with that. We do need to have a talk, I just don't really know how it's going to go or what I'm going to say. I wonder how long I can coast through life on nothing but denial.

What I do know is I need to get away from the situation for a moment. I grab another beer and walk out the door, my feet leading me down a gravel path, through bleached fields and dying wildflowers until I'm knee-deep in dune grass and the wind is nearly lifting me off my feet. I'm on the wide, seemingly endless expanse of sandy grey beach that fades away into the ocean mist, like it's nothing but an apparition.

I sit down on a log and pry the cap off the beer on the edge of the wood. My mind sort of goes into this quasi-meditative state as I watch the waves pound the beach over and over again. The sound, the force, it all makes me go numb, to a place where I want to be.

"Am I going to get in trouble for talking to you?" a familiar voice eventually breaks into my nonsensical thoughts.

I look up and see Stephanie standing to the side of me, the sun lowering on the horizon behind her. She's backlit and glowing like an angel and I can't help the easy grin as it slides across my face.

"Probably," I tell her and then nod to the log. "Sit down. What are you doing out here?"

She lifts her hand and I notice she's has her phone out. "Taking pictures. You know, for the shop. Like, inspiration for future displays and stuff." She sits down beside me and starts flipping through it. I watch as some artsy shots of shells and tide pools and driftwood flicker across the screen, then I'm staring at the profile of her face as wisps of chocolate hair constantly move around her cheeks. I'm dying to reach out and smooth them behind her ears so I can stare at her more clearly.

She's such a beautiful woman. And such a woman. In a way, it's weird to think like that because I've known her since we were twenty-one. We were just kids back then, her with her blue hair and me with my



assholeness. Now she's filled out, like with real curves you just want to grab and squeeze and play with and a face that's more chiseled and at peace than it ever was before. Every day, every year, feels like an evolution to the person she is now, the woman sitting beside me, especially when you scroll back to where we all started.

I can't believe I've been a part of her life for this long.

She looks up at me, squinting against the light. "What do you think?"

I know she's talking about the pictures but I say, "I think I'm lucky I've known you for so long."

She jerks her head back slightly then smiles. "Really?"

"Really."

"That's surprising," she remarks.

"Why?"

She raises a shoulder. "I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if you know how lucky you are." I frown at her and she goes on. "I don't mean about me. I mean, you know, with your life. Everything."

"And girlfriend?" It's a weighted question.

She rubs her hands together and leans over to start playing with the sand, running it through her fingers. "Maybe. If you're happy, then you're lucky."

"And if I'm not happy?"

She pauses, thinking that over. "Then you can change that."

"I'm not sure that I can."

She looks up at me. "I know Nadine doesn't like me. But I also know that I rarely get to see the two of you together. And you and me...well, I've been busy. So have you. I don't really know what's going on in your life. I don't know how she treats you. We used to talk about this kind of thing... but now I don't know anything about your relationship. I just know that you can't make snap judgements about people. Some people seem like total bitches to everyone else but they can be extremely compassionate, kind and loyal to the ones they love. If Nadine is like that with you, I wouldn't know about it and it would explain why you're still with her."

When she's done rambling she stares back out at the ocean. "Or maybe I'm just talking out of my ass."

"No," I say slowly. "That makes sense. But...I don't really know what to say. I'm just hoping that this is a little phase of hers, you know? A rough patch. And we'll get out of it. I feel like...at this point in life, you have to

be ready to stop the games and get serious. That each person that comes into your life, you have to know if they are going to be there in the long run.”

She seems to freeze at that. “Are you serious about her? Marriage and all that?” she asks softly.

“No,” I find myself blurting out. And I can’t take it back because it’s completely true.

“Even if you do find out it’s just a rough patch?”

I take in a long, hard breath as the weight of a million decisions topple on me. “I don’t know,” I tell her and I get to my feet, feeling the need to turn away from her and where the conversation should be going. “But I do know, that things would be better if they had worked out differently.” I swallow and look her in the eye. “For both of us.”

Then I leave her there on the log, on the beach, the wind in her hair, before I do something I might regret.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *STEPHANIE*

“Penny for your thoughts?” Aaron asks me before he suddenly bursts out laughing. He looks at Penny, nearly keeling over on the picnic table, and says, “Sorry Penny, you must hear that a lot and think people are talking to you.”

“Not as much as you would think,” she says wryly and from the look on her face I know she thinks Aaron is a total moron.

I wish I didn’t agree with that half the time.

We’re all sitting on the picnic table just outside of the cottage, in front of a fire pit we have roaring. It’s dark outside, the beer and wine are scattered about, as are the messy ingredients for our half-hearted attempts at S’mores. The wind only whips up every now and then and though it’s toasty in front of the fire, the moment you step away you can really feel that late autumn chill rolling in off of the Pacific.

I should be completely relaxed and in my element. I love being by the ocean. I love the soothing, regenerating qualities of the waves, the way they seem to cleanse you with each break. I love the wind in my hair and fresh air in my lungs and that happy, almost surreal sense of freedom that you get when you’re outside and staring up at that dark, star-filled sky.

But I’m not relaxed, not even in the slightest. I had thought that this whole weekend I would be distracted by work, by the guilt of closing today and the money I’d lose. But that hasn’t even entered my headspace for more than a second. Well, barely more than a second.

Instead, my mind is all over Linden. Literally, crawling over every single glance and touch and word he’s thrown my way. This is exactly why I would never give Aaron my thoughts, whether they be in exchange for a copper penny or a wad of thousand dollar bills. It’s wrong and it’s bad but I can’t help it.

I can’t figure my out best friend anymore.

Sometimes, when he looks at me, I swear something in him has changed. The glances are more intense, his eyes seem molten and charged. Sexual.

And I like it. I love it. I want it. I want there to be this change, for this to be a thing because then maybe, maybe I would act on it. Maybe I would

take that chance and turn him into something more than a friend.

But there lies the problem. How do you ensure someone feels the same way about you without telling them how you feel? This isn't grade school. I can't pass on a message to James and get him to fish around. First of all, sometimes I get the feeling that James is a bit wary of me and Linden's relationship and I know there is no way he'd be accepting of it, regardless.

And if I tell Linden how I feel and he doesn't feel the same way that would ruin our friendship. It would ruin everything we have together, not to mention the relationships we're both in.

When it all comes down to it, I'm not really sure if I can ever do anything about it. I'm just seeing things I want to see and living in a fantasyland. The reality is totally different. My reality is Aaron, sweet but stupid Aaron with his bronzed skin, killer highlights and endless summer attitude. Linden's reality is Nadine...

...and I can't really come up with any positive adjectives for the girl, so I won't. But I now wonder if Linden is going to stay with her if it turns out he's really unhappy. In some ways, I can't believe he even admitted that to me. Once upon a time we would talk about our dating lives with each other, but that all changed in the last year. Now, it's like it's completely off-limits and that's only added another mile of distance between us.

It's not that I want to hear about him and Nadine, particularly if they are happy. And I really don't want to hear about their sex life. Linden has been known to be extremely forthcoming about that and this morning I could hear some kind of sexual activity going on in their bedroom that culminated with Linden moaning, a sound that turned me on so much I had to hop into the bathroom and get myself off before I soaked my underwear.

But even though I don't want to hear about their relationship, I want to know that he's happy. That he's okay. I want to feel close to him again.

And, I guess, I want to know if the whole pact thing was ever something he took seriously. I wonder if it still counts if we're both thirty and end up single again. If I broke up with Aaron and he broke up with Nadine – all in the natural course of things – would that mean that the pact would still be honored?

Would he seriously still consider marrying me? Could I seriously consider marrying him?

Could we at least fuck each other's brains out until we figured out what to do?

Because that, *that* sounds like the best pact of all.

“Earth to Stephanie,” James is saying now, waving his hand in front of my face. He is sitting across from me, Penny on one side of him, Linden on the other. Aaron is beside me, and Nadine beside him and across from Linden. Their end of the table seems a bit strained but I’m realizing that that’s just how their relationship is. I have been avoiding eye contact with Linden more often, though. Ever since we went to Gualala together, she’s been watching us like a hawk. I’m surprised she wasn’t spying on us while we were on the beach.

“Sorry,” I say, clearing my throat. “Spacing out a bit.”

“Thinking about work?” he asks with a sympathetic tilt to his head.

“Yeah,” I tell him. I don’t like lying to James either but it’s easier this way.

Penny leans across the table and says, “We’re going to play truth or dare. Are you in?”

I raise my brow and take a sip of my overly hoppy beer. “Look, I know I said age is nothing but a number, but...”

“Oh, it’ll be fun,” she says. Everything seems fun to Penny. Out of everyone sitting at the table, I’m hoping – and betting – that she and James will go the distance. They’d have a real rock and roll wedding.

I shrug. “All right, I just hope we have enough beer to bury all the shame that will come later.”

Linden pats the case of beer that’s on the ground beside the table. “Don’t worry about that.”

I meet his eye for a second and then quickly look away. It’s more awkward to do that than it is just to stare at his brooding face in the dark, his masculine jaw lit by the flickering fire.

The game, like I suppose all truth or dare games, starts off innocently enough. When we choose dares we are clucking like chickens (me) or chugging a whole beer (Penny) or mooning everyone (James). When we choose truth we are telling each other we were caught for shoplifting in tenth grade (me), faking orgasms when we’re too stoned to finish (Aaron, which doesn’t really surprise me), and cheating during college (Nadine).

Then it takes a drunken turn.

“Aaron,” James says. “If you had to fuck any of the girls here, not your girlfriend, who would it be?”

My eyes bug out. I'm curious as to what he's going to say but it's still kind of invasive.

But Aaron laughs while squeezing my thigh out of reassurance and says. "That's a tough call, dude. Your girlfriend is super hot. Really." Penny blushes awkwardly at that. I don't think I've ever seen her look awkward. "But Nadine has really good fashion sense."

*What?* Hey, wait a minute. Since when does dressing like a female lumberjack equal good fashion sense? I own a damn clothing store.

"Plus I think that bitch thing is kind of hot," he adds.

Now Nadine, who was looking pretty smug over the fashion comment, is glaring at him. "I'm not a bitch, I just know what I want."

"Sure," Aaron says. "But you could probably be a little nicer about it."

I'm watching Linden for his reaction, I can't help it. He's actually smiling. No, he's laughing. Aaron is on point for once.

"That didn't really answer my question," says James.

"Can't I just say I'd do them both, preferably at the same time?"

James's eyes roll up. "Cop out."

"Okay my turn," Nadine quickly says, even though it's so not her turn. "I have a dare for you Aaron. I want you to kiss Penny. With tongue."

"Whoa," James says, shooting her daggers with his eyes. "That's pushing it a bit, don't you think? And that's not how the game works."

"You afraid she's going to like it?" she retorts haughtily.

"I'm down," Penny says. She elbows James in the side. "Hey, grow up. It's just a little tonsil hockey."

"The maturity level at this table astounds me," Linden comments.

Now everyone is looking at me, I guess expecting me to protest or at least find this weird and unacceptable. The thing is, when I imagine Aaron kissing Penny, or doing her and Nadine as he mentioned in the previous scenario, I don't even feel a twinge of unease. No jealousy, no nothing.

"Why are you all looking at me, I don't care," I tell everyone. It probably isn't the best show of my love for him but whatever. "Kiss away. He's good at it." I add that last part for Penny and wink at her, mainly to piss off James.

Penny starts to lean across the table toward Aaron but Nadine yelps, "No, do it properly! You have to stand up."

Both Penny and Aaron sigh, simultaneously aggravated by the fact that they have to move. They gather at the end of the table, right beside me so I

get the front row show. Aaron grabs her around the waist, Penny grabs him by the face. They both giggle nervously, eyeing us shyly before they kiss.

It starts off slow and awkward, gets a bit more heated when you can tell their tongues are going into action, and then ends on a sweet note.

“Not bad,” Penny says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Firm but tender.”

“So kissing Aaron is like kissing steak?” Linden jokes.

Aaron gives James the thumbs up. “Nice lady you’ve got there.”

“Lady?” Penny repeats. “Oh brother.”

But they sit back down and the game resumes. James doesn’t seem bothered by it anymore and to be honest, I still didn’t feel anything as I watched that. It was just kind of weird, like I was observing some sort of experiment and not getting the results I wanted.

Did I want him to enjoy it, to want to kiss Penny? Did I want that as an excuse to break it off, to say we weren’t meant to be together?

I guess because of the extremeness of the last dare, things go back to truth telling for a while. We’re all playing it safe now, asking the easy questions, the ones you don’t mind being truthful about as long as you’re among friends.

Then it’s Penny’s turn.

She claps her hands together gleefully and wiggles in her seat. “Oh, this is going to be good,” she says and as she says it, she’s staring right at me. I can see the fire’s reflection in her lenses.

“I want you, Stephanie,” she says, pointing at me, “to kiss Linden.” Her finger switches over to him.

I’m too stunned to speak but Nadine isn’t.

“He’s not kissing her!” she exclaims in disgust.

“Hey,” I can’t help but protest, tired of the way she’s been referring to me lately.

“And, again,” James says, sounding fed-up, “that is *not* how you play the game.”

Penny slaps the table with her hands and leans over it so she can look down the table and Nadine in the eye. “Why can’t she kiss him? You made me kiss Aaron, *her* boyfriend. I think now she should kiss *your* boyfriend.”

I know what Penny’s doing. She’s trying to make things even and I think trying to rattle Nadine at the same time. I could kiss her for that but I also kind of fucking hate her for daring me to kiss Linden.

Because, I mean...I can't do that.

I can't even think that.

But suddenly there is a tap at my shoulder and it's Linden. He's gotten up and he's standing behind me, waiting for me.

"Hold on," I say and I look over at Aaron because at least Aaron is going to protest as much as Nadine is.

But Aaron is staring at me, smiling actually, with that damn goofy grin, and nodding his head like this is the coolest idea in the whole entire world. "Go on," he says and nudges me with his arm.

*Thanks a fucking lot*, I think to myself and I slowly get up, all the while trying not to look at Linden. But I can't look at Nadine either because her arms are folded across her chest and I'm paranoid she may pick up the empty beer bottle beside her and throw it at me. I know if she did, Penny would have my back in a second, but still. It could break my nose and my nose is cute.

Linden grabs my hand – actually grabs it, like this a thing that we do, grab hands – and he pulls me toward him.

"Come on," he says to me with that trademark smirk. "I'm not that horrible, am I?"

*No*, I think as I stare at his face and feel the heat from his hand transfer onto mine and warm my whole arm, then my chest, then my body. *No, you're not horrible at all. That's the problem.*

Penny starts clapping excitedly. "Well, well, get on with it."

I can't even give her a look, my eyes are locked with Linden's. He's looking at me with such sincerity that it's hard to believe what the truth really is. This is a dare and we are just friends. We don't do this, no matter how many times I've dreamed and thought and masturbated to this, we don't do *this*.

But his hands come up to my face, holding my cheeks and his palms are so large and warm that I feel my nerves spark and fray and light up my whole body. He is holding me there in the most tender, disarming way, like it's his job to protect me, to care for me. But his eyes, his eyes are anything but tender. They are dark and wild and even worried, maybe thinking that this is wrong and we shouldn't be doing this.

Or maybe they're worried that we'll find out we should.

And under all that worry there is desire and lust and a million other simmering feelings that I've craved, needed, wanted.



I wonder if he can see the fear in my eyes. I wonder if he can see the truth.

He's leaning in closer now, his eyes trailing off of mine and down to my mouth, down to where his lips are moving to.

I don't know what to do with my hands. I don't know what to do.

So I stand there and I close my eyes and I wait until I feel Linden's lips on mine.

They press on me, flush. They are soft, so soft, like a pillow I'm sinking into, like there is no bottom. Linden's lips beg, absolutely beg, for more, for more of them, for more of him. And then his mouth is parting and I am kissing him back, kissing the taste of him, which is so much more than just beer. It's spicy and wild, like his smell, and it's addictively sweet.

Our mouths fit perfectly, our lips move in rhythm against each other, that soft, wet, luxurious caress of skin on skin. It makes me want more.

So much more.

Now I know what to do with my hands, or maybe my hands know what to do with Linden. I think they've always known. I'm reaching for his waist, for the sides of his leather jacket, the very one I bought him for his birthday. I know it's not supposed to be part of the kiss, but I can't help it. I want him closer to me and I want more of him.

I get more. His tongue darts into my mouth, slowly sliding along mine and then our mouths are wider, our lips firmer, our kiss hungrier, wetter, harder.

I want to keep kissing him, feeling him, feeling this. It's stirring up gold-winged butterflies from inside my belly, it's making my thighs squeeze together, it's making me want to bite his full bottom lip, to tug at his hair, to feel his hard, rigid body beneath my fingers.

This kiss is breathless and it's making me want all the things I can't have.

*I can't have you*, I think to myself for a moment, trying to bring myself to reality, to the present, to what we really are to each other.

This is just a dare.

And then I am being shoved backward, hard, by small hands against my chest. I break apart from Linden and gasp as I nearly stumble into the grass.

"Get your fucking hands off him!" Nadine shrieks at me.

For a moment I am angry that she's all up in my face and then I am horrified at what she might have seen.

How could *any* of that have been appropriate?

As Penny gets off her to seat to come over to me, telling Nadine, “Hey, calm your tits, it was just a dare,” I look over at Aaron. He’s no longer smiling. He’s frowning, perhaps confused, but he doesn’t look angry either.

But James, James looks angry. And Linden, Linden is staring at me with so much damn sorrow that I don’t know what to do. I feel like I ruined something here, that I got too carried away.

“Excuse me,” I say, moving out of Penny’s grasp and heading back to house. I can’t be out here with these people. They all saw me kiss Linden, they all saw me enjoy that way too much. I’m hoping I can explain it away by saying I was too drunk and it was just all fun and games or just giggle and say that Linden’s such a good kisser, I couldn’t help myself or that hey, isn’t fun to make your boyfriend jealous and then wink at Aaron.

But I need to compose myself first before I can come up with any of that. I need to calm my breath, clear my mind and shove that kiss into the past where it belongs.

It was just a fucking dare. It didn’t mean anything.

It just meant everything to me.

I go back in the house and immediately fill up a glass of water. I drink two glasses full and then feel like I’m going throw up.

I hear the front door open and shut and I freeze, only breathing again when Penny comes in the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her thin brows furrowed in concern.

What do I even say to that?

“Did she hurt you?” she adds.

“Oh,” I exclaim, looking down at my chest where Nadine had shoved me. “No. No, I’m fine.”

“Man, I was so close to clocking her in the face,” Penny says, leaning against the counter and appraising me. “Are you really sure you’re okay? You look really shaken up.”

I swallow uneasily. All the water has done nothing for me. I still feel dry and panicky and sick.

“It was just a surprise, that’s all,” I say to her. “I didn’t think she’d get so upset.” I watch Penny carefully.

She shrugs. “She doesn’t like you. That’s kind of why I wanted you to kiss. It’s my fault. Plus I thought it would be fun to see two friends who

have never screwed each other make out. Are you sure you've never slept with Linden?"

I shake my head violently. "I haven't."

"Well, that's too bad. That was some kiss."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah," she says. "I swear even James was jealous at one point. It was pretty smoking. But it was also a dare. I mean, Nadine made me kiss Aaron, it's only fair. The damn chick can talk the talk but she can't walk the walk." She reaches into her bra and pulls out a red lipstick, swiping it on her lips before offering it to me. I politely decline.

"I think I'm going for a little walk," I tell her.

"Okay," she says warily. "But don't go too far. And don't ignore the party for too long. We are all your friends out there. Nadine isn't. She doesn't count so ignore her like the rest of us do."

I nod and head out the door. The wind is picking up again and I zip my jacket up to my neck. I have no plans in going far at all, in fact I make it about as far as the Suburban and then lean against it on the other side so I'm sheltered against the wind. In the distance I can hear the crack of the flames as the wind stirs it up and Aaron's laughter. It should make me feel less alone, but it doesn't.

Just what the fuck happened out there? Did that kiss actually exist or was it all in my head? Obviously Penny saw something between Linden and I – as did Nadine – but how much of that was because I was getting carried away? How much of that kiss was my wants, my desires, my doing?

And just what the hell was Linden going to think of me now?

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the passenger-side doorframe. I just want to go home. I want to get in the car and drive back to SF and go to my store and continue on with my little life. I work hard and I have no time for anything, but it's safe. Aaron is safe. Everything is so fucking safe.

Here, on this bluff, on this coast, near Linden, I am the opposite of safe.

I hear gravel crunch on the other side of the car and by the length of the strides, I know it's Linden before I even see him.

"Hey," he says, coming around the back of the car. He stands there, the wind tossing his hair, faintly lit by the lights from the front of the cottage.

I try to speak but I can't. I hug my arms closer to my chest and stare down at my boots. They are nice boots, new to the store just last week.

Medium heel, rugged rubber sole, black python body. These boots are safe and real and what I know.

I don't know this man who is staring at me.

Now walking toward me.

"Stephanie," he says and in that moment his accent is so strong and thick and gravely, I have no choice but to look up at him. "We need to talk about that."

I suck in my breath and try to defuse the bomb. "She's your girlfriend, Linden, not mine."

He stares at me for a beat and his face softens. "Yes. I'm sorry about that. Did she hurt you?"

I give him a look. "Please. I'm not made of glass."

Yet why does it feel like I'm so close to shattering?

"I know," he says. "She freaked out but that was no excuse for her to touch you."

I sigh and look away, not sure if I want to talk about this at all. I want to pretend none of this happened, but I'm not sure that I can. I'm not sure that I can ever be around Linden as a friend now that I know what it's like to be with him in another way.

"It's fine," I say quietly. "I guess I got a little carried away." Now, that part was hard to admit. "I'm drunk," I add. "I'm sorry if I seemed a bit, um...not myself."

"That wasn't yourself?" he asks, taking another step toward me. The tips of his shoes nearly meet the tips of mine and there is barely any distance between us. I keep my chin down, my focus on the ground. I can't look at him now, not so close, not when being so near to him is conjuring up the memories from just moments ago. My lips are tingling and I want to touch them to get them to stop.

"That felt like you, baby blue," he says. "And it felt good."

My breath stills, my heart starts to thump harder, slower.

He reaches for my hand and I let him take it because I am weak and I have no willpower. Not with him. None.

"I don't know what that was," I whisper. "It was just a dare."

He squeezes my hand hard and starts to lace his fingers in with mine. Now I'm staring at our intertwined hands, his large one over my small one, and I'm struck by how natural it looks, how easy it feels. I'm meant to hold this man's hand. I'm meant to kiss him.

“Look at me,” he says. I don’t. He reaches for me with his other hand and his fingers rest underneath my chin. He raises it up until I am forced to meet his eyes, those dark blue, stormy eyes. My knees feel like they are made of jelly and my heart beat is all I can hear.

“That was more than just a dare,” he murmurs and as he speaks, his voice is so rough and low that I can’t help the shivers down my spine nor the heat between my legs. “That was real. That was something. Tell me you felt something, that you felt what I felt.”

“What did you feel?” I whisper.

He runs a thumb across my lips. “I felt you. The *you* I’ve always wanted.”

Oh god. What is he saying? He’s staring at me so hungrily and I crave that look, that want, so much that another kiss is inevitable. If he doesn’t do it, I will.

But in the background, above the crackle of the flames, I can still hear our friends’ voices. I can still hear Aaron’s laugh. He might not be the guy for me, but he is a nice, good guy at heart and I couldn’t cheat on him. I couldn’t do that to him, not when it’s been done to me before.

“It’s okay to want me, you know,” Linden says thickly.

My stomach quivers. I manage to shake my head and now his fingers are trailing behind my neck, running into the base of my hair and another shiver escapes down my back.

“Since when is it ever okay to want your best friend?” I say softly, nearly choking on the words. Because that’s what he is, that’s what he’s always been.

He smiles gently, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Isn’t that the best person to want? The person that knows you inside and out. The person who has seen you at your ugliest and most beautiful and still wants to be with you. The person who believes in you and has your back, no matter what.” Then his smile fades and his brow furrows. “You’ve always been more than a friend to me, Steph. Always. You have no idea how I’ve felt, how I still feel about you.”

I blink, trying to absorb what he’s saying. How have I always been more than a friend to him? How has that even been possible, all this time?

“You have no idea how badly I want you.” He takes another step toward me and now my back is flat against the car and his hard, strong body is against mine. “Do you feel that?” his voice is rough as he presses himself

against me, stealing my breath. “That’s how hard I am for you. All the fucking time.”

He is hard as steel, his large erection digging into my thigh and I can’t even swallow or think or act. I’m just this soft shell with a beating heart and flaring hormones and I don’t think I’ve ever wanted a man to just take me and fuck me senseless, to just drill into me, to make me totally and completely his, as much as I want him right now.

I close my eyes as his lips go for my neck and he kisses me there, soft and sweet, wet and warm.

I want more.

I can’t have more.

“I can’t do this,” I manage to say, my words disappearing into the night. Part of me is hoping Linden won’t hear them, that he’ll continue to kiss me and press his dick against me. I want his hands, those long, strong fingers, to disappear inside my jeans, in my underwear, to find out how wet I am, because I know I am so fucking wet for him. I want his tongue in my mouth, on my breasts, my jeans to be ripped down and I want to wrap my legs around him as he fucks me against the side of the car.

It would be so easy. It would be so fucking good.

But he hears my words.

And he stops.

He takes a step back from me and I can see his heart is racing too, his pulse visible on his neck, his breathing shallow and unsteady. “You can’t do this?” he asks. “Or you won’t?”

I lick my lips and the blood is coming back to my legs. I feel a little bit stronger. “Both. Aaron. I can’t do this to him. It’s not fair.”

“Then break up with him.”

“You’re still with Nadine,” I am quick to remind him.

“I’ll do the same. Look, Steph, if you’ve felt anything for me at all, even the slightest *clench* between your legs, you know you shouldn’t be with him. You know it’s over.”

It takes me a moment to tear my mind off the filthy way he said “clench” and know that he’s right. I shouldn’t be with Aaron if I feel this about Linden. Maybe I should have never been with him to begin with. But I thought that was part of life. If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with. Isn’t that how the song goes? Isn’t that what getting older is all about, realizing we all have to settle sometimes, that you can’t

always get what you want? Damn it, why is everything a song from the seventies?

“Stephanie?” It’s Penny yelling.

I look at Linden, feeling like I’ve been slapped back to reality. “Where’s Nadine?” I ask, suddenly worried she’s going to come around the corner and strangle me with her ponytail.

“She went to bed early,” he explains, his eyes darting over to the cottage. The gravel crunches and in seconds Penny appears, rounding the hood of the vehicle.

“Oh,” she says in surprise, looking between the two of us with a well-placed eyebrow raise. “Am I interrupting something?”

I shake my head and brush past Linden, quickly walking toward her. “No, we were just talking about how bad of a kisser I am.”

She smirks. “Uh huh. Anyway, I’m going to bed, just wanted to know if you were okay.” She looks over my shoulder at Linden. “I assume you were taking good care of her.”

“Only the best,” is Linden’s uneven remark.

I don’t turn to look at him. I can’t. I tell Penny I’m tired and too drunk and am going to bed as well. James and Aaron are still outside drinking when I curl up on the pull-out couch and yank the blankets over me. I hear Penny getting ready for bed, then I hear Linden come in. I know it’s him, I can feel his presence. Always.

He stops in the living room, just a few feet from the couch and I try to breathe as deeply and regularly as possible, to pretend to be asleep. I don’t want him to say anything or do anything. I just want him to leave.

Eventually he does. I hear the door to his bedroom close.

But I still can’t sleep.

Not even when James goes to bed and Aaron gets under the covers with me.

I still can’t sleep.

I can only feel Linden’s body against mine, lips on lips, and wonder what’s going to happen next.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *STEPHANIE*

“You kissed Linden?” Nicola exclaims so loudly that her daughter, sweet little Ava, looks over at her mom and makes a sad face.

“Must I remind you that it was a dare?” I say, moving over a stack of what looks like over-stylized Barbies with giant heads so I can sit down on her couch.

“Still,” she says, absently rolling the truck on the floor toward Ava who has now moved onto other things, “this is huge news.”

“This isn’t high school.”

“This is huge news,” she reiterates. “Huge.”

It’s Sunday night and after we returned back from the cottage I wasn’t in the right frame of mind to either be with Aaron or to be by myself. The car ride itself was one big container of sexual tension and bad vibes and I desperately needed to tell somebody what had happened.

Penny is too close to James, so I can’t trust her with anything Linden related and I obviously couldn’t go to Linden, which left Nicola.

I felt kind of bad barging in on her like this, especially since her boyfriend was staying the night, but he kindly went out to grab a drink at the local bar so we could have some alone time. We’re with her daughter of course, but Ava is as cute as pie and one of those low-maintenance kids that trick you into thinking motherhood will be a piece of cake.

“Anyway,” I go on, “it obviously meant something to me. And maybe to him. And now I don’t know what to do.”

“You know what to do,” she says adamantly.

“No, I don’t. I don’t know what this is...I mean, am I just being a fucking horndog because I haven’t been getting any lately? Am I just turning to Linden because he’s new and exciting?”

“First of all,” she says, tucking her legs under her. “Linden is not new but he is exciting. And I don’t think you’re being a horndog. I think this is just what happens sometimes when a man and a woman have been friends for too long. And you guys, shit Stephanie, you knew this was bound to happen.”

“Nothing happened,” I repeat.



“Something did. Something changed. You’re sitting here like we’re back in grade school all over again. Remember Joey Pines? You had the biggest crush on him. You have that same look on your face now.”

“We barely talked in grade school.”

“And yet I remember how much you liked him.”

“Didn’t you end up kissing him at one point?”

She waves the suggestion away. “That’s neither here nor there. The point is, you’re attracted to Linden and it’s painfully obvious that he’s attracted to you.”

“What do you mean painfully?” I ask, remembering how hard his cock dug into my hip.

She rolls her eyes. “I think I need some wine to deal with your obliviousness, Steph. Linden’s never looked at you like a friend truly would, like a brother would look at a sister. He looks at you like a man wants a woman. If you want to take a chance on him, I bet he’d be more than willing.”

I don’t really know anymore. He did say he would break up with Nadine. But then what? If we both left our lovers, then what would come of us? Would we sleep together and if we did, would there be anything beyond that? Would we want there to be?

Would the both of us be willing to sacrifice our friendship because of sex?

Unfortunately, I think our friendship has already changed because of this. I will never, ever forget the feel of his lips against mine, the hard length of his cock or the way he made my body submit in seconds. I won’t be able to look past that, see him as purely a friend, even if I never really did to begin with.

And I know that no matter what happens now, that I have to break up with Aaron. It’s the right thing to do and it’s been a long time coming.

I voice this to Nicola who I think will meet me with disapproval since she thinks Aaron is so “hawt” but she only nods. “I think that’s for the best. He’s a good guy but he’s not really for you. Not when there is someone so much better.”

I sit up straighter. “You really think Linden might be good for me?”

“Please. He’s one of your best friends. You know he’s already good for you.”

“He’s a player.”

“And I bet he wouldn’t be with you.”

“Things might go horribly wrong.”

“You’re right,” she says. “They could. You could say they went horribly wrong for me when I took a chance on Phil. But I wouldn’t have Ava here. The chance was still worth it.”

I’m not sure I like Nicola comparing Linden to Ava’s total asshole of a deadbeat dad, but she does have a point. I think.

“Look,” she says, as she brings Ava into her lap and starts to braid her long hair, “you might not think that *the one* exists but I believe they do. I know they do. You’ve never settled for anything in your life so far, Steph, and you aren’t going to start now, just because society or whatever is spewing their bullshit, that you need to have the perfect life already. Take a chance on Linden. That’s not settling. That’s opening yourself up to something that could be amazing. Don’t you know it’s a woman’s dream to find out the man she’s secretly been in love with has been in love with her this whole time?”

I shake my head. “I never said I was in love with him.”

“But you do love him,” she says. “As he loves you. And that love can morph into something that will blow your freaking mind.”

“And if it doesn’t work out?”

“At least you’ll know. Live with no regrets, that’s what I say.”

“If it doesn’t work out, I’ll regret it. Big time.” If it doesn’t work out, I could lose one of the closest people to me. I would shatter like the thinnest, frosted glass and there would be no Linden to help me pick up the pieces.

Later that night I go home and prepare for a busy week at work. I’m more determined now to find someone to hire. I’m also determined to take Nicola’s advice to heart.

First things first, though. I have to deal with Aaron.

I’ve never been very good at breaking up with people. I hate being the bad guy and I hate ruining what good things they’ve thought of me. I’ve done it, obviously with James and then later with Owen, but Owen’s cheating made it easy to do. All the rest of the guys it was more of an “ignore them and they will go away” kind of deal.

But Aaron isn’t like that. I mean, I have a feeling that in theory it could work. I don’t think Aaron would even notice all that much if I just dropped out of his life. But I owe him a lot more than that.

On Tuesday evening I tell him to come over to my place, that we “need to talk.”

Bless his heart, he didn't seem concerned about my choice of words and when he showed up at the door, holding a six-pack, it's clear that he had no idea what was about to come.

When I drop the bomb, he's even more understanding. It kind of reminds me of a *Seinfeld* episode, where one of the characters re-examines their reasons for breaking up because the break-up went so well. Aaron made it really easy and for a moment I wonder why I'm breaking up with a guy who can just handle whatever life throws at them.

Then I realize that I at least wanted some kind of reaction, some kicking and screaming, maybe a single tear or even a heartfelt “We can work it out, give us another chance.” I mean, we had been together for a year now. Instead I got an “Aw, I'll miss you babe” and that was it!

I told him I'd be by for my things later in the week – even though I barely left anything at his house – and he said “Cool beans, I'll leave them with Chuck if I'm not home, going to LA again” and that was that.

Now I'm alone in my condo, lying in my bed and feeling incredibly empty inside. I stare up at the ceiling at the crappy plaster job I did the other day when I tried to patch up the leak on my own and I kind of want it all to come crashing down on me.

There is a sense of relief though, that I did the right thing. I know I did and it's better for Aaron too. If he wasn't upset in the slightest by the break-up, then we really weren't meant to be together at all. I wonder how many couples coast through life and eventually marry each other because it's the comfortable thing to do? Because they feel like they've been together long enough, that it's what is expected of them?

It would explain a lot of divorces, that's for sure. And I find myself hoping that no matter what happens in the future, with Linden or with anyone, that I never settle for something less than fireworks.

I close my eyes and curl up on top of the covers. I keep replaying in my mind, over and over again, that kiss, that look, those words. Now that I can do it without guilt, my fingers trail down my stomach and slide beneath my underwear. I desperately need a new vibrator so my fingers will do and it's not long before I'm biting my pillow and coming hard.

All I need is to remember how hard and thick and long he was as he pressed himself against me, eager to show me how much I turned him on. I

want to show him how much he turns me on, how just the memory of his lips and tongue melding into mine, the feel of his hand at my neck, the way he spoke about wanting him, gets me off in seconds flat.

So much has changed in such a short time and yet I reach between my legs again.

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Lunch hour doesn't really exist when you're self-employed. Actually, none of the things that ordinary, nine-to-five type folk take for granted really exist. There is no clock to punch in and out of. If I'm not at the store, I'm concentrating on business stuff at home. I can't even online shop for fun anymore – and this is a major blow – because everything always ends up being for the store.

At least I can write-off my wardrobe, that's the one perk about this whole thing. But lunch hours and breaks? Forget it.

As it is, I'm taking my lunch hour the usual way: standing behind the counter and shoveling French fries into my mouth. I know I'm supposed to be eating healthier – I told myself I wouldn't ruin my body in my thirties, that I would do kale shakes and pumpkin seed salads and kombucha or however you say it. But there's a lot to be said for convenience and when I have just a moment to grab something to eat or I'll turn into a raging *hangry* bitch, then the fries win.

It's too bad my ass doesn't like them as much as my mouth does.

Today it's cold and raining and there is barely anyone in the store. Days like this make me panic that no one will come tomorrow and the business will fail and I'll have nothing, but then I remember it was like this last year too. In fact, I opened at one of the worst times and it all still evened out in the end. I declared a loss but it wasn't that great of one. This year is already shaping up to be better.

I'm thinking about the roof in the condo and if this new bout of rain is going to cause even more problems and whether I should bite the bullet and call Linden, just to see if he can come by and really fix my roof (not a euphemism), maybe see if he's broken up with Nadine, when something catches my eye on Facebook.

It happens to be Nadine herself. For a split second, because there are so many exclamation marks on her status, I think that this has to be the "I hate

you Linden! Men suck!” update that I’ve been waiting for. Not many women make it through a break-up without spewing hatred all over Facebook.

But on closer look, that’s not what it says at all. In fact I nearly drop my phone and choke on a fry when I realize what it actually says:

***Thank God for guardian angels!!! I knew the Lord was watching over me when he gave me such a good man as Linden McGregor. Thanks to my bae, I’m moving in with him as of tomorrow. I’ll be in Russian Hill, bitches, so message me if you want my new address!!***

What. The. Fuck.

No, seriously.

What.

The.

Fuck.

I do end up dropping the phone as my heart leaps up into my throat. The room spins and I’m struck with an unbearable hit of anger and humiliation.

Break up with Nadine? The asshole just asked her to move in with him!

I am so damn livid that I actually make it across the store, lock the door and flip the sign over to CLOSED. The shop is empty and I want to keep it that way. There is no way I can deal with one single citizen of humanity without wanting to rip their head off.

I go back to the phone and read it again. People have commented with, “Yay, so lucky!” and all that fucking bullshit and I am so damn tempted to write “He was supposed to dump your ass, what happened?!” but I don’t. I at least have a sliver of decorum left and should work to preserve that.

But I’m not perfect. Instead of writing that to Nadine, I send a text to Linden.

**Fuck you.**

And then I turn off my phone and hurl it at the wall.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *LINDEN*

I knew it was a mistake. I knew it the moment I opened my mouth and I knew it even more when Stephanie sent me a single text that said: **Fuck you.**

She knew what had happened. I have royally, expertly fucked up.

All because I'm trying to be a good guy.

That damn dare started it all.

When I kissed Stephanie, it didn't even matter if everyone was watching. They weren't even there. It was just between me and her. That's all there was at that moment, just the two of us, just her sweet pink lips that taste like cinnamon and the silk of her hair and the way her body so easily tugs toward mine, like it belongs pressed up against me.

That's all I could see and all I'd ever want.

And then it intensified and I knew I was getting hard and that it was so inappropriate and getting out of hand and then suddenly my girlfriend was there and shoving Stephanie out of the way.

I couldn't fault Nadine for acting that way, but I wish she had directed it toward me. I was being the pig, the asshole here. None of that was Stephanie's fault. I was the one who so desperately wanted more than she was giving.

But at least she was giving me something, something that was right up there with all my deepest dreams.

Stephanie ran off and then Penny followed. Nadine was yelling at me about taking things too far and I couldn't do much but agree with her, blame it on being drunk – because I was drunk and that certainly helped me take it further than I should have. Then she slapped me – again, well deserved – and stormed off to bed and then I was left with Aaron and James.

The odd thing was, Aaron didn't really look all that upset and when I came back to the table and sat down beside him, saying, "Hey, sorry about that, I'm a bit drunk," Aaron just laughed and said, "No worries, dude!" and then asked me to hand him a beer.

But James...James had kill, kill, kill, die, die, die written all over his face and it's like I could almost see him turning into *Jason* and sawing me

in half. It didn't really surprise me though, considering the vibes I'd been picking off of him lately.

It didn't surprise me, but it worried me. Was it possible that even though he was with Penny and seemed very happy, that James was still in love with Steph? And if that was the case, just what did that mean for me?

I didn't know and I still don't. If Steph and I ever got together and James told me that he was still in love with her, I'd step back. I don't want to be that guy, especially when you're not supposed to go after your best friend's ex.

But though James was trying to kill me with his glare, he didn't say anything and I wasn't about to pry. I operate best on denial.

So I went after Steph and found her beside his car, hiding it seemed. Was it from me? Nadine?

One look into her eyes though I knew she was regretting what had happened, that she too had been carried away. I needed to show her that it was okay.

I wanted to tell her all the dirty things I'd been dreaming about for years.

But she was a good girl. She thought about Aaron. And I thought of Nadine.

I knew I had to end things with her. I couldn't go back to being with her when I knew how much better it could be with Steph. One kiss and my whole world was colored.

That next morning and the whole ride back to the city, I was thinking of when I should do it, how I should do it. Nadine wasn't going to take it well and she'd immediately accuse me of being with Stephanie, even though things just hadn't been working out between us for a long time.

I had it all planned too. I would show up at her house with a bottle of wine on Monday night to just ease her into it and then explain that I feel that she's looking for a future that I'm not willing to provide and I need to be single and find myself and all the things that are buried in truth.

But when she showed up at the office on Monday morning, after having spent Sunday night alone to "have some time to think" as she had said, she was in tears.

It turns out that she had gotten a notice that morning before she left for work that her building was condemned and that she'd have to move out immediately. She lives all the hell out in Emeryville, in this old Victorian

house that was split into six apartments. She was renting too, so it was as much news to her landlords as it was for her but unfortunately nothing could be done about it, at least not until the structural integrity of the building is looked at more closely and repairs could be made, if its even possible.

Well I couldn't fucking break up with her now, not when she was potentially homeless. So I rubbed her back as she cried at her desk before I was called out to fly a man out from Oakland all the way to Redding and when I got back she had told me none of her friends could take her in, that she didn't have enough money in savings and that her parents were out of the question since they lived in Livermore and it was way too far to commute.

Suffice to say, she was fucked and I was fucked.

So I had to do what any boyfriend would do, let alone any decent man, and I said she could move in with me until the situation got straightened out.

I had stressed the whole "until" part of the arrangement but that just went straight over her head. Suddenly she's calling everyone she knows, telling them she's moving in with me.

I wanted to warn her against putting it on Facebook but she did anyway. And that's when I saw Steph's text.

She must think that every single thing I told her about wanting to be with her was an absolute lie. I do my best to get a conversation going, texting her **Talk to me** and **Let me explain** but it all goes unread.

By mid-week, Nadine has settled a little too comfortably in my flat – it seems half of my framed black and white helicopter photographs have been replaced by IKEA prints of Audrey Hepburn and Brooklyn Bridges – and I manage to sneak out to the Lion for a drink. James is busy working but Penny is at the bar, so I end up talking to her.

"So she moved in with you, huh?" Penny says dryly as she sucks a maraschino cherry in her mouth.

"I didn't really have a choice," I say with a sigh. "She had nowhere to go."

"How noble of you." She pauses. "Did you hear that Steph broke up with Aaron?"

And now my heart goes absolutely cold. "She what?"



“Yep. Kicked him to the curb on Sunday night. Seems that our little weekend away really put that last nail in the coffin. I saw it coming of course but I didn’t think Aaron was all that bothered by your little makeout session. Or maybe it wasn’t that at all...”

I lean over and reach behind the bar, searching for a bottle of something, anything. My glass is dry and I can’t think at all.

Penny slides her Manhattan my way. “Here, this will help.”

I slam it back into my mouth and try to breathe. “She actually broke up with him?”

She nods. “Yup. Didn’t you guys have some sort of pact?”

That fucking pact.

She takes the glass back from me. “But I guess it doesn’t really matter if you’re still with Nadine, huh. Funny how life just kind of screws with you sometimes.”

Then she gets up and goes to the washroom. James is busy chatting with customers so I quickly get up and leave. I can’t talk to him right now. I can’t really talk to anyone.

But I know what I have to do, even though it’s about to make me an even bigger asshole than I already am.

The next night I break up with Nadine, but only after I have secured a place for her. It’s in Marin Country so she’ll be close to work, I’ve paid for a month’s rent so she won’t have to worry and I tell her I’ve got another moving van arranged for the weekend to get her stuff out of storage.

I get punched in the face. Like, right on my fucking cheekbone.

I guess I deserve that too, but I don’t know what else to say. I know I’m a fucking dick for breaking up with someone who’s just been evicted. I know it but I can’t help it. I can’t let Stephanie, the opportunity to be with her, slip through my fingers. Not now, not after all these years of hit or miss and bad timing.

Nadine isn’t shy about letting me know how she feels. Her words are more vicious than her fist.

“You think you can buy me off?” she yells at me, picking up a frame that holds a picture of us in it. “You think that because you’re some rich snot with important parents that you can just buy me a little apartment and tuck me away somewhere?”

“I’m just trying to help,” I tell her, raising my hands in surrender. I have a feeling that picture is going to come flying toward my face.

“Help?!” she sneers and then lets out a caustic laugh. “You don’t know how to help anyone but yourself. Poor little rich boy pretends to actually give a shit about the ones around him. You know, you say that your parents weren’t there for you, that they are heartless and cold, and I can see it. I can see that family resemblance in you. You’re going to be just like them, tossing aside your relationships when the going gets tough, hoping a little money and jewelry will help the problem.”

Her words cause me to panic. “No, that’s not what this is. That’s not who I am.” And yet I’m afraid because this was the thing I feared, that I was tossing away a relationship that maybe was fixable in the end.

But it doesn’t matter. The damage is done. The picture frame goes sailing through the air and I duck as it smashes against the wall behind me. She then proceeds to smash all the pictures in the room, even the ones that are hers, hauling them off the walls and shattering them on the floor. It’s true what they say about red-headed chicks, you know, they all have a wee bit of crazy in them.

Turns out Nadine was holding a surplus.

I barely make it out of that night alive and I don’t even go to work for the next few days because even seeing her there briefly would be bad enough. But by the time Saturday rolls around, the moving guys take the last of her stuff and she’s gone, out of my life.

At least until I see her at work on Monday.

I sit in my kitchen, drinking a gallon of orange juice right out of the container, and let the silence sink in. It’s starting to feel like mine again. I still feel like absolute wanker for breaking up with her at a time like this, but at least I did what I could to make sure she was comfortable.

It’s interesting how that makes me feel better though. I wonder if that’s how my parents felt when they were hit with a shred of guilt for never being around, for never being loving, and then threw money at the problem to fix it.

*I* was the problem, of course, and I don’t think money ever fixed all those holes they put in me. It didn’t stuff the absence I felt by not having a loving family.

I know I’m about to fall into a pit of self-loathing, so I get on my trainers and head out the door. I run forever, all the way along the Embarcadero to the Presidio and then back. Lombard Street nearly murders

my thighs and my knees cry in pain on the way down, but I run until I no longer feel like I'm drowning.

Then I shower, get dressed and call a cab. I'm heading to The Burgundy Lion and when I come back home, I intend to not be sober.

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"What are you doing here?" James asks as I sit at the bar.

I shrug and take off my jacket. "I'm a free man now, I can go where I want."

"So she's really gone, huh?" he asks as he automatically pours me a pint. He nods at it. "It's the Longboard, best part of the keg."

I gratefully take the beer and raise it at him. "Thank you for that." I finish half of the glass and let out a long exhale. "Yeah. She's really gone."

He wipes down the counter, even though he doesn't need to. I think he does it so he looks like he's working, even though he's just shooting the shit with me, even though it's his fucking bar and he can do whatever the fuck he wants.

"I thought maybe you would have gone out there to help her unload and stuff. I mean, you've been pretty saintly about all of this so far."

I raise my brow. "Have I? I thought I've been an outright dick."

James shrugs. "She would have known that about you to begin with. And no, you haven't been. Maybe it would have been better if you waited a bit before you dumped her but I guess I understand. When it's over, it's over."

"Yeah. And I've never been very good at pretending."

"No," he says, holding my gaze for a moment, "you haven't."

I wonder what that's all about but I don't say anything. I finish the rest of the drink and then ask, "Where is Penny?"

His body seems to stiffen at the question and he looks away. "I'm not sure. Having a girl's night."

I nod, not sure if I should ask him if everything is okay. Instead, I cautiously ask, "Where is Steph?"

"Here," he says.

"What?" I sit up a little straighter. "In the bar?"

He nods, narrowing his eyes a bit and then gestures to the other side of the bar. I lean over until I have a clear line of sight. She's at one of the

booths in the corner, sitting with Nicola and Kayla.

Oh boy. I know Kayla doesn't like me and I'm pretty sure Nicola's not my biggest fan either. Throw in the fact that Stephanie seems to absolutely hate my guts at the moment, and that's a table I should stay far, far away from.

But I can't. Maybe because I'm an idiot or a sucker for punishment but I ask James for another beer and get off the stool.

"What's going on?" he asks me as he slides the pint into my hands. "Are you and Stephanie in a fight?"

I eye him sharply. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, when I mentioned your name to her earlier, she looked like she was going to stab someone with a fork and when I mentioned *her* name just now, you looked like you were about to be stabbed with a fork. Did something...happen?"

"No," I say quickly. "What did you say to her earlier? About me?"

"I said to her, 'Talk to Linden lately?' and she visibly shivered like someone walked over her grave."

"I'm not having the best luck with the ladies," I say jokingly.

James doesn't smile. "Steph isn't just one of your ladies, Linden. She's your friend."

God, when did he get to be such a killjoy? I didn't need everyone in the world mad at me.

I ignore him and make my way around the bar and toward the corner booth. Nicola sees me first and her eyes nearly bulge out of her. Kayla just looks venomous.

And then Steph turns her head and it's true what James said, she does look like she's going to grab a fork off the table and hurl it at me, right between the eyes. I know I deserve all the wrath about to come my way but I also hope she takes a moment to hear me out.

Damn it though if she isn't sexy as hell when she wants to kill me.

"You need to leave," Nicola says, pointing to the door.

"And never come back," Kayla adds. "Asshole."

"Wait a minute," I say, standing at the end of the table with arms folded. I notice Steph's eyes briefly going to my biceps and I feel like that just in itself is a tiny little victory. "Why are you all upset with me?"

They both look at Stephanie. I look at Stephanie.

She sighs and then says, "Guys, can you give us a minute?"

Kayla and Nicola exchange a long look and they don't budge.

"Please," Steph says, her voice tired. "It's fine."

"No it isn't," Kayla says and then glares at me. She's remembering the times I loved her and left her, I know it.

"I just want to talk to her," I say to her guard dog friends. "Honestly."

Finally they both move and, as Nicola brushes past me, I say to her, "Maybe you want to take away any sharp objects," but she just laughs.

Now that we're alone, I don't want to screw up. "Is it okay that I'm here?" I ask Steph, still standing there.

She shakes her head. "You're the last person I want to see."

"Can I at least explain what happened?"

She takes a defeated sip of her drink. "What difference would it make?"

I quickly sit down and reach out and grab her hand. She tries to pull it away but I hang on, squeezing it tight, relishing the feel of her warm, soft skin between my fingers. "It's over," I tell her. "I broke up with her. She moved out. It's over."

She swallows uneasily and looks away, at the old-fashioned paintings of fox hounds on the wall, all part of The Burgundy Lion's original décor. Her mouth turns down in this sad, pronounced kind of way when she gets upset and I have to fight the urge to kiss that same mouth and make it sing. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because," I implore, the desperation sneaking up on me, "I want you to know that everything I told you, I meant. I want you and I've always wanted you. Not anyone else."

She stiffens at that and then shoots me a furtive glance. "I broke up with Aaron."

I nod and hope it comes across as sympathetic, not eager. "I know. Penny told me. I was going to end it with Nadine when I got home but then I found out she was evicted. She had nowhere to go. I didn't know what to do. I just couldn't do it then."

"But you did it now..."

I grimace. "Yes. I did. I couldn't wait. I couldn't pretend."

"Pretend what?" she asks and I can barely hear her soft voice above the noise of the bar.

"That I want nothing more than to put you on your back, on this table, and show you what it's like to really get fucked."

Her mouth drops open and she nearly laughs. I've caught her by surprise but she better get used to it.

"Linden," she scolds.

"Kiss me." I tell her. I'm all impulse now, feeling coiled up like a snake and ready to strike. I want her so damn bad.

Troubled, she yanks her hand out of mine and scooches back along the bench, further away from me. "Hold on, this is getting out of line."

"This is getting where it needs to go," I tell her, getting up and sitting right next to her. I bury my face in her hair and inhale her fresh, heady scent before I whisper, "Don't act like you haven't been thinking about that kiss every single day since it happened. Don't pretend you haven't thought once about what it would be like to do it again. To do more."

I put my palm on her thigh and slowly trail it up but her hands are on my chest, pushing me back.

"We can't," she says.

"Oh yes we fucking can," I tell her. I take her delicate earlobe between my teeth and tug until she lets out a small gasp.

"Not now, not here," she says and there is a tone of panic in her voice.

She's right. Not here. I sit up and move away from her a few inches before I look around the bar. She seems to be talking about Kayla and Nicola, but now I'm thinking about James.

Whatever happens between us, it would be best if James didn't know. At least not at first, anyway. If I entertained the thought that he could possibly have feelings for her, then I wouldn't be able to be with her at all, so I push that out of my head and make sure that whatever happens between us is only between us.

"Can this be our secret?" I whisper.

"There is no secret to tell," she answers smartly.

"Not yet," I say, holding her gaze. "But by the end of this night, there will be."

Then she looks up and past me and I know that someone is coming. I quickly yet casually get to my feet and turn around just in time to see Nicola and Kayla approaching us with bottles of cider.

"I see you're still alive," Nicola says before she looks over the table. "And the cutlery doesn't have blood on it."

"It's cool," Steph says with a lopsided smile. She meets my eyes for a second before looking to the others. "We're best friends again."

“Just best friends?” Kayla asks suspiciously.  
Before Stephanie can answer, I say, “Just the best.”  
Then I give Steph a nod and head back to the other side of the bar.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *STEPHANIE*

“What the hell was that all about?” Kayla asks.

“He better have had a great excuse for being such a douche-pilot,” Nicola adds before she slams back her drink. Man, single moms sure know how to party hard.

“He kind of did,” I tell them. And it’s true. Actually after I had seen Nadine’s status update and sent him the ‘fuck you’ text, I talked to Penny and she filled me in on the entire situation. I understood it, I really did, but it still left a bad taste in my mouth. Even though Linden was stepping up to the plate and being a good man about the whole thing, I was suddenly so afraid that this was the end. There would be no more chances. She would live with him forever, he’d fall back in love and whatever things he told me would be completely forgotten about.

I spent the whole week alternating between feeling sorry for myself and cursing God and fate and then Nadine for living in such a shithole that it had to be condemned.

Of course, because I was such a wreck and relegated to my eating ice cream in my underwear stage, I had to fill Nicola and Kayla in on what was happening. I didn’t really want to tell yet another person that I have a thing for Linden, especially since Kayla got to sample the goods already but it was nice to have a little woman support group in place. Actually Kayla had just broken off her engagement a month ago, so she was in a place where she really wanted to hate on all men and especially Linden who fucked her a few times and never called her again.

Saturday was our let’s-get-drunk-and-find-a-good-lay night, so I suggested the Lion thinking that there was no way Nadine would want to be there among Linden’s friends again, especially after last weekend. We’d only been there an hour and were nicely buzzed and gossiping about who knows what when I knew Linden was in the room. Seeing Kayla and Nicola’s faces only cemented the truth.

Linden walked toward me like someone out of a dream. He was wearing a tight grey t-shirt that showed off his big, sculpted arms and broad shoulders, dark jeans that fit in all the right places, had his leather jacket – the very one I gave him – slung over one shoulder like some wannabe



Brando. And it worked. He even had on black leather combat boots for once, giving his already six foot something frame some extra height.

I cursed internally, rapidly, using every single swear word I could think of. I was angry that he was here and even angrier that I was just so fucking attracted to him that it was taking a lot of restraint to keep my eyes glued to anywhere else but his hard body.

But even though I wanted to hold a grudge, to be angry, I just couldn't. He was still Linden. He was still the man who knew me better than everyone else did. I could never say no to him and apparently I couldn't hold a grudge.

So Nicola and Kayla left us alone and I was immediately swept up into the force of nature that he is.

He grabbed my hand and it felt like parts of me were coming back together. He breathed hot air on my neck and I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust.

He said things that I never thought I'd hear him say and things I couldn't wait to hear again.

Then he told me this was all a secret, Kayla and Nicola came back, and he fucked off to the other side of the bar.

That's where he is now. That's where I want to be.

No, more than that. I want to be beneath him on this table, just like he said.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Nicola asks me for the hundredth time. "I can't figure out what's going on with your face?"

"What's wrong with my face?"

"Well, it looks a bit bitchier than normal," Kayla says thoughtfully and reaches across the table to smooth out the deep crease between my brows. "You're too frowny. You also look a bit scared."

"She's scared of Linden," Nicola whispers – loudly – to her.

"We'll protect you sweetie," Kayla says and displays her biceps, which are surprisingly well-defined. "I owe Linden several kicks to the nuts as it is."

"No one is kicking anyone," I tell them. I might need those nuts in the near future. "You're both drunk."

"You're right," Kayla says with a sigh, leaning back dramatically in her seat. "You know it only takes me two drinks before I'm on my knees. Damn Asian genes."

I laugh. "Then maybe you oughta head home."

Nicole fixes her eyes on me. "I have the feeling you're trying to get rid of us."

I open my mouth to protest but no words come out.

Nicola sighs and throws down some bills before she nudges Kayla out of the booth. "Come on chicky, you won't find any men here to get on your knees for anyway." Then she stifles a giggle. "Well, maybe one but I bet you've been on your knees for him already."

"Not funny!" I yell and Kayla turns an even angrier shade of crimson.

Then they're gone and I'm sitting in the booth alone, nursing a cider that's warm, flat and tasteless and I know who is waiting on the other side of that bar.

I scoop up the bills and stick them in the tip jar closest to me, where Dan gives me the thumbs up. Kayla and Nicola never have to pay for anything because they're with me but they always do and I always put their money in the tip jar. It at least ensures the staff is happy every time we come into the bar.

"Hey Steph," James says to me as I round the corner to the other side. He's pouring Linden a pint who is sitting across from him in his usual spot.

In our usual spot.

For a moment I'm thrown back in time to our twenty-fifth birthday where we both sat there at the bar and made a drunken pact that we would marry each other one day if there was no one else for us.

Linden's stormy eyes meet mine and he gives me a slow, carnal smile as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. All at once I'm completely terrified to keep moving but my feet don't know any different. They walk over to him and I sit down on the stool beside him, my shoulders bumping against his.

"You like him again?" James says as he hands me an Angry Orchard without even asking.

"I get moody sometimes," I say with a smile before I take a long swig.

"No shit," he says and then heads down the length of the bar to attend to someone who is snapping their fingers like a madman.

And now, despite the bar and the people around us, I am alone with Linden. It feels like there isn't another soul around for miles. The heat coming off his body is intoxicating and I am so conscious that if I adjust my seat even slightly, my bare arm will brush against his.

I already have goose bumps just thinking about it.

Linden leans in a bit closer, his hot mouth just inches from my ear. “Your place or mine?”

My eyes grow wide. This is already moving way too fast. I don’t even know what *this* is yet.

“Let me have a drink and think about it,” I tell him and my words come out all crumbled and hoarse, like I’ve swallowed a bucket of sawdust. I angle back slightly so I can look him in the eye. “Don’t you think this is all kind of...weird?”

He gives me a lazy smile. “Baby blue.” The slow way he says it makes me focus on his lips, the hint of tongue that peeks out. “This will be the opposite of weird.”

I’m not so sure about that.

He goes on, leaning in again. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

I can feel my face go red. “Now you’re just being cheesy. You don’t need to be cheesy with me.”

“Aye,” he says, “I know I don’t. But it’s the truth. Do you know how long I’ve waited to tell you the truth? I’ve jacked off every day this week thinking about your perfect lips around my cock.”

And somehow my eyes go wider still.

Oh my god.

What the hell?

“Speechless?” he asks after a beat. “I like that.”

I turn my head and see if anyone else is in earshot of this. It may feel like we’re alone but I know we’re not. James is at the other end of the bar still and I sense from Linden that this is the main reason we’re to keep it all secret. Again, whatever this all is.

I have no idea.

But I feel like Linden’s going to show me and do so without mercy.

I swallow hard, my stomach fluttering with nerves and bubbles that make me want to laugh or cry or do something. Scream, even.

“What about the pact?” I ask him.

“What about it? We could just call this stage one.”

He leans in closer now and I know if anyone is watching us it’s going to look like it’s more than just a harmless whisper.

“Sort of like a try before you buy type of deal?” I joke weakly.

“Oh, we’ll be trying,” he murmurs, his breath coating my neck and making my hairs stand straight up. I close my eyes as he quickly kisses me beneath the ear. “We’ll be trying multiple.” He kisses a spot lower. “Multiple.” And lower. “Multiple times.”

Oh dear lord. I want nothing more for him to continue but I flinch away, trying one last minute attempt at self-preservation or at least clean panties.

I put my hand on his forearm, wrapping my fingers tightly around his muscle so he knows I’m being serious. He finally pulls back and looks at me. A soft look comes over his eyes. “Am I being creepy?” he asks.

I can’t help but let out a relieved laugh. There is the Linden I know.

“Kind of,” I tell him. His face falls slightly so I quickly add, “But it’s just because this is just so...this is so huge. This is huge, isn’t it?”

He cocks his head and grins, nodding his head. “Well, the ladies seem to think so.”

I roll my eyes, even though I know he *is* huge. He has to be. I can still feel it pressed against me.

“I’m serious,” I tell him. “One minute we’re just friends and the next...”

“The next I’m kissing you. And I realize I’ve been a fool for not doing it sooner.”

I nod, knowing just how he feels, and say, “I just don’t know what you want from me. From us.”

He frowns. “What do you want from me?”

*What do I want from him? Really?*

“I want,” I say slowly, thinking. I take a sip of my drink and let it roll around on my tongue. I have no choice but to be honest. “I want to know why that kiss felt so good. I want to know what else I’ve been missing.”

“That’s all I want too,” he says.

“And it’s worth risking our friendship over?”

A grave expression comes across his face and he briefly looks down the bar. “I think we’ve already risked it, baby blue. The minute we kissed and it became more than a kiss, that’s when our friendship, as we’ve known it, ended. Now we just explore the next step.” He reaches over and brushes a strand of my hair behind my ears, his touch both firm and gentle. “All of this, you and me, is brand new, you’re right. Let’s just take this one small step at a time.”

“These small steps include sex, right?” I joke and then blush even more because I can’t believe I’ve said that. I mean, I’ve joked about stuff like that before with him but now that it’s *about* him, about us, and it’s real, there is a potency to everything I’m saying.

He scrapes his teeth along his bottom lip and says, “I’d kiss you right now if I could, if the whole world wasn’t watching. Right on the lips. So hot and sweet you’d think I was honey. I’d make you want to drown in it.”

I have to say, I’ve never really been with a vocal man before but I’m starting to like it. A lot.

“Yeah?” I answer rather dumbly. Two cannot play at this game. I completely concede to him and decide to let him do all the talking from now on.

He leans in as if to tell me a secret. “I want nothing more than to get you out of here and bring you back to my place,” he murmurs, his voice so rough and dangerously low. “I’m going to take my time, slowly peeling off your shirt, your bra, kiss your nipples until they are so hard that you’re begging me to bite them. Then I’ll take off your jeans, inch by torturous inch, enjoying the show of your thighs before I reach your panties. I bet they’re ridiculously wet. Even right now, I bet they are soaked. I bet they’d taste good too. Then I’m going to fuck your wet pussy so good that you’ll wonder how you survived this long without me.”

Speechless.

Turned on as fucking hell.

And speechless.

Oh, my good god, what the hell was that?

I’m not sure if I’m more surprised by what came out of his mouth or that it’s Linden who’s saying it. Probably both. I mean, given his parade of leggy women and his frankness toward sex, it’s not that it surprises me at all.

It’s just a bit of a shock to hear him saying it about *me*.

Oh, and a turn on. I mentioned that, didn’t I?

I adjust in my seat and immediately know he’s right about the panty soaking prediction.

“Clenching for me already?” he says and then he straightens up, going back to nursing his beer at the bar like everyone else. Meanwhile I *am* fucking clenching, throbbing, as his words still swirl around my head and

make my legs squeeze together. I'm not sure I've ever wanted to screw someone this badly before.

Then again, we've had years and years of foreplay.

"Busy night, aye," Linden says and I have to shake my head to get back in the game. He's talking to James, who is back in front of us and pouring him another pint. I have a feeling Linden doesn't suffer from whisky dick.

"Yeah," James says, "but it's good for business." He looks over and me and frowns. "You feeling okay there, Steph?"

"What, why?" I ask, panicking a little.

He gestures to his own face. "You're all flushed. Like, feverish."

"Oh," I say and then let my shoulders slump a bit, attempting to play it off. "Yeah, I'm not feeling too well."

"I told you, you've been working too hard," James says teasingly.

"I know, I know," I tell him. I want to tell him that I did just take last weekend off so I could go to Sea Ranch with them and that I am hiring now so that an employee will lighten my load but suddenly I don't feel like getting caught in a conversation with him. I only want to talk to Linden, to think about Linden, to find out what the next step is, if I'm brave enough to take it and if his actions equal his promises.

Maybe Linden senses this because he puts his hand on my shoulder, and just like old times, says, "Okay baby blue, James is right, you don't look well. Let's call you a cab."

"On it," says James as he picks up the phone and hands me my coat, which I had him store behind the bar. I shuck it on and wave goodbye to him while he's on hold and then Linden is grabbing me by the elbow and leading me out the door.

Outside a few people are smoking and laughing as wisps of fog swirl around and I know it will be at least a few minutes before a cab arrives. I can't help but wonder if I am actually being sent home but then Linden slides his hand down from my elbow all the way to my hand and holds it. He squeezes once and then doesn't let go.

"I'm going with you," he says and his eyes glint in the streetlights. "And we're going to my place first. Just so you know."

"What about James?"

He tilts his head, considering. "I don't want James to be concerned with anything we're about to do. I don't want to fuck up our little trinity. But this, me taking you to a cab, hell the both of us *sharing* a cab, it's something

we've done a million times before. Nothing has really changed, Steph. It's only going to get better."

Nothing has really changed but the old Linden – my friend Linden – wouldn't molest me in the back of a cab.

Although, that's not what happens at all. When the cab finally pulls up and we get in the back seat, there is a considerable amount of distance between us. I for sure thought he'd take this opportunity to finish what he started but he just stares out the window at the rows of houses and the orange glow of the fog reflecting the city lights.

It's a cab ride that borders on awkward and I don't like feeling awkward around him. And then I realize how clammy my palms are and how I am so god damn nervous about what might happen – am I actually about to have sex with Linden? – I feel more like a girl than I do a woman.

I wonder if he's nervous too. He seems so cool and calm, not that that's out of the ordinary, not for him.

When the cab pulls up to his apartment, though, he pays the driver and then takes my hand leading me up the stairs to the foyer. It's not that late but our footsteps echo as we walk and as he swipes his key card I look behind me to the street. It's eerily quiet, the mist muffling city sounds. It makes everything seem larger than life.

Maybe it *is* all larger than life right now.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *STEPHANIE*

Linden leads me down the hallway to his first floor apartment, back to holding my hand again, and even though I've walked down past these white walls with the flashy gold apartment number plates and tiled floors a million times before, it all looks different now.

It looks new.

This is all so new.

We stop right outside his door and as he sticks the key in the slot, I blurt out, "What if this is a mistake?"

He pauses and slowly looks over his shoulder at me. "Do *you* think it's a mistake?"

I chew on my lip for a moment and try and listen to my heart. *Do I think this is a mistake?*

"No," I slowly say, my heart starting to race in response. "But it doesn't mean I'm not scared."

He unlocks the door, pushing it open an inch and then turns around to face me. His brow is furrowed, his eyes soft and searching. "Baby blue... it's *me*."

"I know," I tell him. "But what if...what if it doesn't work out?"

"It will work out," he says but I don't know if I share his confidence.

"I just don't want it to blow up in our face, to ruin what we had. I don't want to lose you."

He reaches for my hand and pulls me to him. "You are not going to lose me," he says, peering down at me. "I promise."

I want to believe him so badly. I need to believe him. "What if you lose *me*?"

He smiles at me, his grip hard. "Then I'll just hold on tighter."

I'm pulled closer to him and he opens the door, ushering me inside.

All the lights are off save for one in his kitchen to the left. The apartment gleams in the low light, the floors dark, walnut brown wood, and the walls painted a dark grey. Everything seems more mysterious, more dangerous now. This is no longer the apartment of my friend, this is the apartment of a man I don't fully know yet.



He shuts the door behind me and then takes a step toward me until I'm up against the back of the door. He places his hands on either side of my head, braced against the door, and stares down at me, his lips just inches from mine, our noses almost touching.

I don't breathe. I don't move. I just stare at his full lips, at his searing eyes as they want, want, want. I am aware of what a large man he is, suddenly, like it had never occurred to me before. His hands, his arms, his shoulders, his chest, his height. He's just so big and I feel so small, so easily ravaged.

I want to be ravaged.

He leans in a millimeter until the side of his nose gently brushes against the side of mine. "This moment," he says, his voice hoarse, and closes his eyes. "This moment."

It is a moment. And before I can ponder just what kind of moment it is to him, he leans in and kisses me. It's very soft, light, like feathers. It's a tease of a kiss, an aperitif before the meal. And yet for all its warmth and gentleness, the way his lips linger luxuriously on mine, it undoes me. As if I were held together with string, this kiss is the knife that slowly cuts me loose.

I'm just about to open mouth, to take in more of him, when he pulls back an inch. He whispers against my mouth, "I'm taking this slow. I've waited far too long for this to be over in a minute." He slips his hand behind my neck and grips me there. "I'm going to relish every inch of your body until you're begging for release. Then, I'm going to fuck you so hard, so *good*, that you'll still feel me inside you days later."

I am weak, pliable putty. I lack thought and control. I am just body and blood and need. He bends down and scoops me up into his arms and carries me down the hall like I weigh nothing at all. I am just a girl in his strong arms.

In his bedroom, light from streetlamps floats in through the gauzy curtains and illuminates his bed. It looks like a landing pad.

He gently lays me down on the white duvet, black sheets underneath, and stands at the foot of bed. He pulls his shirt off over his head, discarding it on the floor beside him.

I've seen Linden with his shirt off before but this is the first time I've been freely allowed to ogle him. I mean, how can you not? It's a wonder I didn't run my hands all over him before, lick him from head to toe.

Though the light is dim, his chest is wide and firm with a smattering of well-groomed, Hugh Jackman-ish chest hairs, his shoulders are round and sculpted and his arms are like tree trunks, laced with ropey muscles. His abs are defined and shadowed – a definite six-pack – leading to those sexy, deep hip bones that angle in toward his pelvis. I can't keep my eyes off of him, off of each hardened, masculine part that makes up this beast of a man.

I want the weight of him on my body, I want to feel every part of him with my fingers, my tongue, my lips. I want him so fucking much that I'm almost shaking from the need of it all.

He watches me watching him, a faint smirk on his lips, and he slowly unzips his jeans. They fall to the floor, showing off his muscular thighs. He is wearing dark boxer briefs that hug his body and I can see every rigid line of his erection as it strains against the fabric.

Holy sweet lord.

He grabs his cock for a second and gives it a squeeze. My jaw comes unhinged. Then he pulls off his briefs and for a moment he is standing there, full frontal with his cock jutting out in front of him and on complete display.

His dick is perfect. Just fucking perfect. I can't stop staring at it. It's not just that it's massive (and in a good way, not in a spearing your uterus kind of way), but that it's smooth and thick and long and hard and perfectly proportioned. It's the most gorgeous penis I've ever seen and it makes me wish I could paint because I could have a whole gallery devoted to the beauty of his dick and I would consistently sell out of all my paintings.

"Like what you see?" he asks. *Now* he's smirking.

"I don't know, I may need a better look," I tell him and automatically sit up and lean over, putting my hands on either side of his smooth hips and pulling him toward me. I wrap my hands around his thickness. His cock feels like the hardest velvet and I know I'm looking crazed, horny and greedy. It's hard to fathom how fast we've gone from best friends to dick-holding but none of it seems wrong in the slightest.

In fact, I'm already mourning the fact that we should have done this sooner.

"Your turn," he says and I realize that while he's buck naked in all his glory, I'm completely clothed. I'm not minding this turn of events, but I also know the sooner I have my clothes off, the sooner he can ravish me. And judging by the look in his eyes, that's exactly what he's going to do.

I lean back a bit, conscious of any stomach rolls and thankful that the light in here is dim and flattering, and try to artfully remove my top. But he is quicker. He rips the shirt off and throws it across the room, then spends exactly one second staring at my breasts, before he removes my bra. My breasts spill free, feeling heavy, and he moans, pleased, at the sight of my nipples hardening in the cool air.

“Just as I thought,” he murmurs. Then he is crawling on the bed, naked, and I am lying back underneath him. He dips his head and licks a path from the swell of my breasts in toward the nipple where his tongue teases and teases and teases in large circles, so hot, so wet.

While he squeezes my breast with one hand, flicking my nipple with his finger until I’m groaning from lust, his other hand unzips my pants and slides his hand in.

“Christ,” he whispers roughly, “you’re dripping wet.”

He swirls his finger against my clit and I raise my hips, wanting more. He obliges, sliding his fingers down until two of them are inside me while his thumb presses down in the right spot, making slow circles.

I suck in my breath, my body already rigid with tension. “If you keep that up, I’m going to come right here,” I manage to say.

“So, come,” he says, his lips now on my other breast. “I’m just going to make you come again anyway.”

“You sound so sure of yourself.”

He looks up at me, my nipple between his teeth, his gaze locked on mine and unwavering. I know that look. It’s Linden’s trademark – pure and utter confidence.

But I never really had any doubts.

He bites my nipple gently, then harder, a delicious mix of pleasure and pain. His fingers slide further in until they find the firm cushion of my G-spot and he applies pressure in a quick, tapping motion. I’m not even sure what’s going on but I can’t hold on for much longer. He brings his fingers back out of me and he only has to graze my clit before it triggers my release.

My back arches and he moans into my breast as the whole world swirls and I swan dive into a big pool of bliss, pure pleasure radiating out from every single bone.

“Oh god,” I moan as my hands grip the sheets. “Don’t stop.”

“I’m never stopping, baby. I’m going all night.”

The waves keep coming until the room begins to right itself again. Linden is still on top of me, his mouth trailing up from my glistening breasts toward my collarbone. He's staring at me, almost in awe.

"What?" I ask him.

"Your face."

I'm breathing hard, my face hot from orgasm. "What about my face?"

"I've just never seen you come before," he says. "It's more beautiful than I thought." He moves up a bit, resting on his elbows on either side of my head, his hands sinking into my hair, nearly his full weight on me. His stomach is flush against my stomach, his cock digging into my pelvis. So simple yet so satisfying.

I'm not used to him paying me such compliments. "Don't go all mushy on me," I warn him, half-kidding.

"Baby," he says, kissing my chin and pressing his weight on me. "Have you felt how hard I am? There ain't a mushy bone in me."

He's right about that. Even though I've just come and my head is still swimming, I want nothing more than to open my legs wider and have him thrust inside.

As if he can tell that, he kisses me hard on the lips and then leans over to the bedside table. With the long reach of his arm, he pulls open a drawer and brings out a small box of condoms. He sits up, straddling my thighs, and I watch as he opens a condom packet and rolls it on to the rigid length of his cock, a sexy sight if I've ever seen one.

Though I am on the pill, I'm glad that he's taking the initiative to be smart about this. It's kind of weird, yet comforting, to be with someone when you know a lot of their history of relationships and one-night stands.

"You know when you grabbed me before?" he whispers. "Do it again. Guide me inside you."

"Okay," I say shyly. I bite my lip and smile up at him as he sucks in his abs so I can reach down. I wrap my fingers around his cock, spread my legs and guide him to the right spot. He closes his eyes and sucks in his breath before pushing inside.

I gasp. For a moment I feel like I'm splitting open but by the time he withdraws and pushes in again, my hips drop, my body relaxes and then conforms to him. He fits like a fucking glove inside me, so thick, making me feel so beautifully, wonderfully, impossibly full.

And then I'm suddenly so aware that Linden is inside me, *Linden*. We're naked and he's inside me and he's actually fucking me on his bed.

Linden is fucking me.

God, he fucks good.

He groans in my ear with each slow, deliberate thrust. "You feel like honey," he murmurs, biting down my lip before he groans again as he pushes into the hilt and holds it there for a few, torturous seconds. "So warm, so perfect. You're so fucking perfect." He pulls away to look at me "I can't believe I have you."

*Haven't you always had me?* I want to say that to him. But then again, I'm not sure if I always knew that myself.

He slides himself in and out of me with ease, his breath quickening, the sweat and heat building between us. His cock fills me to the brim and his fingers act like they know my body better than I do. And all this time, Linden remains in control, the pace just perfect, alternating between fast and hard and achingly slow. I'm close to coming again, my neck arching back as he pulls out, then pushes in deep. In and out. In and out. Then he slows and pulls out entirely.

"Hold on," he says gently as he takes his hand out from between my legs and trails it up my chest, my own wetness sticking to me. He lowers his head and licks it up until his mouth is between my breasts. "I love your taste," he whispers. "So fucking good, baby." Then he puts one hand under my shoulder and says, "Get on your stomach. Hips in the air."

I'm not usually accustomed to changing positions during sex and he must see the worry on my brow because he smiles. "I told you I was going to take my time. You're going to come again and when you do, you're going to come hard. Trust me."

I guess I'm all right with that. I turn over and he puts his hands on either side of my waist, pulling my ass toward him as he inches forward. "That's it baby, just like that," he whispers, squeezing my skin.

He guides himself in with ease and from this angle everything changes. He leans forward, his hard, damp chest pressing against my back, and whispers in my ear, "Lie down on your chest, as low as you can go. Keep your ass up."

He pulls me up more and pushes in.

Oh, Jesus.

Remember when I was talking about James, and how one of the reasons I probably stayed with him was because the sex was great? You know, that magic piercing he has to hit that special spot?

Well, Linden doesn't have a magic piercing but I'm starting to think his dick is magic because it's hitting something that's immediately making my knees want to buckle.

"That's it," he says and starts rubbing my clit while he moves in and out. Every time he's in, I can't help but gasp. Then the gasps turn to moans and my breathing is out of control and he's pushing, thrusting, drilling into me from behind. The room fills with the sharp hiss of his breath, his groans of lust, his thighs slapping the back of mine.

"So good," he moans. "You feel so good. God, I love fucking you. Your body just begs to be fucked."

It's not long before I'm practically eating the bed sheet trying to contain myself and the words that want to fall out of my mouth. There are too many emotions and feelings competing for the space inside me.

Something has to give.

So I do.

It sneaks up on me like a rogue wave and immediately pulls me under. I'm tumbling, dizzy, as my body quakes and tremors and my world goes around in a whirl of release. I am loose, I am undone, I am free. And Linden is grunting out my name, his fingers gripping me hard, like he really can't let go.

"So fucking good," he hisses from above me and then he lets out a sharp cry as his pace quickens. I can feel his body shudder against mine as he comes, the quick, heavy inhales, the drops of sweat as they fall off him and onto my back. "Fuck baby, fuck, fuck, fuck." Each word that shoots out of his mouth is punctuated by deep, strong thrusts until he begins to fade inside me.

I'm still swirling, swimming, drowning from the deepest fucking orgasm I've ever had as he slowly pulls himself out of me and collapses on the bed. He drapes one arm across my chest, his face buried into the crook of my neck, breathing hard. It's so safe, so intimate.

As the desire and lust begin to melt away with the rest of my bones, another surge is building up inside me.

This was so good.

Too good.

My Linden.

This was with my Linden.

I don't think I will ever be the same.

No. I *know* I won't be. I can't be, not after this.

There is no going back.

And then I'm hit with a sledgehammer made of heart and truth that feels like its blowing me to smithereens. I don't want to ever be with anyone else. I can't be with anyone else. I want Linden and I want him forever. Tears spring to my eyes as I clamp them shut and think, *You're it, you're it, you're it. All this time you've been it.*

I'm not sure if he's thinking the same thing, because he's gently brushing the hair off my face and kissing my forehead, between my brows, the tip of my nose, my lips, my chin. He says, his voice low and rough, "Nine years. I've been waiting nine years for this. Nine years to finally have you the way I've always needed you."

I blink my eyes open and stare up at him. His look is so intense, so sincere that I feel like I'm sinking further into the mattress, like I'm boneless and stupefied. I can't believe this. I can't believe he's lying here with me naked, that my body still throbs from where his cock was inside me, that he's telling me things I've only dreamed of hearing.

"And now that I've had you," he says softly, his fingertip wiping away a tear that I didn't know had escaped, "I want nothing else."

I try to swallow the lump in my throat but I can't.

"I don't want anything else either," I say but the words sound choked.

He gives me a tender smile and kisses my forehead. "My baby blue."

"My cowboy."

"I think we're going to have a lot of fun together."

He's right. I know we will.

But as I drift off to sleep, naked and in his arms, I'm aware of how quickly things have changed. A week ago we were friends. Now we are lovers.

It feels perfect. Almost too good to be true.

And because of that, I'm afraid it might be.

I'm afraid this won't come easily to us.

I'm afraid.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *LINDEN*

When I wake up, I can't fucking believe my eyes. In fact, I'm tempted to pinch myself to make sure I'm still not dreaming. Because, hell, if that was a dream, it was the best one I've ever had.

But it's not a dream. Beside me, in my bed of messy sheets and covers, there is a gorgeous, perfect woman lying on her side, her back to me. The lines of her sides where her waist dips down and her hips rise up should be on a classic portrait. But none of those birds have an ass like she does. No one else has anything that she has.

That's why she is who she is.

Fuck me. I can't fucking believe I slept with her last night.

Stephanie Fucking Robson.

I grin to myself. I can't help it. I almost start laughing, just because I am so god damn lucky and that hasn't escaped me at all. No, with her perfect, lush, curvy body in my bed, I am just showered with luck, slapped in the face with it.

And it was better than I had imagined. All those years jacking off to her, fucking other girls while thinking of her, all those actual dreams I had – none of them compare to what it was really like. Her taste, the way she felt when I was deep inside her, her eyes and how they glowed like a summer's morning after she came. No fantasy can ever compare to what Stephanie is really like.

"Are you staring at my ass?" she mumbles without moving and I jolt a little at the sound of her voice.

"Er, yes," I admit. "But if you could see your own ass, you'd stare too."

She slowly rolls over and blinks at me and the sunshine streaming through the windows. Yes, it's one hell of a beautiful morning, even the finicky SF weather agrees. "Hi," she says sleepily.

"Hi," I say right back, grinning like an idiot. I move closer to her so I'm flush against her side and my morning wood does a good job of making itself known against her hip.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter," I tell her, not wanting her to have any excuse to leave this bed. "It's Sunday and you're at my place, which means we don't



do anything except eat and screw.”

She raises a perfectly shaped brow. God, she’s stunning even with half her makeup all smeared off her face. “Is that so? I’m not sure I signed up for that.”

“Yes you did,” I say, kissing her shoulder. “When you fucked me last night, you signed up for a lot of things.”

“I don’t recall a contract.”

“No but you did say I was your sex god and you would do absolutely anything for me. And I do mean anything.” I waggle my brows at her.

She lets out a small laugh. “I definitely don’t remember that.”

“Hmmm,” I muse. “Well, maybe I just knew you were thinking it.” I press myself against her, harder. “You know I know you pretty well.”

A shy look comes across her eyes and she looks away. Maybe I’m coming on too strong now.

I reach over and tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “How are you doing?”

She seems to think about that for a moment and stares up at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

And that’s a sentence that sends an icy fist into my chest. “You don’t know,” I repeat.

She shoots me an apologetic look. “I mean...I’m happy. I am. Really. I’m just stunned, I think. It happened so fast and...I don’t really have experience in this.”

“Sleeping with men?”

“Sleeping with my friends. My best friend.”

I know what she means but for me it’s not so complicated. Last night, we did what I always thought we were meant to do. It just took us a hell of a long time to get there.

But with nine years of blue balls, I was sure as hell going to enjoy the payoff.

“Well, I’m still your friend,” I tell her. “That hasn’t changed. This is just an extra dimension.”

“So we’re friends with benefits now?”

I shrug, though I was hoping for more than that. “Sure. If that works for you. I got to tell ya, those benefits are a game changer.”

“It’s going to get messy,” she says, her forehead creased and now I see what she’s really worried about. Actually, it’s the exact same thing that I

am.

She's thinking about James.

"It probably will," I tell her slowly, tugging on a strand of hair. "But that's the same with any relationship, right?"

"And James?"

I sigh. "Well, James might be an issue." And I'm wondering if she suspects the same thing that I sometimes do, that he's still in love with her. "Why do you think he will be?"

"I don't think he'll be an issue, per se. But I just don't know if I want to jump right up and tell him what's going on. He can be a bit...weird about things. Like, he'll feel left out or something. I know he gets kind of cagey when we hang out sometimes, just the two of us."

My heart thumps in my chest like slow footsteps. "Does he?"

She nods. "Yeah. But he's got his own issues, you know? I mean, we both love him, don't get me wrong. He's James. But...I don't know. He's just a bit sensitive and I think if we were all suddenly lovey dovey or fucky wucky in front of him –"

"*Fucky wucky?*"

She ignores me. "If we acted different in front of him, if we changed the dynamic of our friendship, the three of us..."

"But he knows about the pact we made. This wouldn't be much different."

"I know but he thinks the pact was bullshit. Just something you made up for fun."

I frown. "Is that what you thought?"

She purses her lips sheepishly. "Maybe. But it wasn't, was it?"

I shake my head. "No. It really wasn't. I meant it."

"And do you still?"

I nod. "Yes. But now we're just easing into it, aren't we?"

"And this is where it will get messy."

She's right but I don't want to deal with any of that, not right now. I just want to enjoy her like this, just like this, and not have to worry about the bigger picture or ruining friendships. Maybe we just need time.

"How about we just keep it a secret," I suggest. "Like I said last night. Just be mindful, you know? Around others and especially around James. Let's just enjoy this, us, and concentrate on all the hot sex we're going to be having instead of whether James is going to feel like a third wheel. He has

Penny anyway and what we do here in private isn't really any concern of his."

She seems open to that. Her eyes shine brighter. "And then what happens?"

I trail my fingers from the soft spot on her clavicle, all the way between her breasts where I slide them underneath her curves. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I'm sure it will happen sooner or later. But until then, it's just you and it's just me. I know you, Steph, better than you think I do. But I still don't know everything." I let my fingers coast down the middle of her stomach and through the short patch of a landing strip where I pause. "I want to know what turns you on. And what doesn't. And all the secret things you've never dreamed of telling me about. I want to know you on this level. I want in deep."

With that, I reach down and slide my fingers through her folds. She's already wet. This suits my morning wood just fine. I grin at her. "Do you want me in deep?"

She grins right back at me. "What did I tell you about not being cheesy?"

I look up, pretending to think about it. "Something about you liking it?"

She bites her lip and I take that as I sign that she wants me to bite it too. I roll on top of her, loving this view of her underneath.

She runs her hands up along my sides, over my arms and then down my back. She pauses just before my ass and presses. "Wow, you have quite the dimples back here."

"Impressed?"

"Very! Back dimples are kind of my thing."

"You're kind of my thing," I immediately blurt out. Smooth, Linden. Man, since when have I turned into a pubescent boy?

"Kind of?"

I start kissing her neck, enjoying the taste of her skin, her natural sweet, musky smell. "You're my thing. Period."

I move back on the bed, taking my lips from her collarbone all the way down the middle of her body. She squirms underneath me in anticipation, just as my mouth waters for her. I had only a taste last night but I immediately craved more, her juicy lips on mine.

I lick a line down each hipbone and then bury my face between her legs. Her musky smell makes my dick twitch, wanting so desperately to be inside

of her but first I indulge my tongue.

She tastes so unbelievably good. I've never been a man to shy away from eating pussy but there's something about Stephanie that makes her a cut above. Her taste is addictive, like sweet salt, and I groan into her as my tongue swirls around her clit before pushing inside of her.

She's growing wetter by the second, her hands are in my hair, holding tight, and her legs are splayed wider, wanting more. I pull back, wanting to be a tease and gently blow on her until she's whimpering.

"Say please," I tell her, my voice growly.

"Please," she says and I love that there is no hesitation in her voice. I wonder what other things I could get her to say. My mind goes wild.

But first, I want to get her off, then I want to get inside her and get her off again. I attack her with my tongue, pulsing it in and out of her tightness and soon she's coming, her thighs wrapped on either side of my head, her skin throbbing beneath my lips.

I smile against her and look up. She's gripping the sheets for dear life, her back arched and her perfect mouth open. My god, I want so badly to put my cock in there but I'm not one to press it. If she wants to return the favor she can.

Actually, by the way she was staring at my cock last night, I have no doubt she will.

Have I mentioned how lucky I am?

While she's still lying back on the bed and coming down from her high with heavy breaths, I reach for the packets of condoms on the table and quickly roll one on. At some point we'll have to get tested so we don't have to use them anymore. I don't mind practicing safe sex but there is no better feeling than actually shooting your load in someone and watching it drip down their legs. Messy sex is usually the best sex.

I get between her legs again, grab her thighs and pull her back toward me, keeping her legs up in the air. I position myself at her entrance, so wet and ready for me, that I can't help but groan a little.

"I want to fuck your wet cunt so good baby." I bite my lip and stare down at her as I push in. Her eyes widen, from surprise at my words or from my cock entering her, I don't know. I'll take either.

Fuck she feels good. I can't imagine what it will be like to really feel her with my skin, inch by wet, tight, inch. Getting tested isn't exactly sexy talk, so I save that suggestion for later.

I stare down at myself where I push into her, her legs in my hands, my ass driving me in deep. There's never been a sexier sight for a man than this, especially when it's Stephanie. Her full breasts sway with each movement and as I thrust faster, they begin to bounce. Her eyes shine, enraptured and maybe just a bit shy.

I love that I can do that to her.

But I love it more when she comes. The look on her face is pure starlight.

I slide my fingers down between her legs. I know I gave her a G-spot orgasm the other night and if I prop her ass up with a pillow I might be able to do it again. But my hands are skilled and her body responds well to me, like instinct, like it belongs to me. I start stroking her lightly on her dainty little clit and she's so damn sensitive, she's already writhing beneath me, her chest heaving, her lips parting.

I just want to be everything to her. I want to be the best and her only. I want to make her want me, crave me, yearn for me, all the fucking time. I want her to know what it's like to want and I want to know what it's like to be wanted by *her*.

We slowly build to a crescendo. Compared to last night, we take it slow, enjoying the pace, our bodies, the way each other feels. I want it to last forever and yet I want nothing more than to come inside her immediately. I want to watch her face change and for that wonderful vulnerability to take hold.

I want to be the only man who witnesses that look. I want it to be mine forever.

She comes first. It's beautiful. Her skin, glistening from sweat, seems to glow in front of me, her mouth open and wanting, crying out my name, my name that sounds so bloody unbelievable in such a breathy, lustful tone. She shudders from release, riding out the wave, and I'm struck by just how special she is. I think it's going to take a long time before I finally realize just what I have and that I finally have her.

Then I come and it's like I'm pouring myself into her, giving myself in ways I could never even begin to express. It's both numbing and electrifying and brings the hugest grin to my face.

"What are you smiling at?" she smirks from under me.

"You," I tell her, refusing to wipe the grin from my face. "The answer will always be you."

She gives me a coy look and then I grab the end of the condom, making sure it doesn't slip while I pull out. I quickly tie the end and dispose of it before climbing back into bed.

"God, I love mornings," I tell her, pulling her toward me.

She's so helpless and drunk from her orgasm that she's almost mouldable. I hug her tight to me, feeling my sweat cool against her skin. Though I have all intentions of getting up and starting breakfast, the post-sex bliss is too enticing for me to move.

I'm half asleep when I feel her fingertips tracing the skin on my inner arms, going over my tattoos.

"You know," she says quietly, "I never really did hear the story behind these quotes. Is there one? I remember one day you had no tattoos, then the next day you did."

I smile to myself. Everyone knows I love Charles Bukowski, so no one has ever questioned the quotes I chose when I got the tattoos seven years ago. They just assumed that I really liked them.

And I do. But it's so much more than that and Steph, of all people, seemed to pick up on it.

I read the one on my left arm. "She's mad but she's magic. There is no lie in her fire." I read the right one. "The free soul is rare, but you know it when you see it." Even though that's all that is inked on my arm, I go on and tell her the rest of it, "Basically because you feel good, very good, when you are near or with them."

She nods, appreciating it. "That's some beautiful stuff from a drunk."

"Drunks have always written the best poetry."

"So they're your favorite lines, then?"

I press my lips to her forehead. "My dear baby blue. Both of those quotes are about you." I pause while she looks shocked. "Hey, see I'm a poet too."

"Me?" she asks. The look on her face is adorably priceless. I had never planned on telling her the truth but now that I have, it feels impossibly free. Much like her soul.

"You," I tell her. "As I said, you've bewitched me for a long time."

She purses her lips. "I think I liked it better when you were being cheesy." But I can see in her eyes, this is sobering to her, in the best way possible.

“Bring your soul over here,” I tell her and pull her into me. Within moments, we fall asleep. I know I have a smile on my face.

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A few hours later, once we’ve woken up again and ended up in the shower for quite some time (nothing like a little shower sex to get your day going), we’re finally making breakfast.

Well, actually I’m making it for her – scrambled eggs in truffle oil. Trust me it’s divine. I place the plate in front of her with a little flourish and make her a fresh espresso from my machine.

“That must have cost a fortune,” she says as she eyes the gilded machine. She takes a sip and sighs. “Tastes like a fortune too.”

The espresso machine was actually a gift from my parents. They tend to give me a lot of things that say a lot without really saying thing at all. The espresso machine said, “Here, this cost a lot of money, I hope this makes up for the fact that we never called you once last year.” You know, things like that.

“It did,” I tell her. “I hope it would help get me lucky. Guess it worked.”

She narrows her eyes at me playfully. “You’re a pig.”

“You’ve called me that before.”

“If the shoe fits.”

“Pigs don’t wear shoes.”

“They do on cartoons,” she points out. She takes a bite of her eggs and closes her eyes. It’s almost like watching her *O*-face all over again. “Oh my god. These are the best eggs I’ve ever had.”

“Only the best from the best,” I tell her.

“Don’t tell me you laid these.”

“I can tell you what got laid and it wasn’t those eggs.”

She looks to the ceiling and shakes her head. “Such a cheeseball.”

She’s kind of right about that, I just hoped she wouldn’t catch on so fast.

After we’re done eating, we settle on the couch as we usually do. But instead of her sitting on one end and me on the other, this time I’m able to pull her on top of me and molest her constantly. I’m not really sure what the record is for number of times one can have sex in a day, but this damn woman is nearly breaking me.

When she's finished riding me and we're satisfied for now, we flip through the channels on TV without any real purpose. It's Sunday and there's nothing on.

"It's kind of ironic that there is never anything on Sundays when that's the day you'd actually be home watching TV."

She shrugs. "I guess. To be honest, I'm not really sure what Sundays are anymore."

"But you get them off."

"Yes," she says with a pert smile on her lips. "And I get off on them."

"Clever."

"But no, most Sundays I'm going up to Petaluma to see my mom. Or I'm working on stuff for the store. I'm still feeling guilty about closing the shop last weekend."

"Don't take this the wrong way," I tell her, "but I would much rather you feel guilty about that last Saturday and not about us."

Her face softens slightly. "Oh. No. Linden. I don't feel guilty about that. It was a dare."

"But it wasn't."

"But that's what it was to everyone else. I just feel bad that it took me so long to, I don't know, take a chance I guess. And of course I feel bad for stringing Aaron along."

I sit up straighter. "But you weren't stringing him along. You liked him."

She nods. "You're right. I did. And in the end, I made the right choice. No doubt. He's happy doing whatever. I'm happy doing you. But, I mean, I still feel a little bit bad. Don't you over Nadine?"

Ugh. It's like you can ignore that shit for so long but once you're reminded of it, it cuts deep.

"Yeah, I do feel bad," I tell her. "And I admit I was completely selfish about all of this because I wanted you Steph and that's all I could think about. But what was I supposed to do? The fact that I realized how I felt about you...I knew I couldn't be with her any longer. I couldn't live a lie. I might have been in denial with her for a long time but as soon as I woke up, I knew I had to end it. I know plenty of people stay in relationships out of convenience or they're afraid of being the bad guy or they're just too bloody lazy. But the moment I knew the truth, I was out of there. It sucked for Nadine and I am sure I'm going to be in a world of hurt tomorrow when



I go into work but I still stand by what I did. She can hate me all she wants, and she will, but she would hate me more if I stayed with her because I felt I had to, not because I actually wanted to.”

“You don’t have to explain to me,” she says. “I understand. I was there. I just went through that.”

I sigh, feeling all worked up inside. “I know. I just know I’ve got a lot of people pointing their finger at me right now and it doesn’t feel good.”

“Because they don’t understand. Because it looks bad.”

“But it’s *not* bad. How can anything involving you be bad?”

“Because those people don’t know me and they don’t really know you either. And some people live in denial. Some people think it’s noble to settle. But you’re not some people, Linden. You’re not even most people. You’re you. And, I’ve got to say, I’m having no complaints from this department.”

It feels so damn nice to have someone who has your back.

“You know what I’m going to do for you today?”

She purses her lips. “I dunno. I think you’ve done more than enough for me already.”

“I’m taking you into the sky.”

“The sky?”

I point up. “Helicopter. Me. You. Now.”

“Okay, caveman. Remember the last time you tried to take me up there on short notice?”

I nod. “Yes. But that was then and this is now. I know a guy who will let me take his chopper for an hour or two.”

She snorts. “You know a guy,” she repeats back slowly, “who owns a helicopter, who will just let you take it.”

“Yes. His name is Daryl.”

She stares at me for a few beats and then shrugs. “All right then.”

It’s true that I know a guy named Daryl who owns a helicopter. I’m not entirely sure if he’ll let me take it but I’ve been doing a lot of work for him lately, flying around photographers when he’s been too booked up, and I think I can strike a bargain with him.

I excuse myself and go into the bedroom to call him. Ten minutes later, after I’ve promised to do some work for free on my days off, he says I’ve got the chopper.

An hour after that, we’re in San Rafael and we’re taking off.

Stephanie looks absolutely giddy and extremely cute with her giant headphones on. I slip on my aviator shades and for the first time in a long time, I feel absolutely cool. You'd think that flying helicopters would be the most consistently cool and interesting job in the world, and it kind of is. Except when you've been doing it nearly every day for years. Then it just becomes a job. I'd assume commercial airline pilots probably feel the same way.

Watching Stephanie beside me as we lift off is like seeing it all from her eyes, like flying for the first time. I know she's been with me a few times before, but this time it's different. It's for us. And she makes me feel like I'm the cock of the walk.

Speaking of cock...

After I zip us around Point Reyes and as far as Mendocino, pointing out where we were on the coast just last weekend, I give her a suggestive look and unzip my fly.

"Linden," she says through the microphone. "What are you doing?"

"C&C baby," I tell her with a huge grin. "Told you this would happen one day."

"Are you serious?"

I nod. But the minute she puts her hand on my dick, groping the hard contours through my jeans, I realize there is no way in hell this could happen without us both dying in a horrific accident.

I clench my jaw, so completely turned-on, but somehow have the strength to say, "You know what, on second thought..."

She smiles at me and removes her hand. "That's what I thought."

"You render me useless with your tongue, you know," I tell her.

She just continues smiling, pleased with herself.

But when I land the chopper back down at Daryl's compound, all bets are off. There's no one around at this exact moment and I know this won't take long.

"Get in the backseat," I tell her as the rotors slowly whir to a still.

She gives me an incredulous look but, what a fucking trooper this girl is, she gets in the back.

It's not quite cock in the cockpit but it's close enough. As soon as I sit down, she's crawling on top of me, shaking that ass of hers in the air and stroking me through my jeans. I've pretty much been hard the entire time

I've been flying. When I go to unzip my pants though, she slaps my hand away with a wicked look on her face.

"I don't think so," she says. "I want to see just how turned on I can make you."

"Oh, baby blue, you can make me unbearably, painfully turned on. It's fucking torture."

"Good," she says, grabbing me harder. I buck against the fabric, aching for more. She rubs my length, squeezing at the right spots and says, "I can feel your heat."

"You'll feel it better if you put me in your mouth."

Finally, after what seems like an agonizing eternity, she slowly undoes the zipper and pulls me out. My cock is as stiff as cement and dark from all the blood flow. She smiles at the precum on the tip and uses it to lubricate her hand as she slides it slickly along my length.

I gasp, feeling very much like a kid in high school. I'm high on adrenaline from the flight and too turned on to keep it together for much longer. I have a feeling once I'm in her wet mouth, I'm going to come immediately. I'm probably not going to feel ashamed about it.

"Look, I don't want to come in your eye or anything," I warn her, breathless, "so if you're going to do something you better do it now."

"You have such a perfect dick," she says as I lean back and close my eyes, my body tensing as I try to restrain myself. "I could write a song about it."

"Could you write about it and suck me off at the same time?"

Then I feel her lips wrap around the tip and suddenly I'm fully inside her wet, wet mouth.

I'm coming before she gets more than a few strokes in, gripping the leather seats in the back of the chopper and hissing, "Fuck, fuck, oh baby, so good," under my breath.

She pulls away – swallows politely – and then grins. "That was for the helicopter ride," she says smoothly.

I groan as I try to sit back up, my dick still throbbing. "Duly noted. Take Steph up in the air every chance you get."

She slowly wipes her mouth with her fingers. "Actually, you don't have to take me anywhere."

"When did I get so lucky again?"

"When you accepted a dare."

I grin at her. “Best decision I ever made.”

Afterward I drive her home. When I drop her off, it’s bittersweet. I like the idea that I’m dropping her off, what it means, like we’ve had our first date or something. But I hate the fact that I won’t see her for a bit.

“I wish you didn’t have to work so much,” I tell her while the Jeep purrs at the curbside.

“Well, you work too,” she points out.

I sigh inwardly. Yes. I do. With Nadine. That will not be fun. “But I work a few hours a day. Sometimes more, but you’re breaking your back for this business, day in and day out. I worry about you, you know.”

She smiles sweetly. “Don’t worry. And it’s hard right now, that’s all. It will get better. I just need the right employee.”

“Ever think about opening an online store? It might be a bit easier.”

She nods. “Sometimes. But things are so new still, I’m just not confident enough.”

“Well if you ever need any kind of help with it, I’m here.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it. And not just financially, you know if you need an extra loan or something. I just mean...I’ll help you plan, I’ll help you dream. I’m here for you.”

She gives me a quick smile. “Thanks Linden.” And then she kisses me, soft and light, before she jumps out the door. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” she says.

“You better,” I warn and then she shuts the door and walks away. Shit, do I love to watch her go. I wait until I see she’s safe inside her building before I drive away.

I think I just had one of the best days of my life.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *STEPHANIE*

It's been three weeks since Linden and I first slept together.

It's probably been the best three weeks of my life. Even the drop in business because of the shit November weather hasn't even entered my headspace.

Linden is all I think about. Linden is all I do.

Of course I go to work every day, trying even harder now to hire the right person for the shop. Let me tell you, hiring has to be one of the hardest jobs in the world. I naively thought it would be easy. If the person has a great resume, then they'll be a great fit.

But then of course you have to interview them and that's when you find out that most of the people sending you their applications are absolute boneheads. One girl said she wanted to work here because she likes clothes and shopping and this way she can do both. Another person admitted that she had shoplifted once at a previous workplace but she was "over that phase" now and I shouldn't have to worry about her.

So that whole thing has been stressful. And I guess hiding our new, uh, relationship from everyone has been a bit taxing too.

Sometimes I question if we're doing what's right. I feel guilty over the slightest things, so the fact that the both of us often have to lie to James, even though they are harmless white lies about where we were last night and what we've been up to, it feels so terribly wrong. I don't like lying to my friends.

But I admit, I like sleeping with Linden more.

In fact, the whole thing has turned addicting, in a serious, dangerous and very real way. When I say that Linden is all I think about and do, that's one hundred per cent true.

In some ways it feels like we are making up for a lot of lost time and I guess we are. But it's also just the ease of the whole thing. Fucking him is just so easy, it's as natural, as needed, as breathing, sleeping and eating. I've never in my life felt so completely attached to someone in such a physical way.

And the thing that I don't want to admit to anyone, not even myself at times, is that it's so much more than fucking. It isn't just sex, no matter how

badly I want to pretend it is. We aren't friends with benefits, we are friends with something most people die without knowing. At times I want to say we are making love, because as dirty and filthy as Linden can be, as rough and hard as we go at it, there is an alarming current of intimacy and tenderness in everything we do.

Of course, I've always loved Linden, just like I love many of my friends. But that love with him is turning into something else, something deeper, better, brighter. There's another layer to my love for him and it gets uncovered more and more every single day. It's like opening a Christmas present you've always wanted and finding out there's something better underneath.

And it stems from the heart, not just the loins. My heart these days feels like a sponge that's just absorbing and absorbing and absorbing until it's leaking into me and tainting my blood with a sticky kind of joy.

Linden is my thoughts, my air, my earth. Linden is starting to become more than everything to me.

I might be going a little bit crazy but I'm pretty sure that's what someone might call falling in love.

A fall into madness.

*Splat.*

That's going to be me.

It's Thursday afternoon and I've just finished an interview with a girl who seems a little customer shy, but might end up being my only option, when there is a knock at the door. I had locked it and put on the CLOSED sign during the interview so that I could conduct it in peace.

It's Linden, which is a complete surprise. He'd been flying transport for this mega ranch down south all day, taking advantage of the short daylight hours as much as he could. I didn't expect to see him until tonight. He had mentioned taking me to an expensive, trendy restaurant somewhere in my neighborhood that had classic films playing in it.

I give him a quick wave and I can't help the cheek-splitting smile on my face. I hope I look and smell okay but it's too late to do a sniff test.

The girl I interviewed is looking at him with big, flirtatious eyes. *Back off honey*, I feel like telling her. You don't have the job yet.

We walk over to the door and I tell her I'll give her a call soon. I know she wants to hear more than that but all I can concentrate on is the man on the other side.

My lord, is he ever handsome.

I open the door and welcome him in. "Isn't this a nice surprise," I say to him as the girl brushes past us. He doesn't even look in her direction, which I appreciate considering his reputation. His eyes are just for me.

"Hey baby," he croons as he steps inside and he puts his hands on either side of my face. They are cold to my warm cheeks and it braces me. I'm also trying to adjust to the fact that lately he's been calling me baby more than he's been calling me baby blue.

He leans in and kisses me hard, his mouth opening to mine, his tongue sinking in deep and slow, stirring up heat in my chest, my gut, my core.

My knees feel a little weak and I'm grateful he's holding me. The man can sure kiss your breath away.

"What are you doing here," I manage to say when we break apart. He brings his arm around the small of my back and presses me against him.

"I managed to get off early," he says with a wicked gleam in his eye. "So I came over here to get off again."

I raise a brow at his bad pun but he bites along my neck, ending at that sweet spot just below the ear, the place that always turns me into putty in his hands.

"Did I ever tell you about all my fantasies about fucking you in this store?"

"No, you did not," I tell him, surprised to hear this. Surprised but definitely intrigued.

He merely growls into my skin, one hand reaching down to lift up my skirt and cup and squeeze my ass. "Wearing bad girl panties today are we?" he asks, his palm skimming the surface of my ass that's bare from my thong.

Then he slaps it. *Hard.*

I jump from the sharp hit but he's holding me in place and grinning. My ass cheek stings from his handprint.

"Ouch," I cry out, trying not to be a baby about it.

"I'll kiss it better," he says and I know now he's not going anywhere.

"Hold on," I warn him before he gets me even more indecent in public. I pull my skirt down and run over to the door, locking it behind me. Then I turn off the lights so it's not so easy to see in.

When I turn around, he's already unzipped his jeans and has his dick in his hands. He's smiling dangerously and stroking the hard, stiff length of

it.

“So where did you plan to fuck me?” I look behind me at the counter. “There?” I slowly walk toward him and, knowing a rack of clothing is extra protection from wandering eyes from the street, I drop to my knees in front of him. “Here?”

I grab hold of his beautiful dick and put him in my mouth.

“Bloody hell, baby,” he says with a groan, thrusting a bit forward. “Don’t ever stop being so perfect.”

*I won’t stop if you won’t stop*, I think and swirl my tongue around his base.

“Can you do me a favor?” he says breathlessly.

I nod, slowing down.

“Tug my balls. Just a wee bit. I love that.”

Fuck, I’ll do anything to bring pleasure to this man. Plus, he has a really nice set of balls that he does an amazing job of manscaping. While I work his dick with my mouth, I gently cup them with my palm and tug them, just a little bit.

The moan that escapes his lips startles me but travels right to my core, vibrating through my bones. God, it’s turning me on turning him on. I tug a little harder and he makes a fist in my hair, holding me with a burst of warm pain.

“You’re so good, baby,” he says, his breath hitching. “So dirty but so good. Don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

So I don’t. But a minute later he releases my hair and pulls away. “Okay, I lied. Stop. I need to be inside you.”

He shakes off his jeans and briefs and then hauls me to my feet, somehow taking off my shirt at the same time.

“Aah,” I cry out softly, my arms covering my breasts as my eyes fly to the windows. Passerbys may not be able to see clearly but now that I’m standing up, they can at least see some of me.

“The storeroom,” he growls with a nod. “Get in there and get naked.”

I barely have enough time to do so before the door slams behind me and I’m pushed against racks of clothing wrapped in protective plastic. The hangers swing from my weight as he presses into me. He tears off his shirt then puts his strong arms under my thighs and lifts me up. He hikes up my skirt, pushes the thin fabric of my underwear aside and I wrap my legs around his waist.



When the clothes start to give away, he holds me tight and whirls me around and across the room until my back is pressed up against a stack of boxes. Breathing hard, he leaves a trail of wet, messy kisses from my mouth to my breasts, teasing my nipples until they are hardened pebbles. He slaps them slightly and I gasp from the shock and then he's positioning himself into me. I'm so glad our test results came back clear the other week because feeling his bare cock inside me is like nothing else on this earth.

He grins at me, mouth parted and eyes glazed. "Tell me how bad you want it."

"I want it," I tell him, reaching down so he can push himself in better.

"How bad?"

"Fucking bad."

He gives my breast another slap and then laps his large, flat tongue over the sweet sting. "Fucking hell, you have the nicest breasts in the world. Nicest pussy, nicest ass, nicest everything."

He bites my nipple and I groan, my head back against the boxes. "Stop stalling."

"I'm just taking my time. You're the one being greedy."

"You make me greedy."

He runs his thumb over my clit and smiles wickedly. "Greedy, dirty little fucking girl."

I'm on the edge, teetering on the line between wanting to savor and wanting release. He knows this. He loves this. He leans over and teases the tip of my lips with his tongue.

"Give it to me," I murmur into his mouth, practically pleading. "Any way you can."

"The only way I can," he says. Then he inhales, his nostrils flaring with desire and pushes into me sharply.

Even though I'm wet, the angle is deep and tight. I cry out a little before the pain subsides and I feel this warmth and fullness take over.

"You like that?" he whispers against my neck, biting and licking and breathing so hot, so heavy.

I whimper some sort of response as my legs tighten around him and I'm pushed harder and harder into the boxes. Soon the whole shelf begins to shake. My legs begin to shake. He's holding me up and he's spearing into me with these rough, hot thrusts that fill every wanting inch of me.

I grip his back, feeling the muscles ripple under my fingers, his pure strength and size. The backs of my heels dig into the sides of his firm ass and I'm holding him tight, tight, as tight as I can.

"Fuck," he hisses through his teeth as he grips my skin. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. You feel so fucking good, baby, you feel so good."

The pace picks up and it's like he's trying to fuck me through the boxes, through the wall, and into the store. The need in his face, the want and desire, it makes me feel like I'm being devoured, eaten alive, and gladly.

He lets out a frustrated cry and the cords on his neck stick out as he strains for control, sweat running down his face and his hard, broad chest as it crushes against my breasts. He's close to losing it. "Come with me," he growls, and he focuses his piercing, carnal eyes on mine. "Come."

His thumb grazes me. It's a hair trigger. I come and come loose, a feral, uncontrollable sort of bliss ripping through me until I feel like my skin and bones and nerves have been annihilated. My mind feels like it's been blown wide open and from the intensity in his rough grunts, I know he feels the same.

When he pulls out and gently lowers me to the ground, it feels like a dream and the storeroom is a cloud. I'm not really here, I'm somewhere else, but I'm with him.

My heart beats hard in my throat and I can't feel my legs and I can't open my eyes. The whole interior of my body throbs and pulses, sending waves of pleasure through every crevice until the waves get smaller and smaller and smaller. Eventually I remember how to breathe.

I am so, so deliriously happy. I'm high. I'm joy.

He is so fucking good.

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"You know what's weird?" Linden asks me as I drive us over the span of the Golden Gate Bridge, heading north toward Petaluma. Even though I love this bridge to death I'm also scared of it and I try and stick to the middle lane as much as possible. If I even glance toward the edge and the Bay, I get sick.

"What's weird?" I ask.

"Well," he says, placing his palm on my leg and stroking my bare thigh up and down until I have to shiver, "the fact that I've never met your father

is kind of weird. You know, considering how long we've known each other."

He's right. Actually he only met my mom on the day I opened the store. Of course, my father was out of the picture at that point. It was just one of those things where they had a bunch of opportunities to meet – working at the Lion, my graduation dinner – but it just didn't work out that way.

Now, that my dad is somehow back in the picture, I have to say I'm a bit nervous about it. It's one of the reasons why I invited Linden along, so I would have some backup. The fact that my dad is back with my mother but hasn't actually moved back in, is whole world of strange and I don't know what the dynamics of their relationship will be. Linden makes a great buffer.

The other reason is equally as selfish: I want to show Linden off. I want my mom and dad to look at him and be impressed, because how could they not be? He's handsome, he's successful (at least I consider being a helicopter pilot a successful career, even if Linden's own parents do not) and he's charming.

I want their approval. I know I shouldn't but considering I've stayed silent about Linden when talking to Nicola and Kayla, and Penny and James are still clueless, I want someone to tell me I've made a good choice. I want to know how the two of us and our quasi relationship look to other people.

"Bad timing, I guess," I tell him. "Whenever they were around where you could actually meet them, you weren't."

"Guess you could say the same about us."

I glance over my shades at him. "What do you mean?"

He shrugs and runs his hand through his thick hair. "Just that for so many years, when I was single you were with someone else and when you were single, I was with someone else."

"There were a few years in there where both of us were single, you know," I point out.

"I know. I remember them very well. It took a lot of restraint on my behalf not to tell you how I really felt."

All this time, all this time. "Why didn't you?"

He takes a moment and then says, "James. I guess it always came down to James. You know sometimes, if I wasn't his best friend, I'd think the guy hates me."

"Hates you?" I repeat.

“Yeah.” He looks over at me and his eyes are troubled. “Since the day we first met there’s always been this...I don’t know, resentment toward me. Maybe it’s all in my head. It probably is. But it’s just been years of little digs on how I get everything I want and I never have to work hard and how privileged I am.”

I think I know what Linden is talking about. “But you do work hard. You worked extremely hard to get to where you are now. Your parents didn’t help you out with that.”

He gives me a wry look. “No. But they did pay for my school and my flat. I would have worked hard if they didn’t but it would have been a lot harder to get to where I am now. I mean, I know I’m lucky in many respects, but I’m also not in others. But James doesn’t see it that way. He grew up with a messed up family but so did I. Just because my family had money, didn’t mean my life was any better. When you’re a child, you don’t care about that shit. You just want love.”

My heart is breaking a little bit for him. I know it’s been hard for Linden to have the family that he does. I also know that James’s family is a little bit worse. I still don’t know all the details but it was a poor, hard knock life in Oakland for that kid, with an abusive deadbeat dad and a struggling mother. And I know that James does sometimes talk about Linden being born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

“So he’s jealous of you,” I say.

“I think he’s jealous of the *me* he thinks I am,” he says. “You know... James and I, we don’t really talk about that stuff. We don’t talk the same way that you and I do. You know me better than he does, baby blue.”

“And I know that you haven’t had it easy.”

“But as long as James’s life is worse and more of a struggle, then I’ll always be the winner in his eyes. That’s what I think he resents me for. And that’s why I stayed away from my feelings for you for so long.”

My stomach tingles at the mention of feelings. I want to press him more on that subject but I refrain myself. I don’t want to be the pushy needy girlfriend when I’m not even his girlfriend.

Linden glances at me. “I didn’t want him to think I took you away. There was a while there, where...”

“What?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. I just thought if I made any advances toward you, I’d be stepping on his toes too much. And then of course there

was the fact that I had no idea how you felt. All these years I assumed that you only thought of me as a friend and that's it." Pause. "For the most part."

"For the most part?"

He grins. "Well, I did catch you checking me out a few times."

"Oh you did not!" But my face is turning red.

"I think I did. I also caught you catching me checking you out. And you looked like you liked it. A lot."

"Whatever."

"You know it's true. But even then, I wasn't about to risk our friendship."

"So what changed?"

He chews on his lip for a moment. "I think I grew some balls."

"I'm glad you did," I tell him, reaching for his crotch. "You know I love your balls."

An hour later I'm pulling the car down my parent's driveway and kneading my hands on the steering wheel.

"Are you...nervous?" Linden asks, sounding shocked.

I give him a look. "I haven't seen my dad since he fucked off."

"But they are still your parents."

"You get nervous around *your* parents."

"With reason."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I have reasons too."

I take in a deep breath and get out of the car. Once I do, Linden walks around and pulls me into a deep hug.

"Don't worry," he says into the top of my head before he plants a kiss there. "I'm here."

And just like that, half my worries slip away, to the ground, like rain. I close my eyes and let him hold me for a moment. He is here, with me. My rock.

We pull apart and head over to the door. Normally I would just barge in but I feel like it's best to knock now.

When the door opens, it's my father and suddenly I don't feel like I just turned thirty, I feel like I just turned thirteen. He looks the same, tall, tanned, with a dark, lowered brow and intimidating demeanor.

But when he sees me, he smiles and he goes from scary, disapproving dad to someone who genuinely looks happy to see me.

“My little girl,” he says and he comes out onto the stoop to embrace me. He holds me for what seems like forever and I know Linden is just standing there beside us awkwardly.

Finally he pulls away and looks me up and down. “You look beautiful.”

He now turns to Linden and sticks out his hand. “You must be Linden. I’ve heard all about you.”

“Good things I hope,” Linden says, the classic response.

“She says you’re a pilot,” he says and his eyes go all twinkly for a moment before he suddenly looks at the ground and clears his throat. “Anyway, let’s go in. It’s freezing out here.”

As my dad turns and goes back inside, Linden gives me an inquisitive glance. I know he’s wondering what the deal is with the pilot remark and I feel like an idiot for not remembering that’s one of the things my brother Nate and my dad liked to do. When Nate was really young, he would take him to the airport and watch the planes and helicopters take off. Later on, Nate had a remote controlled one that he was really good (at flying).

But then when he got more and more sick, he wasn’t able to play with it as much and eventually we could only take him to the airport for short periods of time. It wasn’t that my dad had wanted Nate to be a pilot and it’s not like Nate ever expressed that himself – he had wanted to be a lot of things. But I guess that’s what really stings. Nate never really thought of himself as sick, even when he was at his worst. He had that optimism of a child that things would get better. He really thought he would live forever.

“Stephanie,” Linden says softly and he grabs my hand, “are you all right?”

I nod and swallow the lump in my throat. “Yeah. Just remembering something.”

“Your brother?”

I nod again. I don’t really talk about this with Linden, or anyone, actually. I rarely think about it myself. It’s just easier that way. So sometimes, when I’m reminded of Nate and what he used to be like, what our lives were like, it really catches me off guard.

No matter how badly you push it away and ignore it, the pain of loss never really goes away.

We go inside the house and it immediately smells like home. I guess because it is, but it’s funny how no matter where you end up living in life, some places always remain more than just a roof over your head.

We take off our shoes and I grab Linden's hand, leading him toward the kitchen. There we find my mother, looking absolutely perfect as usual. Her hair is up and curled off her face, she's got an apron over a dress and patent leather pumps on her feet.

Have I mentioned that my mother is probably where I got my fascination with fashion from? Whether she was taking care of Nate or playing with me and my toy horses, she never had a hair out of place and always looked put together. Even now, and my parents are on the older side, so she's pushing her sixties, she looks like she should be in the pages of *Good Housekeeping*.

"Hello dear," she says brightly and then smiles wide at Linden, red lipstick against white teeth. "Hello Linden. How was the drive over? I hope traffic wasn't too bad."

"It was fine," I say and she's coming around the kitchen island and pulling out the stools.

"Here, sit," she says and when we don't move she claps her hands together and says, "or sit with your father in the lounge. He just opened a bottle of scotch. Linden, you're Scottish, you must like scotch."

"That I do," Linden says, making his accent more exaggerated. It also has the secondary effect of turning me on.

My mother ushers us into the lounge off of the dining room, where my father is indeed sitting in his usual leather chair and sipping from a highball glass. He gestures to the loveseat beside him where we sit down.

It's kind of weird being with Linden like this in front of my parents, or in front of anyone, really. In this new stage of our, well, pact, we've usually been alone. Now that we are on the sofa together, squished against each other, I'm not really sure what to do with my hands. I wanted Linden as a buffer and I want my parents to approve of him, but I don't know exactly how we're supposed to act with each other. We'd never talked about that.

But Linden immediately puts his arm around me and holds me close to him. So that settles that. There are no questions now.

My father raises a good eye brow as he looks at us. "Is this a new thing?" he asks.

*Well, you haven't really been around for a few years,* I want to say. But I don't. I'm not here to rock any boats.

I can feel Linden's eyes on me, searching for the right answer. When I don't say anything, he looks at my dad and says, "It's a bit of a new thing. I

woke up one day and decided life was too short to be just friends with a girl like your daughter.”

My dad doesn't look too impressed so he shouts to my mom in the kitchen, “Hey honey, you never told me that Stephanie and the Scottish guy were an item!”

“They aren't an item, they're just friends,” my mom yells back.

“No,” my dad says. “They most definitely aren't just friends.”

And as if to add to that, Linden puts his other hand on my leg and gives it a squeeze.

My mom's heels *click click click* from outside the room and then she's in the doorway, peering at us in mild shock.

“Well,” she says. “Stephanie, a bit of notice would have been good.”

“Why?” I say, hating how everyone is making such a big deal out of this.

She puts a hand on her hip. “It's one thing for me to make dinner for you and your friend, it's another thing to make it for you and your boyfriend.”

“He's not –” I say and then stop myself. Linden's face is right there and he's staring at me, waiting for me to go on. But I can't do it. I know he's not my boyfriend but in some ways he's way more than that term. I lick my lips and look back at her. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you. But Linden is happy eating anything, really.”

I hear him snicker slightly from beside me and I gently elbow him in the gut.

The rest of the evening goes rather smoothly. We sit with my dad and chat about current events and when Linden mentions his family, then some big discussion about politics and Britain and other shit gets started. I know Linden hates it, but it's true that when people find out that his father was an ambassador that they look at him differently, with more respect. Which is crazy because I respect Linden more for what *he* does, not what his family is a part of. I respect him from wanting to be separate from that whole thing and be his own man.

Meanwhile, during dinner, I'm busy trying to decipher just what the hell is going on with my parents. They are acting like a bunch of star-crossed teenagers, all gaga eyed and extra polite to each other. I suppose I should be mature and think it's really sweet but there's a part of me that just doesn't get it.



It isn't until after the meal when my father invites Linden to step outside and have a cigar with him – a good thing since that's always been a sign that my dad really likes you – that I have a chance to be alone with my mom.

But before I can even say anything she's asking me about Linden.

"When on earth did the two of you get together?" she asks, putting the last of the dishes away. My mom cleans as she cooks, so there's actually never anything to help her with after the meal is over.

"A few weeks ago," I tell her as I nurse my glass of wine, not really wanting to get into it.

She folds her arms and leans back against the counter. "And are you serious about him?"

I roll my eyes. "Look, I don't know."

She studies my face for a moment. "Yes you do. Why are you holding out on me?"

I smile at her choice of words. "I'm not *holding out* on you, mom. It's just new. And it's complicated. And I don't know what we are."

"You're sleeping together."

"Mom," I warn.

"I hope you're using protection."

"*Mom*," I say again. "Please. I'm thirty. I know these things. Next you're going to tell me to be careful because boys are only after one thing."

"No, I won't tell you that," she says, folding a drawer of dishcloths, "because I can see that he's after more than that."

I don't say anything but a small part of me is elated that she noticed.

"But," she goes on, "I also see you're being cautious. That's a good thing but don't let it get between you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know it can be complicated, as you say, going from friends to lovers. But that's how some of the best relationships start."

"Right. But that can also be how some of the best relationships end."

"That is true," she says, her voice sing song. "But it's always worth a risk. Especially as you get older."

"Again, mom, I'm only thirty."

"I know, I know. Quit reminding me how old you are, it only makes me feel older." She shuts the drawer and sighs. "When you're young, you see

the world in black and white. When you get older, you realize it's always been grey. Same goes for love."

"Are you talking about me and Linden now or you and dad?"

She smiles to herself and it makes her face look even more delicate. "Your father and I had a real rough patch. Actually, it's always been rough. If it wasn't for you and your brother, especially your brother, we would have gotten a divorce a very long time ago. But we held off for both your sakes. That wasn't how life worked. So when the time was right, your father decided to move on from me."

I'm having a hard time trying to absorb this information. The whole time growing up, I thought my parents were madly in love with each other, just because they were parents and that's what they were supposed to be. Turned out, I had no idea what "settling" looked like. Now I do.

"I know it isn't easy for you to understand," she continues, "and it's even harder to explain. But I knew it was the thing to do. What I didn't know, what I didn't realize, was how much I missed your father. How much I actually loved him. I ignored it for a while, not wanting to risk it again. I think he was doing the same, that's why he wasn't as in touch with you. But when he called me one day, out of the blue, wanting to talk, I thought maybe we could take it slow."

"So...this is you taking it slow? Is that why he doesn't live here?"

She nods. "He comes to see me a few times a week. We go on dates. It's...nice. And it's unconventional. Our friends don't understand but it works for us. Shades of grey, you see. Sometimes things work out with the person you never expected. Sometimes that person is your husband. Sometimes they end up being your best friend."

While I'm pondering that, my dad and Linden come back in the room, smelling like cigars, which is actually a smell I happen to love. As Linden removes his shoes, my dad goes over to my mom and kisses her lovingly on the cheek. She waves her apron at him to waft the stink away.

So, my mom and my dad are dating. Each other. I guess there are worse scenarios out there.

On the way back home to the city, I'm not saying much. I'm lost in my thoughts. I'm thinking that maybe I shouldn't be so cautious anymore with Linden. Maybe I need to seriously look at where this is all going. Is this really a stage of the pact? Are we doing this because we want to marry each

other? Suddenly the idea of marrying him because of a promise we made years ago seems wrong.

I want Linden because I'm in love with him. That's the only reason there should be.

Always observant, Linden turns down the classic rock station we're listening to on the radio and the car hums with silence for a beat. Then he says, "So I guess I'm your boyfriend."

I give him a half-smile. "Sorry. I didn't know what to say back there."

He frowns, his expression turning serious. "Don't be sorry. I would love to be that to you."

"Really?"

"Aye," he says, "even though it sounds a bit juvenile now, doesn't it?"

"Well, I guess we could refer to each other as lovers. I mean, that's what we are, right?"

"And at dinner parties be like, 'oh Jeeves, would you like to meet my lover, Stephanie?'"

I giggle. "Maybe not quite like that. We're not old or, I don't know, French enough for that."

"Then I guess boyfriend works."

"I guess."

"And you're my girlfriend." He reaches across and picks my hand off the stick shift. He kisses my knuckles gently. "But really, you're my everything. And there's nothing that will change that."

I really hope he's right.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *LINDEN*

“What the hell are you wearing?”

I’m at Stephanie’s front door and she’s staring at me like I’m an alien from another planet.

If I was, I would be from the Planet of the Sharks.

As in the San Jose Sharks.

I decided it would be fun to take her out on a surprise date and since she says she’s never been to a Sharks game and I almost always go with James, I thought that this would be quite the surprise indeed.

But at the moment, she’s probably just confused as to why I’m dressed all in blue and have a plush shark mascot head over my own.

“Hockey!” I announce and hand her the tickets. “We’re going to a Sharks game, baby blue.”

She raises a brow, still looking me over. “That is what I was praying you’d say.”

“Come on,” I say, throwing my arms out to the side, “get excited. You’ve always wanted to go.”

She just stares at me. I sigh and remove the mask from my head. “Okay, does this help?”

She grins at me and comes out into the hall to kiss me. Her lips feel especially soft today, her tongue especially frisky. She smells and tastes like mint and sugar.

I’m hard in a second. “You know, this shark head could be a little fun if you’re up for some roleplaying.”

She bites my lower lip, tugging on it slightly, inhaling my breath. “The only thing you’ll be playing is tied up to my bed,” she purrs.

Yes. Yes please.

Suddenly hockey seems like a stupid idea. “You know what? The Sharks can wait. We can see them another day.”

She grins and puts her hand on my chest, feeling my hard muscle for one appreciative moment before she shoves me back. “No way, San Jose,” she says, her eyes gleaming. She turns around and heads back into the apartment, grabbing her purse off the kitchen counter before locking the door behind her. “Let’s go.”

I groan in disappointment but it doesn't matter. We'll be coming back to her place later and I'm going to hold her to it. The shark mask might even make an appearance.

I drive us down the freeway to San Jose, which normally doesn't take that long unless you're stuck in traffic like we are. Sometimes it feels like the whole city migrates on game days, especially as we get into the hockey season. The holiday season doesn't help either. It's like the moment Thanksgiving is over (which I spent with Stephanie and her parents), everyone decides they must be driving to a mall somewhere to buy presents twenty-four hours a day. Christmas is at least three weeks away.

A lot has changed in the last month and a bit. I finally learned to let go of the guilt I felt over Nadine, so that helped me enjoy my happiness with Stephanie a lot more. Actually Nadine made it easier on me. She did end up staying in the flat I got for her the full month but she also quit her job as receptionist. I'm not sure where she's living or working now but my boss said it was a good move for her and I just have to take his word on that.

It was such a messy ordeal, what happened, but in the end I don't regret it for a second. Being with Stephanie in this way, the way I always wanted, is better than I could have ever expected.

"Remember that whole cock in the cockpit?" Stephanie suddenly says as we crawl forward at a snail's pace. "Or at least the attempt at one?"

I swivel my head toward her, stunned. It's like she heard my thoughts on how amazing she is. "Yes."

"This might make being stuck in traffic a good thing." She gives me a wanton smile and places her hand on my crotch.

"Right now?" I can't believe I'm even questioning this but... "There are cars all around us."

"Oh relax, it's dark out," she says. "My side is the shoulder, the person behind us can't see what we're doing because of the wheel at the back of the Jeep, the person in front of us only sees your headlights and whoever is beside you...well, let's hope they mind their own business."

I look over at the person beside us. It's a pair of middle-aged men dressed in Bruins jerseys, the jackasses we're playing against tonight. Actually I don't mind giving them a show.

She increases the pressure from her hand and then unzips my fly, folds down the waistband of my briefs and pulls the tip of my cock out. I can see precum already glistening on it.

“Such a beautiful dick,” she murmurs, her fingers coiling around my length and giving it a hard squeeze.

Fuck me. I close my eyes, hissing in my breath and then open them before I nearly rear end the car in front of us. This is actually going to be difficult. Thank god I had enough sense not to follow through while in the air.

I’m not even sure if this makes sense even now but you won’t hear my protesting. Thirty-years old and I’d never been given a blow job while in a moving vehicle. I’ve driven and fingerbanged someone in the passenger seat but that was back in high school.

I thought that was pretty cool back then but this is much, *much* better.

Stephanie strokes me up and down, her grip firm and hard, then she takes the rest of my dick and balls out. My body stiffens, waiting for her.

She makes sure she has enough slack with her seatbelt and leans over, taking my cock into her mouth and my balls into her other hand. I have a war against my eyelids that desperately want to close to take the whole sensation in. It’s dangerous but I don’t want her to stop.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and for the first time ever I’m thankful the Jeep is automatic. Stephanie’s head bobs up and down beneath my chest and I curl my free hand into her hair, pulling on her strands.

“You crave that cock, don’t you baby,” I murmur, my grip tightening in her hair, pushing her head down further until I can almost feel her tonsils. “You love sucking me off, the feel of my cum sliding down the back of your throat. Yeah, that’s my baby. Just like that, just like that.”

She continues, her lips, tongue, mouth and hand working in perfect unison; my precum and her saliva making the best lubricant. My body goes from stiffening to jerking from the damning need to release my semen inside her and there is one small window of mercy to take advantage of. The cars around us all come to a standstill, a sea of red lights amongst the darkness. I quickly put the Jeep in park before I take my foot off the brake.

This is happening *now*.

“Suck it, suck,” I hiss at her, trying to breathe. “So, so good baby.”

And then it’s like I’m hit by a truck, only we’re both here and better than fine. My orgasm slams into me with violent spasms that have me digging my nails into her head and muttering obscenities under my ragged breath. Then it slips over me like a warm, numb bath filled with pins and

needles, and I'm conscious of never feeling so alive and yet so drugged as right fucking now.

Bloody hell.

She pulls her mouth away, a trail of saliva lingering behind and then tucks my spent dick back in my pants. "Well that was fun," she says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and giving me a wicked smile.

I can barely form words. I just nod. Then the traffic starts to move and I snap to attention, putting the Jeep out of park and jolting forward. I look over to the car beside us to make sure there's enough room to pull in front of them, when I remember it's the Boston Bruin fans.

And judging by their wide eyes and open mouths, they just caught the whole show.

I quickly roll down the window, stick my finger out and yell, "Bruins suck!" at them, before I cut them off and speed through the now moving traffic.

By the time we get to the game, I'm high on life and adrenaline and Stephanie. I limit myself to one beer but ply her with overpriced wines and we cheer on the Sharks all the way to the third period. She doesn't even mind when I put on my shark hat and start dancing after every goal.

In fact, sometimes she looks at me in this way I can't really describe but it does things to my heart. It warms me up, from head to toe and my chest is the epicenter. I just want to bottle that look and hold onto forever, open it on a cold, foggy day and feel bright and alive all over again.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm falling in love with her.

Sometimes I wonder how long I can pretend I'm not.

Just after the third period starts, that bloody Dentyne-sponsored "Kiss Cam" goes into action and after making two other couples awkwardly make-out, it settles on us.

Yup. Our faces are up there on the Jumbotron for all the fans to see.

I shrug and look at Steph and she smiles shyly at me, trying not to look in the direction of the hidden camera. I put my hands on both sides of her face and kiss her passionately. Like, I really go at it. If you're going to do something, do something right.

A few people around us applaud and whistle and then it's back to the game.

Later that night, after the Sharks beat the Bruins in overtime, we go to her place and fall into bed together. The talk of tying me up is gone and I

don't care. I just want to be inside her, feeling every square inch of her soft, warm body. I'm getting buried in what we are, what we make each other feel and I don't care. It's so good. What we have is so fucking good.

"I think I'm losing myself," I whisper to her after we've come, our bodies naked, sweaty and sated, limbs draped over limbs, hands holding onto hands. My throat feels thick, my breath heavy, my words weigh a ton. "Every time I'm inside you, with you, I think I lose a little bit more."

I turn my head to the side to look at her. She's staring at me with big, wet eyes so full of everything I could ever want from her. "In the end you might have all my pieces," I tell her. "Please be gentle with them."

I don't know why I expect her to laugh at that or call me cheesy again but she doesn't. Maybe because it's true and she can see that. She reaches over and traces my lips with her fingertips. They smell like sex. They smell like heaven.

"Linden," she says and her voice sounds like snow. "Please be gentle with me."

Something in my chest snaps and shakes loose.

I love her.

I love her so god damn much.

"I promise," I say and hold her close to me. I count the steady beats of her heart against mine before we both fall asleep. There is nothing but warmth in my dreams.

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The next morning I drop Stephanie off at work. Already I know something between us has changed, another layer uncovered. There is this air of tenderness permeating every look, every touch. It makes me feel more fragile than I would like.

So I go to the gym and spend a few hours there working my legs and arms before my afternoon flight. Then when that's all over, I pop into The Burgundy Lion to get my bearings and have a pint.

James is there and so is Penny. I'm especially glad to see her, though I'm not really sure why. I haven't talked to James much the past couple of weeks, not really since Thanksgiving, and I haven't been into the Lion. Naturally, I've been in Steph's bed and she's been in mine.



The guilt is starting to get to me, I must admit. At first I really was doing it out of courtesy, or at least just to put off the inevitable awkwardness. I didn't want my relationship with James to change. But it is changing and I can't be the only one who feels it. Now the fact that I've secretly been sleeping with Stephanie for six weeks seems like dirty pool. It feels like a big, shameful lie when it should be anything but.

"Well, look who it is," Penny says as I step into the bar. She at the counter, in her usual spot. I pull up a chair next to her and catch James's eye as he tends to a customer. He nods back but doesn't smile. In fact, he looks a bit ticked off. I really hope he's just in a mood and it has nothing to do with me.

"Hey sugarcakes," I tell her.

"Sugarcakes?"

I shrug. "Why not? Those are two good things aren't they?"

She purses her red lips and eyes me through her glasses. "Depends if you're on a diet or not. Where have you been, stranger?"

"Around," I say, deflecting. "How are you?"

"Not drunk enough."

"Well it is only five in the afternoon."

"You're Scottish, who are you to talk?"

"Good point. I should get started." I wait until James has a free moment and then I wave him down. "Hey fuckface," I say.

He doesn't even blink. "Fuckface?"

"He called me sugarcakes," Penny mumbles into her drink.

I frown at him. "Don't tell me your nickname is suddenly offensive."

"I don't know man, I haven't seen you in forever. Thought maybe you'd be a little friendlier than that."

He pulls an Anchor Steam out of the fridge and plonks it down in front of me but then heads around the other side of the bar.

I look at Penny. "What is up his ass?"

She exhales in a low whistle. "Well, I actually don't know, to tell you the truth. He's been a bit, um, bitchy with me lately too."

I don't like to hear this. I like Penny. I lean forward on my elbows and give her a sidelong glance. She does look tired and maybe even like she's been crying. "Having a bit of a rough patch?"

She nods quickly, her chin quivering a bit, but manages to pull herself together fast. "Yeah. I hope it's a patch."

“You guys are great together, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” I tell her and suddenly I feel better, as if my words are truth.

“I don’t know,” she says and then she leans in a bit closer. She smells like whisky and I realize she’s actually quite drunk. “If I asked you something, would you be able to tell me the truth?”

I’m not sure I’m good with the truth anymore. But I nod. “Of course.”

“Is James cheating on me?”

My head jerks back. “No. Cheating on you? No. I mean, not that I know.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I’m not really around much lately, you know how things are, but I can tell you that James is not the cheating type. He’s too sensitive for that shit. He’d spill the beans to you out of guilt if he ever did. And he’s a big believer in karma.”

“Okay,” she says quietly and turns her attention back to her drink.

“What makes you say that?” I ask, because now I’m curious. James is a pretty loyal guy. In fact, he’s as loyal as they come, which in turn makes you feel you need to be just as loyal to him.

“I don’t know...just a feeling. Like there is someone else.”

And then my heart skips a few beats before coming back hard. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Call it woman’s intuition.”

I have to be careful with my words. I don’t want her to think the thing I’m thinking if she’s not already thinking it. I don’t want her to think of Stephanie. “Is that not the same thing as paranoia?”

She glares at me. “It’s a thing, all right? I just don’t think he’s in love with me anymore.”

“So you think it’s a new girl?”

“I’m not sure about that either. But if it wasn’t anything before, it’s definitely something now.” Her eyes seek the ceiling and I think she’s trying not to cry but then she slams down her empty whisky glass and says, “Damn it all to hell. Isn’t that what the dames say in the forties films, when they find out their lover has been unfaithful? Damn it all to hell.”

I can only stare at her, my gut full of pity for her and selfish worry for me. It can’t be Stephanie. If James really is pulling away from Penny, it’s for other reasons. Maybe there is some other woman I don’t know about. I don’t know. I haven’t been around. Maybe James isn’t the loyal guy I thought he was.

Maybe he's just as good at keeping secrets as I am.

That thought sobers me up and I find myself knocking back the beer until it's gone. When James finally does reappear at our end, Penny has left. I didn't even notice her go, that's how wrapped up in my own head I am.

"Hey man," I say to him. His eyes slide slowly to mine. "Sorry I called you a fuckface without warning."

"It's fine," he grumbles.

"Are you all right? You seem like you're PMSing a wee bit."

He gives me a steady look, the kind of look that tells you take a few steps back. I remain anchored to my stool though, because I've never been the one to back down between us.

I wave the bottle at him. "I could sure go for another one."

James puts his hands on the counter, that ever present washcloth in one hand, and leans forward. "You know what, Linden, you have some nerve. You don't speak to me for weeks and then you come waltzing in here like everything is all right."

"It's not all right?"

"No."

"Look, man, buddy, pal. I have spoken to you. Have you checked your damn phone? I've been texting you. You've been texting back. It's not like we aren't speaking."

"You know what I mean."

I have to play stupid. "No. I don't. I've been busy lately, that's it."

"What kind of busy?" he asks in an accusatory tone.

"Like, life busy."

"Not pussy busy?"

"No."

"You know I saw you."

Ah shitnuggets.

"Saw me? What does that mean?"

He straightens up and folds his arms across his chest. "You and Stephanie."

Ice water. In my chest, in my veins, everywhere. Somehow I manage not to speak.

James goes on. "I was watching the Sharks game, man. I saw you two on the Kiss Camera. It sure looked like you enjoyed it."

I swallow. Hard. Then I lean back in my seat and giving him an easy smile. “So?”

He frowns. “So?” he spits out. “What the hell were you doing at the game with her?”

“She wanted to go.”

“That was our thing, man.”

“I know,” I say, feeling an iota of relief at where this is going. “But she called me up having a bad day and I thought it would be a great way to cheer her up.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” he says bitterly. “Why didn’t you invite me?”

“It was last minute, you were working.”

“I could have arranged something.”

I shrug. “Well, I didn’t know.”

“And why the fuck were you kissing her?”

And now it’s coming around to this again. I have to diffuse this bomb and quick.

“It was a kiss cam, that’s what you’re supposed to do. Like I’m going to be that dude who doesn’t kiss the hot girl beside him.”

“You think Stephanie is hot?”

I snort in open disbelief. “Are you kidding me? She’s fucking hot as hell.”

“That’s my ex-girlfriend you’re talking about.”

I roll my eyes. “And my friend. What, friends can’t call each other hot? You’re pretty hot yourself James, in that emo, hipster, spends too much time in a dark basement kind of way.”

“Fuck you.”

“Dude, don’t be so homophobic.”

He’s still glaring at me. He wants to bring the conversation back to Stephanie.

“Besides,” I tell him. I’m about to lie right through my damn teeth and I hope Stephanie doesn’t murder me for it. “She has a boyfriend now.”

“What?” James snaps to attention.

Uh oh. Maybe Penny was right.

“Uh, well he’s not really her boyfriend. Fuck buddies I guess. But yeah, she’s seeing someone. Casually. But still. Sees him. Like, he’s there. Visible. In the picture.”

“Who the hell is this guy? She hasn’t told me anything. What’s his name?”

My eyes flit over to the neon Guinness sign on the wall. “Ireland.”

“His name is Ireland?”

“Yup. Ireland Brownglass.”

“Ireland Brownglass?”

I throw my hands up. “Dude, I can’t help his name. True story.”

“Where the hell did she meet Ireland Brownglass?”

“At a bar in the Castro.”

“What? Are you sure he’s not gay?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, he could be. I’m sure Stephanie will figure that out soon. She’s a smart girl.”

He looks mildly distraught. “I can’t believe she’s seeing someone.”

“Well maybe don’t be a stranger,” I tell him. I nearly recoil at the look I get in response. “What? I’m just saying, reach out more. That’s all. It can’t be a one-way street here. If you’re mad I’m not calling you, call me. Life is just going to get busier the older we get.”

I also want to add that it shouldn’t be a big deal if she’s seeing someone but I’m afraid of what his response will be. I’m afraid of what could be truth, because the moment I hear that James is in love with her, I know I’m going to have to make some difficult choices. Choices that will destroy at least one friendship.

So I don’t say anything. I just drink my beer and then when James gets busy again, I fish out my phone and text Steph.

**By the way, I told James that you’re seeing a guy called Ireland Brownglass. You met at a bar in the Castro, and he might be gay but you don’t know that yet. Long story, I’ll explain later.**

She answers a minute later: **This better be good.**

I’m not sure if it is good and I’m not sure how much I can really explain without tipping her off.

It’s starting to feel like we’re slowly losing a hold on things.

I just need to hold tighter.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *STEPHANIE*

You know how drunken karaoke can be the most annoying sound in the world? Well, drunken karaoke Christmas songs are even worse. The only saving grace comes when someone replaces the words “silver bells” with “silver fuck, pickup truck.”

That’s currently what James is singing right now, standing on top of his bar of all places and belting out the strangest rendition of “Silver Bells” I’ve ever heard. But at least he’s more entertaining than half the people tonight.

It’s The Burgundy Lion’s company Christmas party and we’re all gathered there to drink cheap punch and strong eggnog and get our ears blown out by each other’s inflated sense of self. It’s like having a front row ticket to the American Idol auditions. No, wait a minute. It’s worse.

I know I can’t sing, so I do the world a favor and stay put in my booth. Linden, of course, can sing and is used to being on the Lion’s stage way back in the day. He’s the only one who has done a decent job tonight. I say decent because he is drunk and he did try and sing the Led Zep song “Battle of Evermore.” Anyone who knows anything about music, or even how ears work, knows that you do not attempt to sing like Robert Plant when you’re plastered.

It’s a week before Christmas and tonight is the first time that Linden and I have been out in public together, among friends. But even though we’re out in public, we’re not out as a couple. I’m sitting on one side of the booth with Penny and Kayla while Linden sits with Dan. All of us are trying not to watch James but it’s like a car accident that just kind of pulls you in.

I lean over to Penny. “You should be proud.”

She nods. “Oh yes, very.”

She’s been a bit different lately. Granted I’ve only seen her on a few occasions and we never talk about the deep stuff, so I’m not sure what’s going on in her life. But she’s quiet, almost morose. I make a mental note to ask her later, in private, how she’s really doing.

“So how are you and Ireland?” she asks. “Ireland Brownglass, right?”

Linden kicks my leg under the table and I fight the urge to look at him. I remember now he has sent me a text last week about this but then when I saw him again, we fell into bed together and it never came up.

“Ireland...good. We’re good.” I nod. “We’re great.”

“And you met in the Castro?”

“Ow!” Kayla shrieks from beside me. “Who just kicked me? Was it you, asshole?”

I turn to see her pointing an accusatory finger at Linden. He holds up his palms, eyes wide. It’s funny how scared he is of Kayla half the time. I think he really feels bad about screwing her over.

“Um,” I say slowly, tearing my eyes off of him and looking back at Penny. “Yes. The Castro.”

“And he’s not gay?”

“Oh,” I say and pretend to consider that. “Yeah. Maybe he is. I don’t know. We broke up.”

She makes a sad clucking sound. “Aw, I’m so sorry.” Pause. “I thought you said you were great.”

“I meant *I* was great. It was mutual.”

“Oh. I’m still sorry.”

“Yeah,” I say looking down at my beer. “He was probably gay.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kayla whispers in my ear but I ignore her.

“Okay,” I say standing up. “I’m going to get a round of shots, who wants one?”

“Me!” Linden practically bolts out of the booth.

He walks beside me to the bar and I’m so conscious of the distance between us. It feels so unnatural now to be with him and not have his large hand at the small of my back, or his arm around my shoulder. He’s just so touchy feely with me it feels terribly wrong to not feel him at all.

“That was a close one,” he says under his breath as we head over to the bar. James has just climbed off of it and is helping himself to the punch at the other end, so we get one of the working bartenders to pour us both a shot of Jameson.

“Make it two,” Linden says.

“You’re already drunk,” I tell him.

“Where is your festive spirit, baby,” he says, leaning close to me. His lips nestle right below my ear. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“Not here,” I whisper softly, smiling for Caroline, the bartender who is pouring us the shots. She gives me a funny look but I keep my fun smile

pasted on, like this is just what friends do, whisper intimate things in each other's ears.

And now he's nibbling on my earlobe. My body immediately relaxes, wanting more, while my mind is reminding we aren't safe and this isn't appropriate.

"Linden," I warn.

He stops nibbling but he doesn't pull away. "Have I told you how fucking hot you look tonight?" His warm breath tickles me.

"No. Do go on, though."

"Your dress is amazing." He's right about that. It's strapless red satin to my knees, with a corset waist that sucks me in and makes my breasts look ridiculous. "You look like a Disney Princess."

"A Disney Princess?"

"Yeah," he whispers roughly. "One of those princesses who look like they might give you a BJ if you play your cards right but in the end she probably won't."

I laugh. "I don't even know what that means."

"I can show you."

"Here you go," Caroline says, loudly, so that we break apart and she pushes the four shots our way.

"Caroline, you're always a sweetheart." Linden raises his shot to her. "Come on Steph, let's toast Caroline."

"To Caroline!" we say in unison. She just shakes her head and walks away while we slam the shots back down the hatch. It burns but the heat turns pleasant in seconds. It reminds me very much of the heat between my legs. One mention of a BJ, even in the weird roundabout drunken way that Linden just did, and I'm picturing his cock, how hard it is between my hands, his salty taste as I lick his tip.

"One more," Linden says, putting the other shot in my hand. We tip those shots back even quicker. Then he gets out of his chair, lowering his voice, "Meet me in the women's washroom in one minute."

He crosses the bar to the back. I love watching him go. The confident swagger he has, the sight of his muscles moving under his clothes, the wide expanse of his shoulders and the way his body slides down into a perfect V, those indents on the small of his back that I love to rub and lick. Of course no one can see that with his shirt on but I always know they are there.



Once he disappears into the back, I get up and slowly, ever so casually, look around the bar. People are laughing, someone is singing Santa Baby in a disgustingly sweet tone, a glass breaks somewhere in the background. At the table Kayla and Dan are talking about something and by the front door James and Penny are having a discussion. It looks like a heated one, which means they aren't paying attention to us but it also makes me wonder if that's what's been wrong with Penny lately.

I feel hit with guilt over that. Had I been around more often, like I used to be, I would probably know exactly what's going on. But I haven't been. Things haven't just been changing between Linden and me, they've been changing between everyone.

I shake my head, not willing to bring myself down tonight. For all I know, Penny and James are fine. And Linden and I? We're more than fine.

I walk over to the bathrooms as casually as possible and do a quick knock on the women's door.

"Hello?" I ask sweetly.

"Who is it?" Linden answers in a high-pitched voice. It's eerily similar to his Robert Plant impression.

"A Disney princess," I answer. I wait a moment, feeling the anticipation build, and the door unlocks.

I quickly step inside and see Linden on the other side, staring at me with a twisted smile. The bathroom has two stalls, a handicapped one and a normal one but luckily you can lock the entire area as a whole. I barely have a chance to lock the door behind me before I'm pressed back against by Linden's sheer force.

My body operates on pure instinct. It craves him as much as my heart and mind and soul do. As he presses against me, breathing hard and kissing me, messy and wet, I put my hands around his shoulders and relish the ridges of his back muscles as I pull him in.

One of his hands is lost in my hair, tugging on it in short jabs while the other is lifting up the skirt of my dress. Once he discovers I'm not wearing underwear, he lets out a deep moan that I feel vibrate through me and he explores me with his fingers.

"So wet," he murmurs. "My baby gets so fucking wet for me." He sticks three of his large, long fingers inside me and I clench around them. "So greedy too."

"Just shut up and fuck me already," I hiss into his ear.

He laughs, low and rich, pulling back my hair at the same time before he sinks his lips and teeth down the exposed front of my neck. “No patience.”

“Not here, not now,” I tell him. “Not with you.”

“I’ve made you an animal.”

“So then you should act like one.”

He pauses and looks up at me, giving me the most devious look. “Is that so?” Like his cock, his accent thickens when he’s turned on and it ripples down my back. I clench around him again, wanting him in deeper but he withdraws his fingers and goes to undo his belt.

While I hear the quick zip of his fly, he scoops his arm around me and whirls me around so that I’m facing the bathroom stall. He kicks the door in and then pushes me through until my hands are up against the cool tiled wall.

“Spread your legs, wide,” he demands and before I can do so, his body is pushing between them. “Wider,” he growls.

I go as wide as I can without my heels slipping and try to control my stance. I’m not one to shy away from dirt in sexual situations but I do have to say I’m glad that the bathroom is spotless tonight. I’m not sure the men’s bathroom would be the same but even then there’s a thrill about needing something so bad, you don’t care where you get it.

This is one of those situations.

Linden pulls my skirt up and slips his hand between my ass cheeks, entering one finger into me. I flinch a bit – I wasn’t expecting that – but he quickly removes his finger and uses his hand to steady his cock.

“Maybe later?” he playfully suggests.

“Maybe.”

He then primes himself at my opening and waits for a few beats. I can feel the heat coming off of him, his size and immensity at my back, the way his eyes burn into me. I know he’s looking at my ass, at his dick as he’s about to push its inflexible length inside me. Before I can urge him in, he pushes with one large, powerful thrust.

My fingers clench against the tiles, my elbows and knees locking to keep me in place. I can’t help the cry that escapes from my lips, and then the soft “oh,” as he slowly, agonizingly, pulls himself out.

This man is larger than life.

He is my life.

He is my Linden.

And he's pounding me from behind in the woman's washroom.

With one hand gripping the top of the bathroom stall and the other holding me in place at the waist, he drives himself in with hot, deep jabs that hits the right spot every time.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he hisses, inhaling sharply. "Baby, I'm coming, I'm coming."

Before I even have a chance to try and catch up, he lets go of my waist and slides a finger over my clit, petting it twice, and that's all it takes to set me off like a bomb.

I explode outwardly, until I feel like there is nothing left and he explodes into me. I can feel him inside, hot and potent as I throb around him and then his arm is under my belly, holding me up while my legs begin to give up.

I almost fall in the toilet. That would have been a tough one to explain.

"That was incredible," I whisper, trying to catch my breath, to bring my head back down from swimming in the stars.

He kisses the back of my bare shoulders. "Now who is being cheesy?"

I turn around and give him a sloppy grin. He's got that look I love in his eyes; sleepy, happy and satisfied. I love it because I'm the only one who gives him that, the only one who can render such gentleness from this bear of a man.

He bends down and pulls a few swatches of toilet paper off the roll and then sweeps it up my inner thighs in a very soft, tender fashion.

"People will get suspicious if you have semen on your legs," he explains with a smile before tossing the paper in the toilet. "Personally, I love the look on you."

We step out of the stall and quickly smooth ourselves over in the mirror. I'm just about to unlock the door to head out first when there's a knock at it.

I freeze. Maybe if I don't say anything, they'll just go away. I look at Linden and put my finger to my mouth.

The person knocks again and says, "Hello? Steph?"

It's Kayla.

Damn. Well, I guess it could be worse.

I motion for Linden to go into the other stall which he does and then I unlock the door, opening it a crack.

"Hey," I say brightly. "What's up?"

“What are you doing in there, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Uh, I had stomach problems.”

“So you locked the whole area?”

“Bad stomach problems.”

She grimaces and then looks over my shoulder. “Who is that?” she asks and then she’s pushing open the door and stepping into the room.

“Linden?” she asks, staring down at his shoes. Not many guys wore combat boots today.

“No, it’s some random guy,” I quickly say.

“Who, Ireland Brownnoser?” she says and then pushes open the door to the stall. “I knew it!” she exclaims.

Linden emerges from the bathroom, not looking as sheepish as I would have expected.

“Shhhh!” I hush her and go to lock the bathroom door behind me. “Keep it down. No one knows.”

“No shit, no one knows,” she says, narrowing her eyes at Linden. “God, Stephanie, how could you with this jackass?”

“Uh, *you* did it with this jackass,” Linden points out.

“Linden, shut up,” I tell him. I turn to Kayla and give her a pleading look. “Please don’t tell anyone. We just are figuring shit out and don’t want people to know.”

She folds her arms and taps her foot, the bottom of her shoe echoing in the room. “Mmm hmmm. And how long were you two going to fool around for?”

I look at Linden and shrug. “Forever?”

Kayla lets out an exasperated sigh. “I knew it. I knew something was up.”

“Well hopefully no one else will know.”

“Yeah right. You can’t hide this shit forever. You should just go out there in the middle of the room and tell everyone. Get it over with.”

I shake my head. “No. Just because two friends are fucking each other doesn’t mean the whole world deserves to know about it.”

She gives me a caustic look. “Actually, I think your closest friends deserve to know about it.” Then she turns and heads to the door, shooting me a look over her shoulder. “And if you think you’re just friends still, you’ve got another think coming.”

Then she leaves. The tension stays with us in the washroom.

I give Linden an apologetic look. “Sorry. She’s pushy.”

He nods. “I know. Well, hopefully she won’t blab.”

“She won’t.” But I’m starting to wonder just how long we can keep this charade going. Something has to give. We both can’t keep lying. If James is the problem, well, then at this point it’s James’s problem and not ours.

But tonight isn’t the time to talk about it. Tonight is about having fun. After the New Year, then we’ll come clean. We’ll sit James down and explain to him that...well, we’ll try and define what we are. And then hopefully he’ll understand. It might be weird for him at first but over time I think he’ll see that nothing has really changed between the three of us.

And yet as I kiss Linden on the cheek and then make my way out into the bar, pretending I was never in the washroom with him, I know everything has changed already.

I have no idea if it can ever go back.

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Hours later, after the party ended and too much alcohol and Christmas cookies were consumed, I end up at Linden’s place.

It’s starting to feel like home to me. It helps that his apartment is new and not leaky. Not that my apartment leaks anymore, thanks to him and his handyman skills, but there is something about Linden’s that makes me feel so safe.

Maybe because I’m never there alone, I’m always with him. Whether we’re making scrambled eggs together in the morning, binge watching TV shows on Netflix, or just getting off in the shower, he’s always there.

He’s steady. He’s reliable. He is my rock.

He is my Linden.

Always has been.

Always will be.

This night though, after the hot fuck in the bathroom, being found out by Kayla, getting drunk on Jameson and Burgundy Lion merriment, I feel like he’s more than all those things.

He is my lover.

And my love.

And I can’t keep these butterflies in my chest any longer. I want to let them out. I want them to touch him, graze him with feather soft wings, so

that he knows just how I feel about him.

We tear off our clothes and climb into the crisp sheets of his bed. We are both too tired and still too satisfied to have sex, so we curl up in each other arms. He kisses my temple, his lips lingering there, as he holds me close.

I don't want him to ever let go. He told me he wouldn't.

"Linden," I say softly, so soft that I'm not even sure if I've spoken or if my words have disintegrated into the air. Everything has more meaning when it's late and you're in the dark.

There is a long pause and then he answers. "Baby blue."

"I..." I begin and then suddenly everything I was about to say – that one simple phrase – is stripped from me. I can't continue. I don't just love Linden, it is so much more than that. It's something beyond words, beyond such a common, every day thing. You see 'I love you' written everywhere and I'm suddenly struck at how it's just not *enough*. It doesn't describe how I feel.

"What?" he whispers, his lips now brushing against my ear. He holds me tighter. "Please tell me."

I swallow and start again. "Linden. There is a space in my chest that I've never noticed before. It's like, all this time, I've had a whole other heart in there and that heart holds a whole other world. I never really noticed it because it was hidden. It wasn't activated. It wasn't shining and so I couldn't see it. But now it is." A tear trickles down my face but I don't wipe it away. "You've made it shine, Linden. That new heart, that new world, it's all you. I feel like it takes up every inch of my body, like I'm blooming each day. You're in me and I can't hide it or contain it or ignore it. You blind me. You are me." I take in a deep breath. "I guess I'm trying to say that I love you."

Silence. It's as thick as the night. I hold my breath, waiting for his response, wondering what he's going to say. In this moment that drags on and on, I am filled with hope and I am filled with fear. Because as much as Linden makes me feel like I have a love inside I can't even begin to contain, I'm scared he doesn't feel the same way. That he doesn't even come close.

I'm scared now that I've scared him away.

*Oh god, why isn't he saying something?*

I panic. "Maybe that was too much, maybe-"

"Shhh," he says, turning my head so that I'm staring into his eyes. They are so deep and unreadable in the dark. But when he turns his head just

enough, the light from outside catches in them. They are watering.

I feel like I'm a dam about to burst.

"Stephanie," he says, his voice soft but choked. "Did you know that no one has ever told me that they loved me?"

It feels like there's a rock on my chest. "What?!"

"It's true," he says. "I've never heard anyone tell me they loved me."

"But, but..." I think back, scrolling through memories. Hadn't I ever told him that, as a friend? Hadn't James? Hadn't his parents, his brother? "Nadine?" I ask.

He shakes his head only slightly. "No one. Nadine and I were very close but those exact words were never chosen. Believe me. I know. I know this because now I've heard them for the first time, just now, from you, and you can never forget something like that."

But his parents never said they loved him. My heart is crumbling for him. I want to cry.

"And because no one has ever told me," he goes on quietly, "I never had anyone to tell. I didn't really know what love was because no one defined it for me. I only knew what it wasn't. But you, Steph, you've always been different. You've had my heart from day one. James saw you first but I can guarantee you had my heart before you had his. I've never got to tell you this, because I kept this love to myself. If no one would share with me, I wouldn't share with them. I was a greedy fucker." He pauses. "But I loved you. Never as a friend. Always as something more. From the moment you walked into the bar, you owned the word and what it meant for me. I prayed and I dreamed that one day I would get to tell you myself. That no matter how you felt, I would tell you that I loved you and nothing could change that. That it was mine to give to you." He inhales deeply and says, "And so, I love you, baby blue. I am *in* love with you. You are love to me. And I'm honored I'm finally able to tell you."

Now I am speechless. Floored. And my soul is oh so fucking full I can barely live. I can only grab his face and kiss him as sweetly, deeply and sincerely as I can. And then I laugh and smile and he does the same.

"I suppose though," he says, wiping away a tear but still grinning like a crazy person, "if I had more practice in saying it, it wouldn't have been such a convoluted speech."

"Speak for yourself," I tell him. "We both took the roundabout way to say three words."

“But sometimes those words aren’t enough,” he says, kissing my hand.

“No, they aren’t. But you are.”

That whole new heart inside me is growing. I don’t think I could ever make it stop.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## *LINDEN*

There is a problem.

There is a major fucking problem.

I'd just put the empty bowl of cereal in the dishwasher when there was a knock at my door. Considering Stephanie just left me three minutes ago, I assumed it was her forgetting something. Maybe, my brain wants to think, she came back for one more round and can't get enough of me.

I opened the door, about to say exactly that ("Back for more, baby?") but I am so glad I didn't.

James is standing on the other side.

"Uh," I say, trying to find the words but all I can think of is, did he see Steph as she left? Does he suspect? Why is he here? Is it even possible for me to play it cool right now? I attempt to, anyway. "Hi James."

"Hey," he says. His voice is low. He doesn't seem angry, so that's a good thing. But he does seem troubled. Even more so when his gaze briefly lowers and he flinches. "Maybe you should put on some pants."

I smile, suddenly aware that I'm only in my boxer briefs. That's not normally a big, big deal, but since I was just thinking of Steph, I know I have a bit of a chubby going on.

"Sorry," I say, quickly turning around but gesturing for him to come inside. "Come in, what's up man?" I quickly head to the bedroom and look around for signs of Steph. She's pretty good about not leaving her stuff around – I can't even convince her to leave a toothbrush, she just carries it in one of her millions of purses – so I shuck on a pair of jeans and go back out.

"Wild party last night," James says as he closes the front door behind him.

Now my brain is racing over every intonation in his voice. Did Kayla say something to him? Did he see something?

"Bloody fun though," I tell him, heading over to the fridge with as much casual swagger as I can inject into my walk. Just another Saturday morning here, nothing to be suspicious about. My eyes scour the living room for a pair of red panties I know I ripped off of Steph just the other day.

"Yeah it was."

I bring out a jug of orange juice and shake it at him. “Do you want to hit this?”

He shakes his head. On closer inspection, he’s not looking so good. He’s paler than usual and there is a ring of purple beneath his eyes. “You all right?” I ask him, quickly adding, “Hungover?”

He nods and looks up at me. His eyes are very grave, very dark. “Yeah. Hungover. I drank like a fish.”

“Who didn’t?” I say, pouring myself a glass of juice and gulping it down. “But you can’t get in the holiday spirit without spirits.”

James doesn’t even smile. He just stares at me and I can almost see the darkness swirling inside of him. My scalp prickles with unease.

“I broke up with Penny.”

I blink, surprised but not surprised. “What? Why?”

“I did it last night, after the party. We had a fight.”

I chew on my lip, thinking, and say, “Well, just because you had a fight doesn’t mean you should break up.”

“Were you in love with Nadine?” he asks.

I’m a bit caught off guard and immediately reminded of my conversation with Steph last night. She loves me. Baby blue *loves* me.

“Linden?”

“Sorry.” I shake my head and take a gulp of my juice. “No. I wasn’t in love with her.”

“And you knew it.”

“I did. I wanted to think it could change, grow to that, I guess. But no. I wasn’t in love with her.”

“And so you broke up with her.”

“Exactly.”

“Same thing then. I don’t love Penny.”

I can’t help but feel my face crumble a bit. “But you guys were so good together. She’s such a nice girl. She’s fun. She’s made *you* more fun.”

“I know, that’s what has made this so hard. You know, I’ve honestly been thinking about this for six months now.”

“Six months?” I exclaim. “You’ve been wanting to break up with her for six months?”

He shrugs and looks away, ashamed. “Like you, I thought things would change. Because she is fun and we have a great time together and I do care

about her. A lot. In so many ways, she's perfect. But I'm not in love with her. When I look at her, I don't get that freefall."

"Freefall?"

"Yeah," he says softly and brings his eyes back to mine. "The way I feel when I do love someone." He licks his lips. "Look, Linden I have to tell you something."

"Please don't tell me you're in love with me, James. You're not my type."

"You're not my type either. Fuckface."

I smile but his face grows tense, his brows low. Please, please, please let him say some random girl's name.

"I'm in love with Stephanie."

No.

No. No. No. No.

My chest feels like there's a vacuum inside. Black, dry, nothingness is all there is left.

"You what?" I'm barely able to speak but I should be able to speak. I should have known this was coming. I *knew* this was coming.

"I'm in love with her," he says. While my voice has grown weaker, his has grown stronger. There is a steely determination in his eyes, as if telling me this he is making it more real to himself. "I'm surprised you never figured it out."

"No," I tell him. I clear my throat, trying to absorb it all. I can't act hurt, I can't act like there is this ice rock of utter fucking despair in my gut, the kind that keeps you from breathing properly.

"That's good, I guess," he says.

"So..." I begin. "I'm sorry. I just...how long have you been in love with her for?"

He sighs. "You know what, man? I don't know if I ever really got over her. When she broke up with me, that really fucking did my head in. I was so in love with her and, looking back now, I can see why she did it. I was so fucking immature. We both were but I was acting like a real brat, you know? I guess because she was my first real love, you know, more than just a fuck. But Jesus, Linden, you have no idea what the sex was like."

I bite down, my jaw strained.

He continues, "She's so fucking good in bed. Back then, and recently too."

“W-what?” My lungs empty.

He gives me a grin. It’s smug and I want to punch it off his god damn face. “Yeah. Her twenty-ninth birthday. Remember when you were in the hospital with Nadine?”

Yes. Yes. I do.

“Well, I didn’t want Steph to spend her birthday alone. So I went down to her shop. Things got a bit carried away. We ended up having sex right there in her store. How about that, huh?”

Black spots are appearing in my vision. Everything he said sounds like it’s coming from a dream, some nightmare. It’s not real. Stephanie did *not* sleep with James on her twenty-ninth birthday.

“Shocked,” James comments. “I rarely get to shock the great Linden McGregor. This must be a first for me.” He gives me a rather wicked smile and goes on. “Anyway, the sex was amazing. You know, that whole I-still-want-you-and-I-must-have-you. It got pretty fucking messy. Food everywhere, spilled drinks. Just took her right there on the floor, on her hands and knees and she was fucking loving it, Linden. She was fucking loving it.”

All I feel is rage. Red hot, sticky flames of rage. Angry, uncontrollable, hate-seeking rage just burning inside of me, eating away. I’m going to do something stupid, I know it, I know it. I can’t help it.

He’s my best friend and I want to kill him

Just fucking kill him.

But somehow I swallow down my fury, gulp it, until it burns my throat and I plaster on a smile. “Sounds pretty cool.” I breathe in, breathe out. “Just that one time?”

His eyes drop with disappointment. “Yeah.” The rage slips from me, slightly. “But what it made me realize is that I’m still not over her.”

“That’s a long time to be pining over your best friend,” I tell him, then busy myself with the rest of my juice. I’m trying to think how I should act about this, how he expects me to. Does the Linden he thinks I am – the one that sees Stephanie as only a friend – does he care about this scenario at all?

I guess he would a little.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” I ask. “You broke up with Penny but as long as you’re just harboring these feelings, it’s never going to go anywhere. Aren’t you worried about messing up the friendship? Do you know if she feels the same way about you? Because, I don’t know man…”

she's got a pretty full life at the moment and from my end, she doesn't really seem to think of you that way. No offense or anything."

A cold, calculating gleam comes into James eyes as he looks up at me. "Typical Linden."

"Typical Linden?" I repeat.

He taps his fingers on the table. "You know what really pissed me off? When you made that pact with her. That stupid shitty little pact."

"Why would that piss you off?"

He gives me a look. "Obviously you know why now. But there you go, telling the girl that I'm in love with, my ex-girlfriend, and our friend, that you'll marry her if you're both single when you turn thirty."

"I didn't know you were in love with her," I admit softly.

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Yes!" I say. "Of course it would have."

He squints at me warily. "Oh, I'm sure. You always have to go after what's mine. You can't ever let me have something for myself."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask, slamming the carton of juice back in the fridge. "It was a harmless pact."

"I know you didn't mean anything by it. But that kind of pisses me off even more." He gives me an acidic smirk. "You know, I thanked my lucky stars that I saw her first. That I hired her. That I asked her out. I wasn't about to let you have something else you didn't need. You get everything Linden, just handed to you, all the fucking time. But you didn't get her."

I ball my hands up into fists and then release them. "Why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

"And there you go with your devil may care attitude, like you don't give a shit, because you don't give a shit. Not about anyone but yourself."

"Did you come all the way here to tell me you're in love with Stephanie or was it just an excuse to tell me every grudge you've always harbored?"

He sucks on his teeth. Then his shoulders relax a bit. "No. I came here to tell you about her. Everything else...kind of slipped out."

I fold my arms tightly over my chest, feeling an intense mix of anger and hurt rolling inside me. "Anything else then? Come on, I can take it. Obviously, I don't care about anything except myself."

"You just have no idea what it's like to be me. To have to work so hard through life to even get the slightest bit ahead. I grew up poor. I had a drunk fuck for a dad and a helpless mom. I struggled to get everything I have. It's

not easy being your friend Linden when you just get everything handed to you. That's why Stephanie is so special to me. She's more mine than yours."

"That's not true," I say through grinding teeth.

"What?"

I swallow hard and take a deep breath. "She's been friends with both of us for years."

"But I'm the only one who's fucked her, who really knows her."

Not true. But I clamp my lips shut. Part of me wants to tell him, wants to hurt him for all the resentment he's spewed my way. But the other part agrees with his resentment. That part sees his point.

That part knows I'm guilty.

"You haven't been with her, have you Linden?"

The question startles me. I never thought he'd actually ask me that.

"With Stephanie?"

He nods slowly. "Uh huh. Seems silly to ask, but judging by the kisses I saw – oh you can say it was a dare or it was for the cameras, but it wouldn't surprise me if you were the type of guy to take it a step further."

But I am that type of guy.

Holy shit, I am a terrible person.

"Because," he continues watching his fingers as they drum slower, "if you were that type of guy, I'd have the right to know. And I'd never speak to you again. It would be like you never existed. You know that saying, bros before hos? There's truth to that. You don't screw over your friends. And you don't lie about it either. So, Linden. What type of guy are you? A friend? Or the other guy?"

I have to answer. I have to say something.

I have no time to weigh the right option. I can only buy time.

"I'm your friend James," I tell him. "I've never been with Steph. She's all yours."

The biggest, brightest smile slowly appears on his face. He looks like a kid on Christmas morning. It doesn't make me feel relieved at all. It makes me feel absolutely sick to my heart.

I just lied, flat-out lied to my best friend. I just destroyed something beautiful with my other best friend. Because now I know I can't be with Stephanie, not after what I just said. We can't continue sleeping with each other like we have and we can't come out with the truth anymore.

I have to break it off with her.

My chest feels bereft, like the bottom dropped out. It *has* dropped out.

I can't break it off with her. I can't. I can't. I can't.

"Sorry if I was a little bit harsh," James says, still smiling. I'm smiling back now but it's the phoniest, stiffest smile that has ever crossed my face. "Friends go through shit all the time. I guess I harbored a few grudges against you that I didn't really know about."

I nod. Not feeling anything but deep, stabbing loss.

"Anyway, this makes me feel better. You have no idea how hard it was not to tell you earlier, to keep this a secret, but I wanted to make sure it was real. It is."

It's like he's changed from night to day. "Are you going to tell her?" I ask, my voice a bit rough.

He ponders that for a moment, tilting his head. "I don't know. I think I have to play my cards right." Suddenly he snaps up, his eyes flying to mine. "But you can't tell her Linden."

"I won't."

"No," he says and he sticks out his pinky finger. "This is the gayest shit but I know you don't break these. You cannot tell her anything. Ever. This is just between you and me, as friends, as brothers. This is that fucking bro code, you got that? You promise? Pinky swear? You will not tell Stephanie anything about what we talked about today. I don't even want her to know that you know about us fucking, okay?"

I slowly stick out my hand. Pure, unadulterated guilt forces me to curl my finger around his. He shakes it once.

"Good," he says, exhaling loudly. "Now I can breathe. Man, Linden I was so afraid to tell you all this, that you'd think I was crazy. But I feel so much better now. I thought I would have my heart broken all over again but now I feel that maybe, maybe we have a chance. I mean, with Penny gone and Steph single again and the fact that it was only last year that she slept with me...I really might have a chance."

I mumble something in agreement, feeling dazed and disoriented. My kitchen swirls around me and the aching feeling in my heart won't stop. It won't fucking stop.

"So," James says, getting out of seat. "What are your plans for the day? Want to head to Union Square? I need to do some Christmas shopping. We could get some Blue Bottle coffee."

I don't want to spend a second longer with him. But I don't think I can be alone either. Stephanie is at her store so I can't even talk to her about this.

"Can we get some beers instead of coffee?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Hair of the dog, sure." He goes toward the door and then looks me up and down. "You should put on a shirt, you don't need a mob of women chasing after you. Or maybe you do. Who the hell have you been screwing lately?"

"No one you need to worry about," I tell him. I slip on a shirt and a cargo jacket and head out the door.

No one he needs to worry about anymore.

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I don't know how I get through Christmas shopping, with James of all people and today of all days, when my whole fucking world seems to crumble around me by the force of my own two hands, but I do. He goes back to being his mostly chipper self, save for a few well-placed swears he hurtles in the direction of the holiday shoppers.

I don't say much. I can't. I don't dare. I'm lost in my thoughts and the guilt, of not only lying to James but what I'm going to have to say to Stephanie. I'm at a crossroads I never wanted to be at, the one where you have to choose between two people you love.

James is more of a brother than Bram is. James, for all his faults, is loyal and I've never had that kind of loyalty. James has been a great friend to me over the years and he's never once screwed me over.

But I've screwed him over. He may not know it, but I did. I did when I went after Stephanie even though I suspected he might be in love with her. I did it because I wanted her and my wants were more important than his. He would never do that to me. But I would do that to him.

And then there is Stephanie. And when I think about her, my words fail me because she has my heart. She makes it so easy to be that guy who screws over his best friend. She makes me feel like I don't need anyone else in the world but her. She is my world and I told her I would hold on tight, that I wouldn't let go.

But here I am, heading to her store after I say goodbye to James and I'm about to let go. I can only hope she holds on. I can only hope that we can



get through this, that we don't have to lose each other. The fact that she slept with James on her birthday, that she didn't tell me, is a major blow but even then, I know how she feels about me. The way she looks at me. She loves me. I've never felt anything more true.

And because of that, I know she won't go for James. I know she's not interested, that I won't lose her to him in that way. But I still might lose her because of him. I need her to understand but I don't even know what to say because I swore I wouldn't tell her how James's felt.

Which means I'm just going to have to end it. I'm going to have to play that god damn friends card and hope that we can go back to that.

Because I don't know what I would do if I really left. If she removed herself from my life.

I just don't know. But I do know I couldn't handle it. I couldn't survive it. How do you survive when your whole world ends?

It's six in the evening when I get to her store. All the lights are off, except one in the backroom, and I think maybe she's already gone home. Then I see her shadow.

I take in a deep breath and knock on her door. A few moments later she comes to it, smiling like an angel.

I can't do it. I just can't do it.

She unlocks it and opens it and I come inside along with a rush of cold, wet air from the street.

"Brrrr," she says, shivering as she closes the door. "It's finally feeling like Christmas now." She looks down at the Nordstrom bags in my hands. "Ooh, are those for me?"

Actually they are. Despite everything, I still ended up buying her something, plus presents for her family. I guess there's some optimistic jackass inside me who thinks maybe the world will go on.

"Yeah," I tell her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, peering at me. She stands on her tip toes and kisses me on the cheek. "You seem...brooding."

"Brooding?"

"Yeah. Like you belong on the moors or something. Were you shopping all day? That would make anyone brood."

"Not you," I point out, striding across the store and tucking the bags in the corner so she doesn't peek at them.

“No, but you know what, I prefer online shopping much more. You don’t have to deal with...people.”

I can’t help but smile. “Funny words coming from someone who deals in customer service on a daily basis.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Thank god for the online part though. You know, I’ve been thinking. If my online store ends up being more popular than my retail one, I may just shut all this shit down.”

This is news to me but she looks completely serious. “Really? But you put your heart and soul into this store.” I gesture to all the little finishing touches and details that she put there herself. “Your love for this place is everywhere.”

“I know,” she says. “But I love the online store too. It’ll still be love, just in a different form, that’s all.”

I can’t help but stare at her over those words. She may be able to go from loving a brick and mortar store to loving one made of bytes and pixels, but I can’t go from loving her like this to loving her like a friend. It won’t be the same. I won’t recover.

“Linden?” she asks. “You’re getting all brooding again. Look, I’m not saying I’ll do it for sure. But I’d be crazy not to. With online, I can manage it by myself and if I need help, it’s a lot easier to hire someone for a warehouse, for packaging and shipping shit than it is to be in customer service. A lot easier. Hiring is a complete bitch. Plus I’d make more money with no leases or crazy expensive rent to pay. And you know, if you hadn’t pushed me to start looking at my options, I wouldn’t have thought of having an online store to begin with.”

She walks over to me and pushes a dainty finger between my brows. “Stop frowning. You look like you have something to say to me. Say it.”

I can’t do it. Not tonight. I need to know what I’m saying goodbye to before I say goodbye.

“I love you,” I tell her. I grab her face in my hands and peer deep into her eyes. “I love you so much. And these words still aren’t enough.”

Her eyes shine in the dim light. “I love you too, cowboy.” She takes my hand and puts it on her chest. “Right here. Two hearts.”

I close my eyes and rest my forehead against hers. I want to hold on, just keep holding on.

“Let’s do something special tonight,” I murmur to her. “Anything you want?”

“Anything?” she muses. She wraps her arms around my waist and stares up at me. “Well, you know I like to do you. I could do you special style.”

I smile. “I have no doubt about that. But before. What’s the appetizer?”

She licks her lips, thinking.

“Come with me.” I pick up the packages and take her by the hand.

Thirty-minutes later we’re high on Hawk’s Hill, overlooking the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. I used to bring chicks here when I was younger and they’d ooh and aww over the sights. Tonight, there is no one here. It’s cold and the wind is picking up, but it’s moving the thick layer of fog below so that every so often the red-orange span of the bridge appears before it’s clothed again up to the tips.

I bring out a bottle of red wine and two coffee cups I got at the gas station and pour us both some cheap merlot. We sit on a rock and watch the show. The view is as dramatic as it can get and the fog glows like a radioactive sun from the city lights.

“This is beautiful,” she says softly. I turn to look at her. She’s the one that’s beautiful. Her perfect nose, her expressive lips and those soul-baring eyes that still take my breath away. Nine years later, she still takes my breath away.

I grab for her hand and hold it tight.

We go back to her place later and make love. It is slow, passionate and intense. She cries when she comes and I feel like I’ve given her every part of me and I never want it back. It hers to keep.

She curls her body into me and I hold on even tighter.

In the morning I’ll let go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *STEPHANIE*

Before I even open my eyes the next morning, I know something has changed. I reach over with my hand but already know that Linden isn't in bed with me. The place where he was sleeping, the whole night pressed against me, isn't even warm. He's been gone for a while.

He's never left without saying goodbye. He's never left while I've been asleep. I start to panic, thinking maybe there was something wrong with him, that he's sick, before I hear cupboards closing in my kitchen.

I release a deep breath and sink back into the bed for a few moments longer. He's not gone. He's here.

But even so, as I lie there, he doesn't come back to the bedroom. I can hear him, clearly because the walls are so thin in this tiny place, pattering around in the kitchen but he never comes out. For some reason I end up holding my breath again.

Eventually I get out of bed and slip on the robe that's draped over the laundry basket and step out into the hall.

For all the commotion I heard, I thought maybe Linden had made breakfast as he usually does. But there is nothing except a carton of almond milk and a half empty glass. And Linden, fully dressed in a thin black Henley that shows off every curve of his muscles, dark jeans and a furrowed brow. He's leaning on the counter and staring at a blank space in front of him. His jaw is set in a hard line and the air around us feels thick and charged.

My woman's intuition amps up and I try my best to just breathe as normal. There is nothing foreboding or scary about Linden in my kitchen.

But when I move to the other side of the bar, he looks up at me. And in his eyes, I see something I've never wanted to see. They are dark and dull and full of what looks like regret.

I'm not sure if I can handle this blow.

"Linden?" I ask, smiling, trying to keep my voice light, hoping that if I act okay everything will be okay.

"Hey," he says hoarsely, then clears his throat. "How did you sleep?"

There is no intimacy in his eyes. I think that's what's making my limbs feel so suddenly numb.

“Fine. You?”

He just nods and wiggles his jaw back and forth, dropping his gaze. He’s breathing heavily and I look at his hands. They are gripping the counter, the veins in his forearms standing out.

“Baby?” I whisper. I can barely breathe now. “What’s wrong?”

I hold my breath as I watch him. I watch every little tell-tale spot on his face, every movement of his body. I’ve known this man for so long, it’s so easy to tell when something is right or wrong. And right now, something is very, very, *horribly* wrong.

I feel like I know before I even know it. Isn’t that what everyone fears when they’ve fallen in love? That they’re about to keep falling, with no one to catch them this time? That they’ll drop and drop and drop forever?

“Linden. Please, what is it?”

He keeps still for so long so that when he finally exhales, so harsh and loud, I nearly jump.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” he says slowly. He has to clear his throat again and again. “Um, about us.”

Oh no.

Fuck no.

He gives me a pained smile, so pained it looks like he’s trying to smile through a gunshot wound. “It’s just been getting too hard lately with the sneaking around, you know? Having to hide. I’m just not sure if we can do it anymore. It’s no longer fun.”

I feel scooped out, hollow.

“Then shouldn’t we tell people? And no longer hide. Stop the charade. I’d be happy to stop the charade.”

“I can’t do that to James,” he says and looks away.

“Can’t do what to James?” I take a step toward him. “Linden, James will get over it. I promise you.”

He shakes his head. “No he won’t.”

“He will,” I say, louder now, hating that this has become such an issue. “And if he doesn’t, then it’s his problem, not ours.”

“I can’t,” he says flatly.

“I don’t understand,” I tell him, wishing I could just smack some sense into him. “What does it matter what he thinks? Why do you care so much?”

He sighs loudly and runs a hand through his hair. “You’re right,” he says softly. “You don’t understand.”

“So then explain it!” I yell, throwing my arms out. “Tell me what the fuck is going on. What are you getting at Linden? Are you breaking up with me?”

He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing but somehow he manages to look me in the eye. “I think we should...we need...to go back to being friends. Just friends.”

I am being split in two. “Just friends?!” I nearly spit it at him. “I’m fucking in love with you! You said you were in love with me. How the hell could we go back to being just friends?”

“Don’t get all upset,” he says.

“Fuck you! Of course I’m upset!” I put my hands on my head and tug on my hair, feeling the anger shoot through me, fighting the urge to scream. “Just friends? I can’t be your fucking friend Linden. Not ever.”

His eyes sharpen. “You said you would hold on.”

“No, you did!” I retort. “And you’re not. Over James? Fuck James.”

“Hey, he’s your friend too.”

“I don’t give a fuck whose friend he is,” I tell him. “If he’s a friend, he’d understand two friends falling in love. And if you actually loved me, you wouldn’t give me up for him.”

“That is not fair!” He roars at me, jabbing his finger in my direction. “You have no fucking idea what I’ve been dealing with.”

I blink in shock. “No idea? Linden, I’ve been with you for the past fucking two months, don’t tell me I have no idea, I’ve lived it. And I’ve hated it.” His eyes widen and I go on, “Yeah, sometimes I’ve hated it, the fact that it’s all hidden, that it’s a secret, that you’re ashamed of us.”

“You wanted to keep this a secret! Until it was all figured out.”

“Well then I finally fucking figured it out. I thought that was pretty obvious when I told you I was in love with you. Christ, Linden, none of that other shit should matter.”

He is despondent. “But it does.”

My face is growing redder by the moment and the apartment is feeling more and more like a firepit, like there will be no air soon, that this terrible, fucking unfair moment will consume us. But god, it can’t be over yet. It can’t be over. I won’t let it be. I love him, us, everything that we are about to give up that easily.

I take in a deep breath but it’s still shaking. I’m shaking, “Linden,” I say, putting my hand on the counter. “Look, I know it’s hard but let’s just

talk this through. Okay. There's a way out of this, I know there is. One where people don't have to get hurt."

He shakes his head and walks out of the kitchen and past me. He doesn't even touch me as he goes. "Where are you going?" I ask.

He grabs his coat from the couch. "It's over."

"What the fuck?" I run over to him and shove at his arm. He barely moves. He won't look me in the eye. "What the fuck happened between last night and now? How could you stop loving me overnight? How could you just stop..." And now tears are threatening to unleash down my face. My mouth fills with water.

Finally he looks at me. "I still love you, Steph. I'll always love you. But I'm doing the right thing."

My mouth drops open. I can't even form words.

"Please, trust me," he goes on and now his eyes are wet too. "I didn't want it to be this way but it's just something I have to do. It's for the best. You and I will recover. We'll get through this."

I shake my head until the tears fall. "No. No. No we won't. We won't."

"Then don't let go," he says. "And I won't either."

He goes to move but I reach out and grab his arms, holding him in place, as I stare up at him through my blurry, hot vision. "Linden. Why? What aren't you telling me?" He doesn't say anything. Again his eyes are searching the wall, the door, everything but me. "Tell me!" I scream, shaking him.

"He's in love with you!" he yells right back and his voice is so loud, so broken, that I feel frozen to the ground. "James is in love with you. He even broke up with Penny because of it. He told me this. He told me you two slept together last year." Oh no. Oh no. "And ever since then, you've been in his system bad. And he's so fucking glad that you're the one thing that I never had."

"What?" I ask dumbly.

"I lied to him," he says through gritted teeth. "I told him I had never been with you. He was asking. I had no choice."

"You could have told him the truth."

"And what kind of friend would I be?"

"The kind of friend you are!" I yell and it looks like I've slapped him. "Jesus, fuck, Linden. Listen to yourself. You're giving me up for him, because he's apparently in love with me? Why, because you feel guilty, you

feel sorry for him, you hate yourself? You hate that you were with me to begin with? Which fucking is it, Linden, which fucking is it?!”

He doesn't say anything.

“So all of the above?”

He licks his lips. “I did the right thing. He deserves you. Not me. I have everything. He doesn't.”

I put my hand to my forehead in disbelief. “Oh my god. Are you listening to yourself? Are you? I don't love James, I'm not in love with him. I love you. You! Always fucking you. How dare you try and throw that away. How dare you?”

Now he's starting to look sorry. “We have a...our relationship...it's...”

I'm not sure if he's talking about me or James now but I don't care. I am broken, in pieces, fused together only by molten anger.

“So that's what it comes down to then. James tells you he's in love with me. You try to hand me over. Like a sacrifice. To appease your guilt, so he doesn't hate you, so you don't hate yourself. Is that it?”

“No,” he whispers. “Please, baby...”

“Don't you fucking dare call me baby,” I hiss at him, taking a step back. “And don't you fucking dare talk to me again either.”

“No, Steph.” He reaches out to grab me and I rip out of his grasp.

“Get the fuck out here, Linden,” I growl at him. “You're a fucking idiot if you think you could do this and still be my friend. You fucked this up, fucked me over, big time. So congrats. Go back to your James and your eased conscious. But I'm not going to be there.”

He really does look shocked. No, he looks destroyed. He really thought we could go back to the way things were. All I know is that if he truly loved me the way he said he did, there's no way he could survive it.

I point at the door. “Get out. And the next time you tell a girl you love her, make sure you know what the word means. I don't think you have a fucking clue.” I pause and drive the final stake in. “You should have went on keeping it to yourself.”

His breath hitches and it's almost like I can see a world crumbling behind his eyes. But I don't care. I have my own ruins now to deal with.

He turns, slow, stunned, pauses a moment and then walks to the door. As soon as he's gone I quickly slam it behind him and lock it.

I wait a few seconds, unsure whether to cry or scream or what. Then I see the Christmas presents still in the Nordstrom bags. I immediately pick



them up and throw them against the wall, screaming my lungs out. Some smash like broken glasses, others land with a thud. I kick them and kick them and kick them until I'm sweating and the bags are torn and the boxes are all bent inside. I kick and stomp until they feel like my heart.

Then I fall to the ground among the carnage and I cry.

And I cry.

As the world that I loved slips past, right out of my fingers.

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The next few days I do something I have never done before. I don't open the shop. On day one I don't even drag myself out of the apartment. I don't shower, I don't get dressed, I don't eat. I don't even charge my phone or turn on my computer or my TV.

I just lie there on the couch, on the bed, on the floor. I lie there and I cry. I am ruined with debilitating sorrow, a loss that's pulled straight from my chest until I feel like I must be concave, that I could never straighten again.

Then I scream and I kick and I yell and curse the world. I am anger reborn and frustration unjustified. I am brutal hate and cold, dead winter. I am turning, tumbling in despair and there is no light, no warmth, no world, no heart.

I feel like I've died. But death should bring peace. I have no peace. I am not even numb. I am just stuck in this life that wasn't the one I was living a few days before.

In this life I've lost everything.

On the second day, I still don't go to work and I still don't charge my phone or go on the computer. I don't shower but I do manage to put on clothes. I clean up around the apartment a bit. I throw away the presents but then my curiosity wins and I fish them out of the trash. I sit on the floor and open each smashed bag.

One is a shattered ceramic bowl with lemons on it, like my mom loves to collect. That would have been Linden's present to her. The other is a stainless steel cigar cutter. That would have been his present to my dad.

Then there is small jewelry box. I assume that's for me. I almost can't open it. I'm too afraid, like he's watching somehow, like I'll be even more hurt than I already am.

But I do open it. It's a silver bracelet with skull shaped diamonds all around it. It's expensive and it's beautiful. And there is something inscribed on the inside.

*Thank you for showing me your soul.*

I.

Break.

Down.

Later, when I've had enough of being alone with my thoughts and after I've shoved the bracelet in the back of my closet, far, far away, I get in my car and drive all the way out to Petaluma. When I cross over the bridge, I am no longer afraid of falling but I have tears in my eyes. Hawk's Hill, the site of our last night together, the last time we were in love, is off to my left.

What happened? I still don't understand. Maybe I've never understood James and Linden's relationship, maybe I've underestimated the guilt complex that Linden harbors. Maybe his parents screwed him over far greater than I thought.

But I know one thing is for sure. He doesn't love me. He doesn't know what love is. It's not his fault, if he's never been told and if he's never felt it.

But it still hurts worse than a knife to the stomach, than a bullet to the chest. It's my heart in a claw trap, bleeding and pierced, and I can't seem to loosen it.

When I get to my parents, my mom is waiting for me outside. It's like she knew. My father's car isn't there because I guess it's not their date night or some bullshit like that. It's too bad though. I like my dad in situations like these. He's good at talking sense, at seeing the male point of view.

My mom brings me into a hug and I immediately start bawling. I lose it on the front steps until she brings me inside and lays me down on the couch. She gives me some of dad's Scotch. She listens to me as I try to explain through my sobs and hiccups.

It doesn't sound any clearer, any better. My mother seems as confused as I am. But then when I calm down she sits beside me and pats my knee.

"He's hurting too, you know," she says.

I shake my head. "Not like me."

"You don't know that sweetheart. I've seen that boy many times now. He loves you. He really does. But sometimes, when people have no real experience with using their hearts, it's easy for them to get confused. It

sounds like his relationship with James was a lot more complicated than you thought.”

I sip back the rest of the Scotch, finding small comfort in the burn. “They seemed fine. Linden sometimes felt James resented him...”

“And if he felt that, and James has been closer to him than his own family, he may feel he needs to do what he can to not have it be true. You can be like that too sometimes.”

I look at her sharply. “Like what?”

“Eager to please. Wanting approval. From us.”

I raise my brows but my mom just smiles warmly. “I know. I don’t blame you. It’s mostly our fault, I guess. With your brother...he demanded so much attention.”

“He was *sick*, mom.”

“I know. And Nate needed that attention. But you were sometimes pushed aside. We didn’t mean to do it. But we saw it happening and we just hoped that you’d grow up to understand.”

“I *do* understand,” I implore her.

“Just because you do, doesn’t mean it stops. Life leaves scars. Sometimes you don’t see them until later. Sometimes you don’t know where they’ve come from. Sometimes they fade before your eyes. But the world leaves its mark on us. Linden may not understand his.”

I sigh and sit back. “So what does this mean? What do I do?”

“I wish I knew sweetie. It sounds like he needs a friend. Do you think you could be his friend?”

“I want to,” I start but my heart sinks with sadness. “But I can’t. I know it’s selfish of me, but I just can’t. I’m in love with him. I can’t ever be his friend. He left his mark on me too deeply.”

“Sometimes you need to be selfish,” she says. “Want to stay for supper?”

“Sure,” I say, my stomach rumbling at the thought. I only ate a bag of rice crackers yesterday. “Where’s dad?”

“He’s napping?”

“Napping?”

She jerks her head in the direction of the bedroom. “Didn’t I tell you? He moved in last week.”

“What? I didn’t see his car outside.”

“It’s in the garage now.”

“So everything is back to normal?” I ask.  
She smiles, her eyes crinkly and soft. “In this world, yes.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *LINDEN*

Dead-man walking. That's what it feels like. That's what *heartbreak*, *heartsmash*, *heartruin*, feels like.

I'd never experienced it before. I hope I never do again.

And the funny thing is, I know I won't. Because I won't ever give my heart to anyone else. It belonged to Stephanie. It always will.

And because she has it, I am without one.

Deep, yeah maybe. But I'm in so much fucking sorrow, in so fucking deep, that there's no coming out of it. There is just an endless pit inside me that keeps caving in. All day. Every day.

They say the nights are the hardest. I think the mornings are. Mornings are when I reach over in bed to hold her and grab nothing but air. Mornings are when no one scolds me for drinking orange juice out of the container. Mornings are when I make scrambled eggs for one, when I have no reason to drive into the Mission district, when I make too much coffee because I don't know how to make any less.

Mornings are when I can't kiss her goodbye.

I can't kiss her ever again.

I lost her. I let go. Fully and completely.

All to appease my conscious. All to feel like I did nothing wrong.

I had conceded to James for the first time in my life and I'm beginning to think it was the wrong thing to start with.

It all came crashing down on me anyway.

A few days after I ended it with Steph, I couldn't even bring myself to hang out with James. If he always resented me in some form, I was starting to resent him. I was starting to blame him for everything.

But it's the day before Christmas Eve and he invites me over to his placet. He's not working. He wants to have a drink, but obviously not at the Lion.

So I go over there. I bring a twelve-pack because that's what buddies do.

The door is open. James lives in a rather shitty walk-up but he's at least done a good job decorating the inside. Still, the neighborhood isn't the nicest.

“Maybe you should lock your door, aye,” I tell him as I come inside and lock it behind me.

He’s sitting on the back of the couch and staring at me, like he’s been waiting for me to come inside this whole time.

“What’s up?” I tell him, putting the box of beer on his kitchen table. The room smells like weed but I can’t tell if he’s high or not. “Why do you have your crazy face on, brother?”

“I can’t believe you lied to me,” he says, his face eerily blank, and that’s when I know it’s all over. It’s almost a relief.

Still. I have to try. “What are you talking about?”

“Stephanie,” he says. And my first thought is, oh my fucking hell, did she speak to him? Did she tell him that she knows he’s in love with her? What else did she say?

Is she okay?

*Of course she’s not fucking okay. You broke her god damn heart.*

“What about her?” I ask, still hoping.

“You’ve been screwing her. For months.”

And here it is. The fucking truth.

I raise my chin in defiance. “Who told you that?”

“Her friend, Kayla,” he says. “She says you broke her heart. I guess I had something to do with that, didn’t I?”

I don’t even know what to say, so I don’t say anything. There is nothing to say.

“No apology?” he asks bitterly.

Right. Well I guess there is that. But I know that it won’t do any good. “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“Sure,” he says with a quick nod. “Okay. You lied. Point blank to my face. You told me you had never been with her.”

“I had been with her.”

“For months.”

“For months,” I agree.

“How long have you been in love with her?”

“About as long as you have.”

He shakes his head and laughs humorlessly. “And of course, you end up being the guy she falls in love with. It had to be you, didn’t it?”

I can’t seem to swallow the brick in my throat. “It didn’t have to be. But I’m not sorry it was.” I pause. “But I broke it off with her because I didn’t

want to see you get hurt. I didn't know you loved her, James. Come on."

He narrows his dark eyes. They look like a viper's. "But did you at least suspect? You said you didn't before, but you were lying then anyway. Did you at least think I had some feelings for her?"

I nod. "Yes. Maybe not in that way..."

He clucks his tongue. "Typical. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I saw her first but I guess in the end she had to become yours anyway."

"She's no longer anybody's."

He shrugs. "Why do I care?"

I'm stunned. "But I gave her up for you. That counts for something."

"You gave her up for *you!*" he suddenly yells at me, spit flying from his mouth. "None of this was for me. This was to get rid of your own guilt, to make yourself feel better, like you're a noble, better man, when you're nothing but a self-centered asshole. You always have been and always will be." He takes in a deep breath. "But now at least you'll know what it's like to lose. You've lost her. And now you've lost me."

I don't need to protest. I don't need for him to tell me to get the fuck out like Stephanie did. I can only nod, turn around, and leave the apartment. James and the box of beer stay behind.

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It's amazing what people will do on Christmas Eve if you pay them enough money. By the time nine o'clock rolls around and I'm hauling my suitcases to SFO, my entire flat is packed up and in the back of a moving truck. Not only were the moving people willing to work all day loading my shit for the right amount of pay, but some grumbly Jewish man was up for the job of driving all my belongings across the country.

Originally I was going to do it myself. But when I called my father last night and told him I was going to take him up on the flat in Manhattan, he insisted I get there in time for Christmas. Which is, you know, tomorrow.

It will be the first Christmas with my family in ten years. I'm not even sure what to expect anymore or who my family is. But I know it's better than staying in San Francisco where I have absolutely nothing left for me. My father had been right – what was the point of putting down roots if there was nowhere for me to grow?

There is no Stephanie. There is no James. And though I loved my job to death, there are always new jobs to be found. Manhattan is full of helicopters needing to be flown.

Manhattan is full of possibilities for a new world.

I get on the airplane and as we race against another flight taking off at the same time, I stare out the window, at the tips of the Transamerica Pyramid building and the Bay and Golden Gate Bridge as they poke through the shroud of fog.

I leave my heart in San Francisco.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Three months later

STEPHANIE

“I’m so glad you gave me a second chance.”

I nod, spearing a piece of butter-soaked broccoli with my fork. I’m not really listening, to be honest. I should be, because my ex-boyfriend is sitting across from me and we’re at one of the nicest restaurants in town and I’m not hating it entirely.

But my mind is elsewhere. It’s always been elsewhere since Linden left.

I’m not really sure what possessed me to actually give Owen a chance. Loneliness, I guess. That’s kind of what my life has been boiled down to lately. Acute, aching, loneliness that breaks me on a daily basis. When Owen called the other day, telling me he never stopped thinking about me and that he wanted to make things right, I felt all my defenses cave. Sure he was the guy who cheated on me all those years ago, sure he was, at last look, a boring accountant who drank straight vodka. But I wanted, needed to have someone tell me they wanted me.

I need and want Linden. But that’s not what I have.

Instead, Linden lives in Manhattan, in a fancy apartment his parents got for him. At least, that’s where I assume he lives. I actually don’t know a thing about him anymore. I don’t even know if he’s a helicopter pilot or has gone into political science or schmoozing with high society or being a playboy like his older brother.

I haven’t talked to Linden since he left right before Christmas. It all happened so god damn fast. One minute we were screaming at each other and the next minute he was gone. It was like he took every broken part with him and now I’m left with nothing but just the outline where his love used to be.

Or where I *thought* his love used to be.

It’s the end of March. It’s warm and sunny in that nutty SF way. My online business is booming and I’m planning on closing the physical store once my lease in October is up. Things do look bright but I just can’t look at them that way. They used to look so much brighter.

My girlfriends, Kayla and Nicola, have been great, really supportive, but I feel like even they might be getting fed up with me. They tell me to

forget about Linden, they tell me I'm hot and still young and that I could have the city in the palm of my hand.

It's not true but I don't care anyway. I just want what I had and what I can't have anymore.

And I certainly don't want Owen. But for selfish reasons, I'm glad I'm out with him. I was so tired of being alone. It really begins to get under your skin after a while. I'm all about independence, but a little close human contact – a little affection – is sometimes needed.

"Stephanie?" Owen asks and I look up at him. He's got a receding hairline now and his ears have gotten elf-like. I think he'll look like an aging Legolas when he's fifty. He's even wealthier these days, running his own accounting firm for many of the major businesses in Silicon Valley but to his credit, he hasn't changed much.

"Sorry," I quickly say. I finish chewing my broccoli, slowly, in an effort to buy more time, to think. "I'm glad you decided to get in touch." There. That's as diplomatic as they come. I may be lonely, but I don't want to give him the impression that this anything more than it is.

He smiles, seemingly happy with that answer. "Good. It's funny how life goes sometimes, isn't it? Some people come and go and some go and come back."

Yes. But not the ones you want.

Suddenly my phone rings from my purse. I normally wouldn't answer it on a date but I'm not too worried about this one. That's the one good thing about exes, they can be as comfortable as an old shoe. I pull it out, expecting to see a call from Nicola asking me how it is and if I need an escape plan, but it takes me a full second to register the number.

Speaking of exes - it's James. I haven't talked to James since December either. I couldn't stomach it, not after I learned how he felt about me, not after I knew he was a catalyst. I lost both him and Linden at once.

I shoot Owen an apologetic look. "Sorry, I have to take this." Because I do. Because James would never call me out of the blue unless it was important.

"Hello?" I answer it.

"Stephanie?" James says. "Have you seen the news?"

His voice is so dull and grave it sends chills down my spine. "What? No, sorry I'm out for dinner."

“Okay,” he says and I expect him to let me go but he goes on. “I’m sorry to call you like this but you need to know. There’s been an accident.”

Thump. Thump. *Thud*. My heart falters and skips to a stop.

Oh god.

It can’t be.

“What?” I whisper. I almost don’t want him to answer.

“It’s Linden. There was a helicopter crash.”

“What?!” I am shrieking. The whole restaurant is staring at me but I don’t care. My soul turns into a cold, dark place, like the sun has been snuffed out. I’m sucking in air, afraid to move or breathe or do anything. I feel like the longer I hold still, the longer this moment will last, the longer I won’t have to hear news that could destroy my world yet again.

“I don’t know what happened,” James says. “But I thought you should know.”

“Is he alive?” I whisper, frantic. I am pure panic.

“Yes,” he says and I’m so relieved I nearly fall out of my chair. I notice Owen is at my side, holding me up and everyone is still staring. “Yes I think he’s fine. Well, he’s not fine, he’s badly banged up. Broken leg, ribs, arm. Concussion. Lacerations. But he’s alive.”

“How did you know this?”

“Bram, his brother, he called me. I guess he thought we were still...”

*Friends* is what he wants to say.

“Yeah,” I say softly, understanding, while Owen is rubbing my shoulder now and asking if I’m all right. I ignore him, wrapped up in this phone call, this last lifeline to Linden, to the life I had.

“Do you want to go see him?” James asks.

“What?”

He clears his throat. “Do you want to go see him? In the hospital. Fly to New York.”

“What? When?”

“Tonight. Red-eye. I...I looked online the moment I heard and saw there were flights. Bram said it would be good, that Linden doesn’t really have any friends out there. He said to text him when we get there.”

“You’re going to go?” My heart is thumping louder now. Should I go? Wait. That’s a stupid question.

“Yeah. I realized I need to apologize to him. For a lot of things.”

I swallow and nod. “Yeah. Me too.”

“So you’ll come if I book us tickets? Eleven PM from SFO. Virgin America. I’ll pick us up.”

“Yes. I’ll go home right away and pack. See you in a bit.” I pause. “Thanks James, for calling me.”

“No problem, Steph.”

I hang up the phone and look at Owen. Thankfully now the other patrons are back to their meals but Owen is looking really concerned. I don’t blame him.

“What happened?” he asks.

“You know my friend Linden?”

He flinches a bit. I know he remembers Linden. “Yeah.”

“He was in a bad accident. He lives in New York now and he’s in the hospital. I’m going to catch the red-eye to go see him. I’m sorry,” I tell him and then stand-up. “I don’t mean to cut out on our date like this.”

“You know, if you didn’t want to see me, you could have just told me. You don’t need an escape plan.”

I put my hand on his arm and squeeze. “Please,” I say imploringly. “This isn’t a lie. I have to go.”

He nods. “I’ll pay up and take you home.” He turns and signals to the waiter. “You know,” he says turning back to me, “you’re a hell of a good friend.”

I can’t even smile at that. I don’t know what I am to him anymore. But I know I need to see him. Sometimes a second chance comes to the other person.

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Even though it’s been just a couple of months since I last saw James, it’s weird to see him again. Still, when I spot him at the Virgin ticket counter, the first thing I do is throw my arms around him. I let out a deep sigh and he hugs me back. It’s almost like old times. I realize that after everything we’ve been through, I really do miss him.

“Hey,” I say, pulling away.

“Hey,” he says back. He appraises me. “You look good.”

I give him a small smile. My hair is a bit shorter, shoulder-length and layered, and dyed black again. “Thanks. So do you.”

And I'm not just saying that to be polite. He does look good. His hair is shorter too, scruffy with lots of product in it, and there's a bit more color to his face. "Did you go on vacation?" I ask.

He nods. "Went to Mexico for a few weeks in February."

"That's nice. Good for you, getting away and everything." And because I'm curious, I ask, "Who did you go with?"

It takes him a moment to speak. "Penny."

I smile widely. "Nice. You're back together again?"

Now it's a bit awkward, at least in my head, because I know the reason why they broke up. He knows this too but the way he's eyeing me tells me he's unsure of what I've heard. "Yeah," he says. "We just had a little break for a bit. It did us good."

"That's awesome. I'm happy for you." And I actually am. After everything that has happened, I don't wish him any harm. It was just the way things happened. And I love Penny to bits.

Soon we're lapsing into small talk, things that are safe like hockey and business life and crazy San Francisco stories, and before we know it we're in the air, cruising through the dark night over the American continent.

Unfortunately, I can't sleep on planes and this red-eye is pretty full. I'm in the window seat while James is beside me and some snoring Asian lady is on the aisle.

So I listen to music until my battery on my phone dies. Then I put it away and sit back, staring out at the dark space above us, the blanket of clouds below us.

"Steph," James whispers. "Are you asleep?"

I turn my head to look at him. "Obviously you just saw me put my phone away."

He shrugs with one shoulder, bumping it against mine. "Maybe you're one of those people who can fall asleep in a second, just like that."

"I think those are called narcoleptics."

He nods, then his eyes brighten. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't get us first class. I always thought that when I was older, I'd always be flying business."

"Well it helps to have a business that pays for that shit. We're more or less self-employed small business owners. I don't know about you, but I don't have *that* much to write off, you know?"

"I know. Still."

“Meh. We’re just trying to see a friend in a hurry. It doesn’t matter how we get there as long as it’s fast.” And I want this plane to be going three times the speed. But once I do get to see Linden...what do I say?

“Yeah,” he says softly. “Listen...I’ve been keeping something to myself for some time now. Something I don’t feel good about.”

*Oh god. Please, please, please don’t tell me it’s him still in love with me,* I think. I understand how egotistical that makes me seem, but I couldn’t handle that bullshit after what he just said about reconnecting with Penny.

When I don’t say anything, I realize he’s going to tell me anyway. So I quickly say, “What is it?”

“I know the reason why Linden broke it off with you.”

A flood of emotions come back into me. I try and breathe through them. “Why?”

“Because of me. I made him.”

I’m not sure what to say, because while I do know some things that I probably shouldn’t, this is news to me. “You made him?”

“You know, I thought I was in love with you.”

My eyes widen. Not because of shock because he actually had the balls to tell me. “Uhhh...”

He smiles quickly. “It’s okay. The term is *thought I was*. I’m not. And I wasn’t. But I wanted to be, because you and I had something once and it was something Linden never had.” Okay, that’s just the tiniest bit petty there. “You know...I told Linden, after you guys broke up, that I knew you two were sleeping together.”

*He knew?*

He goes on. “I told him that your friend Kayla told me. And she did. She was drunk at the Lion though, so it wasn’t her fault. I was feeding her shots and getting her to talk. The thing is, I always knew. The moment I saw you guys kiss at Sea Ranch, I knew. I knew the weekend before that when I caught a moment between you in the hallway. When you made that stupid pact. In fact, I think I’ve been more aware of your feelings for each other than you have. This whole time, I’ve been watching this show play out.”

I can barely believe what I’m hearing. “You knew the whole time?” I shriek and then lower my voice once I realize that I may have woken up the entire plane.

“It was kind of obvious if you were on the outside looking in. And man, did I ever hate Linden for it. Hated you a little too.”

“But why?”

“Well, I hated you because I felt like you just wanted Linden from the beginning anyway and had to settle for me. And Linden because, well, he gets everything he ever wants. And I don’t. And I was tired of it.”

“But you know that’s not true.”

“I know. But I was a jealous fuck and in denial and I needed a scapegoat, so why not my best friend, huh? And I knew you guys were getting together. It was so obvious. The kiss camera. The two of you disappearing at once. The way you touched each other, talked to each other, when you thought no one was looking. I was always looking.”

I shift in my seat uneasily. “That’s kind of weird, James.”

He nods. “Yeah. It was. And it was eating me up. I started to convince myself that I was in love with you. You know when we slept together at your store, that was just sex. It really was. Later, I just told myself it was more than that. I was more in love with the idea of finally having something that Linden couldn’t have. So I stole you away from him, just so he would know what it feels like to lose something.”

I feel like I’m being coated in tar, I am that disgusted. “That’s horrible,” I tell him, inching away from him and toward the window. “Seriously, that is a fucking asshole thing to do.”

His eyes are bright, almost feverish in the cabin lights. “I know it is. I was horrible. I am an asshole. I was the man I was accusing him of becoming. And I ruined all of our relationships with each other. But most of all, I ruined what the two of you had. Something I always wanted. And I’ve never forgiven myself for it.”

“So you’re going to New York because you’re sorry?”

“I’m going to New York because I need to say I’m sorry. After learning we almost lost him today, I need to tell him in person. I’m so fucking sorry. And I love him and I miss him. And I just want my friend back.”

As much as I kind of hate James at the moment, I see a tear roll down his face and suddenly I’m coming a bit undone myself. He fucked up, majorly. But he’s sincere. And he’s hurting as much as I am.

He quickly wipes away a tear, looking a tad ashamed and says, “And most of all, I want to see him with you again. You two belong together. More than anything else, it should be you and him.”

I sigh sadly and lean back in my seat. “Yeah. But he could have fought for me, you know? He didn’t.”

“I don’t think Linden knows what fighting is,” he says.

“Maybe not. Maybe he does. But I think I deserve that. Someone to fight for me. To believe in me. And trust in love. Sounds cheesy but...once you have love, you have to trust in it. I don’t think he knows that but I think I need someone who does.”

He’s nodding. “Yeah. I understand. Look...I know saying sorry isn’t going to fix things. But I’m going to try. I know what I did was horrible and selfish and I was just so angry of being...of being nothing compared to him.”

“But you know that’s not Linden’s fault,” I point out. “That’s coming from inside you, not him. He has been a good friend. Maybe not the best at times, but nothing is so black and white. Life is grey. Love is grey. He just...I loved him, James. I still do. And I like to think that he at least tried to love me the best he could. He honestly never wanted to hurt you. You were always on his mind, you were always what he worried about. He’s tried really hard to be a good friend to you but we all fuck up at some point and have to make hard choices.”

He sucks on his bottom lip but doesn’t say anything for a moment. Then he sighs pitifully. “I know. I feel like such a...a...”

“Big fucking baby?” I supply.

He gives me a little smile. “You know I always lament the fact that I had to grow up so fast but...I’m not sure that I did.”

I can’t argue with him there but I throw him a little bone. “I guess sometimes as you get older, your friendships don’t evolve like they should.” I should add, *don’t be too hard on yourself* but I want him to be hard on himself. I guess I can be a bit immature too.

“What a fucking mess,” he says.

“Yeah. What a fucking mess.”

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Somehow, and I don’t know how, I do manage to sleep for an hour or two because when the wheels hit the tarmac at JFK, I’m jolted awake. And then I’m reminded of where I am, who I’m with, and who we are going to see.



Linden. My heart squeezes at the thought of him, lying in the hospital bed. I wonder if his parents are there – his brother did call James, which was a good sign – but I know they won't be giving him the love and support he needs. I wonder how scared he was when it happened, how it happened, if he's permanently damaged. I wonder if he'll want to see me, see James. I wonder if this is the start of a second chance or just the final way to say goodbye.

Once we've landed, James is already texting Bram. He gives me a small, hopeful smile as we gather our bags and step into the aisle. "Are you ready?" he asks.

I nod. He briefly grabs my hand and holds it for a moment, but it's friendly. It's comforting. It gives me a little bit of strength.

It's weird to suddenly be in Manhattan. The iconic skyscrapers, streets that look like tunnels because they go on forever, the vibrancy and life of the place. I've been once before with Kayla for a girl's weekend, but it wasn't enough. I still love San Francisco to death but if there's any city that could compete for space in my heart, it's New York.

The cab we caught pulls up in front of a brick hospital and we clamber out. I only packed for overnight, so my bag is light and easy to carry. We wait outside for a moment as James texts Bram again to tell him we're here, freezing our asses off. March in New York and March in San Francisco are very different beasts.

Thankfully it's not long before Bram comes out, striding toward us in a hurry. He is nearly the spitting image of Linden, except slightly taller and leaner, with striking eyes that are grey instead of dark blue. He's got thick dark hair like Linden too, but the last time I saw him it was full of wax and product. Right now it looks a bit crazed, like he's been pulling on it. He's worried. This worries me.

"Hi," Bram says, his accent somehow stronger than his brother's. There is an awkward moment where it looks like he's unsure whether to shake our hands or not. He ends up pulling me into a hug. "Thank you for coming, Stephanie." Then he nods at James. "Thanks for bringing her."

"No problem," James says quickly. "How is he?"

Bram sighs and begins walking toward the front doors. We follow him. "He's better. His concussion is wearing off but he's still out of it. He's high as a motherfucking kite. On a lot of morphine for the pain."

"Jesus," I swear, my fingers digging into my chest.

“Yeah,” he says. “He doesn’t look very pretty. Which is a nice change for once.” It’s an obvious joke but there is no humor in it. I don’t know Bram well at all and what I do know I don’t really like, but this is affecting him more than I thought it would. In some ways it’s good – it means Linden has more love and support from him than he may have thought.

“And your parents, are they here?” I ask as we get in an elevator with a nurse.

He nods. “Aye. They’ve been here. My mum is at home now, er, resting, but dad is down the street. I’m not sure if he’s having a meeting with someone or getting some food other than the bloody disgusting food they have here,” he eyes the nurse, “no offense, sweetheart.” He looks back and me and gives me a light smile. “But he is here.”

We get off on a floor of the hospital that somehow smells cleaner and looks fresher than the others and Bram leads us down the hall. Being the looky loo that I am, I can’t help but peer into every open door. These are private rooms that must cost a fortune but at least the McGregors’s money is being put to good use.

Finally, we stop in front of one closed door and Bram takes in a deep breath before he opens it.

I immediately want to cry.

Linden is barely recognizable. It’s not that he looks terribly mangled, but he has a bandage around his head, his face is bruised and scratched, and his left leg and left arm are in casts. He looks so small in the bed that I have a hard time believing it’s him.

But it is. His eyes are closed and he looks like he’s sleeping. I’m wondering if we should just come back later when he’s awake.

James has his hand at my elbow and is slowly leading me forward. It’s like I’ve forgotten how to walk.

“Linden,” Bram says as he goes over to the side of the bed, peering down at him. “You have guests, brother.”

Linden’s head is slumped to the side, his eyes are flickering while his breathing is heavy.

“Oh yeah?” Linden mumbles back. He still doesn’t raise his head or open his eyes.

Bram eyes me expectantly.

I clear my throat and step closer. I put my hand on top of Linden’s while I think of what to say. But it turns out I don’t need to say anything. He

slowly, gingerly, moves his head and opens his eyes to look at me. His beautiful eyes create a whirlwind in my heart.

“Steph?” he whispers, frowning in hazy confusion. “Are you real?”

I smile. It might be the saddest smile I’ve ever worn. “Yes. I came as soon as I heard. We both did.” I move slightly so he can see James standing beside me.

“Hey man,” James says softly.

Linden’s brow furrows even more. Clearly we both were the last people he expected to see. “Hey.”

“All right, I’ll leave you guys be,” Bram says, heading for the door.

But then James is going after him. “I’ll come too. Come back later. Give these two some privacy.”

Well that certainly makes things a little more awkward. I watch as they leave the door open a bit and disappear down the hall.

I swallow and look back at Linden, at the glazed look in his eyes, my hand still on his. He wraps his fingers around mine, wincing slightly, and squeezes. It feels like home.

“I still think I might be dreaming.”

“No,” I say softly. “You’re not. James told me what happened, so we came on the red-eye. You look...what happened?”

He’s still staring at me and underneath the drugs, the lazy slant to his eyes, I can see him fighting inside to remember. “There was a malfunction, I think they said it was an electrical short but I don’t know.” He licks his lips, breathing slow. “Luckily there was no one else on board. I was supposed to take out passengers for a tour. I work for a tour company now and it was a new chopper. So I took it up just to see how it handles. I remember the lights coming on, then going off, not far from where the airport is. I had to take it down. I remember...almost being on the ground. Maybe thirty feet. Then it pitched. I knew I was going down but...I don’t actually remember the crash. I woke up here. I saw the news footage. It looked like a flaming wreckage. I really don’t know how I got out of it, even like this. I’m lucky.”

I’m so completely horrified. He gives my hand a squeeze. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Believe it, cowboy.”

He smiles but then closes his eyes, tense from pain.

“Do you need me to let you rest?” I ask.

“No,” he quickly says, but keeps his eyes closed. “I just get dizzy. I have a concussion and the drugs are...the drugs are bloody fabulous...but it feels like I’m underwater.” He opens his eyes and stares right at me. “Please don’t go. Tell me things. Tell me how you are.” He takes in a deep, deep breath. “Fuck, I’ve missed you Steph.”

My eyes are growing hot. I don’t want to break down. “I’ve missed you too. It’s been...it’s been rough. It’s not much fun without you.”

“I’m really sorry,” he says, his words getting choked. “I really am. I...I handled everything so wrong. So wrong. I’m...” he pauses and exhales hard, his jaw clenching. “Shit. It hurts every fucking day.”

“Do you need more drugs?” I ask, searching around for the nurse’s call button.

“No,” he says, his eyes flashing, looking wide awake. “No. Not this pain. The pain I caused when I left. I had your love and I threw it away, like it was worth nothing when it was worth everything. I broke my own fucking heart and I broke yours. Every day it feels like there’s another crack inside me and no matter how much I ignore it, it’s not fucking healing. It’s not getting better. Steph...baby blue...I’m so fucking sorry. I ruined everything we had.” He closes his eyes and nods to himself. “I deserve this.”

“Don’t talk like that,” I admonish him quickly. “Seriously, stop it. Yeah, things got fucked up but no one deserves to be in a god damn helicopter crash. No one deserves this, especially not you. People make mistakes, I get it. We just weren’t what I always hoped we’d be.”

“No, we weren’t. We were better than that.” He gives me a half smile. “Together we were the best. That’s why it hurts so fucking much.”

There is a knock at the door and I turn to see James standing there. For the second time in twenty-four hours, I want to kick him the nuts.

“Sorry,” he says, and he does sound sorry. “A nurse told me visiting hours are almost over. I just wanted to say a few words to him.”

I nod but Linden squeezes my hand tighter. “Please don’t go,” he says hoarsely, trying to hold me to him. “I need you.”

Does he really? Or is he in a drugged-up, overly emotional because he faced death head on, kind of daze? I keep forgetting he lives here now. I keep forgetting how much everything has changed.

“You’re going to be fine,” I tell him. Then I reluctantly let go of his hand and walk away so that James can say his peace. As I pass by him in

the room, I shoot him a warning. I don't know what James is going to talk about, if he's going to lay it all on him like he did to me on the plane, but I'm not sure how much Linden can handle.

James nods though, seeming to understand. I look back in time to see Linden watching me, looking more pained than before. I step out in the hall and see Bram and a distinguished-looking older man standing a few feet away.

"You must be Stephanie," the man says, coming toward me with his hand out, talking in a ridiculously refined Scottish accent. "I'm Linden's father."

"Oh, hello," I tell him, happy to finally meet this infamous figure. His father is tall and handsome with salt and pepper hair and twinkling eyes. I can definitely see where his sons get their looks from. I shake his hand as firmly as I can, wanting to impress. "Nice to finally meet you."

"Yes," he says. "Nice to finally meet you, the famous Stephanie Robson."

I snort. Not exactly very ladylike. "Famous?"

He exchanges a look with Bram. "Linden has talked about you a lot over the years."

"He has?" Linden barely talked to his parents at all.

"Yes. You were always mentioned at some point or another. And ever since he moved here, well...you're mentioned a lot more. It's nice to put such a lovely face to such a beloved name."

Linden's been talking about me his father even now? While I'm pondering that, he places his hand on Bram's shoulder and says, "I'm going home to get your mother. I'll be back in a bit." He gives me a small bow. "Pleasure meeting you. Hope to see you again sometime."

"Sure, yes of course," I tell him and watch him go.

"Hey," Bram says to me. "I'm not sure how long you're staying in New York for but do you want to get a coffee while we wait for James? There's a good place next door."

I nod, thinking that's better than staying in the hospital. The problem is, I have to head back to SF soon to open the store – I can't afford to close it right now.

As we leave the hospital, I'm wondering if I'll even get a chance to say goodbye again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *LINDEN*

I remember once when I was a wee lass, I'd gone to the stables to help my mother. Well, I wasn't really helping per se, as I was just hanging around. My nanny had the day off and so my poor mum was relegated to taking care of Bram and I. Boy, we really were a couple of twats. Bram would climb up into the hayloft and jump into the bales below, while I would sneak in and out of every horse's stall.

This one day, I was following my mum around, like a spy. I knew it annoyed her to have us playing around her when she was trying to work, so I kind of hung around in the background. I remember watching her though, maybe even wondering what was it about the horses that she seemed to like so much more than me.

That day she was fussing over a yearling that she was trying to sell, I think. I remember it being a filly and sometimes I fancied that maybe it would be my horse. My mum seemed to pay that much more attention to it.

When she left to go check on another horse, I went into the filly's stall. Appleton I think was the name, though now I'm realizing they would have named it after a bottle of rum. But then again, that seems about right.

I was petting the horse, just like my mom had, when Bram dropped somewhere in the barn. It made the filly spook and she ended up bucking out, kicking me right in the head. I was obviously not standing where I was supposed to be.

All I remembered at the time was an explosion of wet fire inside my head and then everything went deep, deep black. I woke up later with a veterinarian peering over me. Apparently it was easier to call him than it was to take me to the hospital.

For most of my life, I thought that was the scariest thing that had ever happened to me. But now, now that's changed.

Surviving the helicopter crash is the scariest thing that's ever happened to me. Of course that seems quite obvious. That would be one of the most traumatizing things to ever happen to anyone and luckily it rarely does. But it wasn't the crash itself that shook me to my bones, nor the actual bones inside me breaking. It had nothing to do with that.

It was after, when I woke up in the hospital, and realized I didn't have the one person on earth that I needed. I was alone, maybe not physically – thankfully my father and brother were there – but I was alone in my soul. My heart still belonged to someone else and I could have died without ever seeing it, or her, again.

That's when the loss of the last couple of months, the despair and the change, all came tumbling around me at once, crushing me until I had no choice but surrender to it. Surrender to the loss. Surrender to the shit fucking choices I made.

This was all my fault.

I cried. I really fucking cried for that first night. Everyone thought I was in pain so they kept pumping me more and more full of drugs, but the pain was somewhere they could never reach. The crash was over but I was still breaking, breaking, *breaking* inside.

All for Stephanie, the woman I lost, the woman I threw away.

And for what? For a better conscience? For pride?

For nothing. It was all for nothing.

Nothing has such a hollow, infinite sound to it.

When Stephanie appeared by my bed, I knew it had to be a dream. There was no way I could just ache and want so much and have it appear the next day. I wasn't a fucking genie.

But it wasn't a dream. Was it?

I'm looking at James right now but he's not the person I want to be looking at. The person I want left me again. The person I want still has my damn heart.

"Was Steph really here?" I ask him, my throat so hoarse and dry it's like I swallowed sandpaper. The room still spins like I'm in a slow-cycled washing machine, so maybe it really was a dream. How am I to know?

But he nods. "Yeah. She was here."

Then why am I still in pain?

"Look, I know I'm the last person you want to see," he says.

I can't help but frown, even though it hurts my head to do so. "Actually I thought *I'd* be the last person you'd want to see." Considering the way things ended between us, I'm shocked he's even here.

I'm shocked Steph is here too. And then my mind wants to focus on something I hope isn't true. Are they together now? Did James follow

through on his intentions for her? Did she end up falling for him all over again?

Was this my doing?

My heart clenches. There is not enough morphine in the world for this.

James scratches at his head and then sighs. He sits down on the plastic chair beside the bed. "Linden. I'm going to tell you something and it's not going to be easy."

Oh fucking hell. I'm right, aren't I?

"Okay," I say. It's barely audible over the blood whooshing in my ears.

"You're going to want to kill me."

"Sounds wonderful."

"And I probably shouldn't tell you this right now of all times, but if I don't tell you then you'll never get back to where you need to be. And you know where you need to be, don't you? You need to be back in San Francisco. And you need to be with her."

All right. It's taking me a while to process this but that's not at all what I thought he'd say.

He swallows uneasily. "I told you I was in love with Stephanie. And you know what? I was. When we were together, I was. And after we broke up...yeah, I did have a hard time letting go of her. Sleeping with her again didn't help either. It's not like I lied to you but...when I told you I was in love with her, that I broke up with Penny for her, I didn't really know what I was saying."

"I am so confused," I tell him, trying to understand. "You may have noticed I've got a concussion."

He looks right at me and it's like he's bracing himself. "I wasn't so much in love with her as I wanted to have her. I wanted to have her want me. And I wanted to take her away from you. Because I knew. All along I knew what was going on between the two of you. I knew you both were lying to me, hiding shit from me, sneaking around. I didn't like it. And more than that, I didn't think it was fair." He pauses. "This isn't an easy thing for me to admit but the fact is, I was jealous. I wanted you to know what loss and sacrifice was. For once, I wanted you to not have everything."

I don't realize how much I'm clenching my jaw together until my head starts to pound with pain. But that's nothing, nothing compared to the rage



inside. “What the fuck?” is all I manage to eke out. “Why would you do that to me?”

His smile is cold. “Because you were doing it to me. And because I was a weak, stupid friend who couldn’t seem to stop resenting you. I’m not proud of it. But it’s true.”

“You’re going to give me a fucking heart attack,” I swear at him. “If my fucking arm wasn’t broken, I’d fucking choke you to death. Hell I bet I could do it with one bloody hand!” And suddenly I’m reaching for him, but the IV is pulling at my skin.

“I’m sorry,” he says, not moving, like he wants me to kill him. “I fucked everything up. I ruined what you and I had and I ruined what you and Steph had. I ruined everything. Even my relationship with fucking Penny! All because I was too petty and blind and angry to see what I was doing.”

I can barely speak. “Why the fuck are you telling me this now?” I growl at him. “I’m barely alive, in the bloody hospital. Did you tell me that to appease your own god damn conscience?”

He shakes his head. “No. Because I don’t feel any better and I don’t think I will. I’m telling you this now because Stephanie is here. That you don’t have to worry about my feelings. That you shouldn’t feel guilty for anything. I’m telling you this so you can fucking fight for her. That’s what she deserves. Someone to fight for her. We both had her at some point and we were both very lucky. But you’re the one who can have her again, *should* have her again. You’re the one she belongs with. It’s always been you.”

I close my eyes, trying to regain my breath. “I broke her heart.”

“Then man the fuck up and put it back together.”

I open one eye at look at him. He’s gotten to his feet, looming over me.

“We both fucked up. But you’re the one with best shot of making it right. Get her back. Win her back.”

“She doesn’t want me back.”

“She’s still in fucking love with you,” James says, exasperated. I want to believe him so badly but I don’t know how anyone could love anyone after this. Love is so fickle, so rare, so fragile. There’s no way she would have held on to it. There’s no way she could ever forgive me after what I’ve done.

“Do you still love her?” he asks quietly.

I don't even think. I just nod. "Yes. More than ever. I love her more than anything." And with each word that comes out of my mouth, my chest caves in a little bit more. Maybe it's a broken bone, but I can't be sure.

"Excuse me," the hawk-eyed nurse, I think her name is Andie, appears at the door. "Visiting hours are over. He needs to rest."

I look to James in a panic. "Where is Steph?"

"I think maybe with Bram," James says. He looks at the nurse. "Anyone else out there? The girl in the grey sweater, dark hair?"

She shakes her head. "No one. Please, sir, come on. You can come back tomorrow."

James looks back at me. "Sorry man. I'll see if we can stay another day. She said she can't afford to close the shop, so..."

So she's going to go home. Hell, it was a miracle she even came at all.

"Anything you want me to tell her?" James asks.

I shake my head gently. "No." Because everything I want her to know, I have to say myself. Only now I won't be able to.

"Hey, again I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to lay this all on you. But I wanted you to know that I fucked up and I'm going to try and be a good friend again. I really fucking miss you, bro. It's not the same anymore."

I don't know what to think or what to say so I only nod. "Tell Steph..." tell her what? "tell her I'm glad she came."

"Will do buddy."

And even though I don't feel comfortable with calling James my buddy anymore, I do feel another pinch of loss when he leaves.

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"Linden," I hear a female voice calling me. "Sweetheart, can you hear me?"

It's not the female voice I was hoping for.

I slowly open my eyes. Sun is pouring in through the hospital room windows. My mother is at my bedside, sitting on the chair. Her hand, a skinny, pale hand with crepe paper skin, rests on my arm.

There is no one else in the room. We are alone.

I can't remember the last time I've been alone with my mother.

"Mum," I say thickly. I try and sit up.

“Shhhh,” she says, pressing her hand into me. “Don’t move.” I can smell alcohol on her breathe, no surprise, but her eyes are clear. She seems with it.

She seems concerned, too. This is all very jarring.

“What are you doing here?” I manage to ask.

“I came to see my boy,” she says softly but she doesn’t sound offended or defensive over such a question. It’s as if she knows it’s a bit strange for her to be here, looking over her son while he’s in the hospital. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I was in a helicopter crash,” I tell her.

She smiles. It’s a thin, hard line but it at least reaches her eyes. She’s dressed very demurely in a white turtleneck and beige pants. She has on no jewelry at all. It also looks like she hasn’t slept for days but that could just be another bender wearing on her face.

“Your father wants to sue the helicopter company,” she tells me.

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“You don’t object?”

I sigh. “I don’t know if it would do any good. We don’t need the money, do we?”

“Of course not,” she says. “But I think it’s more for principle. You make people pay when they’ve messed up.”

“But I don’t really know what happened, whose fault it was.”

“They said it was an electrical short.”

“I’m sure a better pilot could have landed it.”

“Linden,” she says, her voice harder now. “You’re one of the best pilots there is.”

I have to admit, I’m stunned by such an admission. My mouth drops a bit and there is a peculiar warm feeling in my ribs.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she adds. “We all know this. The company is at fault.”

I sigh heavily. “But these things happen. It’s just the risk you take. I knowingly take that risk every time I fly. I know what I’m getting into. It’s a complicated, convoluted machine, made up of rotors and drive shafts and wires and it flies vertically. You know what you’re getting into every time you step on board one of those things. You can have a perfect safety record, but you’re never really safe because nothing is. But that’s life.”

“That’s life,” she repeats. “I take this that you’ll still be flying then?”

“Of course,” I say, with no fear, no hesitation. “I’m not sure if I’ll go back to the same company, but one accident isn’t going to stop me from flying. I know it’s not exactly what you want to hear, but it is what I was born to do.”

She sighs delicately. “I know, son. Your father and I haven’t been the most...enthusiastic...about your career choice. And this is exactly why. No one wants to see their child hurt.”

I’m tempted to interrupt her, to tell her I’m surprised she even knows she has children, but I let her continue. This is rare. This is very rare.

She folds up the sleeves of her sweater and goes on. “But if you feel like it’s in you and this accident, this horrible, horrible thing, hasn’t dissuaded you from your passion...well then your passion is meant for you. And we, nor anyone else, shouldn’t have any say in it.” She pats my hand. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but truly, we just want you to be happy.”

I think that’s as close to “I love you” as I’m going to get from her but it feels just the same.

“So,” she says, slowly getting to her feet. “Are you going to stay here? Or are you going back to San Francisco?”

I flinch, which makes my head hurt. “Why would I go back to San Francisco?”

“I thought that’s where you are most happy.”

I swallow. “I don’t know.” I can’t imagine going back and being happy without having Stephanie.

My mother peers at me for a moment with those strangely clear eyes. Then a tiny smile appears. “You know, your father says he finally met the girl.”

“The girl?”

“Stephanie,” she says, as if she’s been some huge event. “I hate to tell you how to live your life, Linden, though I’m sure you would disagree with that.” She laugh softly to herself. “But if you’re willing to go flying again, despite the crash, despite the risks, and put it all on the line...maybe you’re willing to do other things. Maybe helicopters and hearts aren’t so different.”

“Who are you?” I can’t help but ask. It looks like my mother but it sure isn’t acting like her, not the mother I’ve been around my whole entire life.

“I know, I know,” she says, patting my hand once more and heading for the door. “Sometimes it takes a lot to wake someone up.” She throws me a kind smile and then leaves the room.

I'm left wondering if she was referring to herself.  
Or to me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *LINDEN*

I'm in the hospital for two weeks. Two fucking weeks of boredom, itchy skin, fluorescent lights, crabby nurses, terrible food. Two fucking weeks of pure hell.

But it gives me two fucking weeks to think. To think about James and what he told me. To think about what my mum – who started visiting me every day, sometimes drunk, but always kind – advised me.

Two whole weeks to think about Stephanie. To decide to move back to San Francisco. To get my old job back and get my two best friends back.

But mainly to get Stephanie back. Because there was no point in having a heart if I wasn't going to use it properly. If I was willing to risk life and limb again to go back into the sky, even after everything that happened, surviving the worst case scenario, then there was no reason I couldn't do the same for her, for us.

It doesn't matter if she doesn't feel the same way. It doesn't matter if she no longer loves me, if she will never forgive me. It only matters that I try anyway. I'd risked it all before on her and I failed us. I won't let that happen again.

And then of course, those two fucking weeks have brought me closer to my birthday. My thirty-first birthday.

It's tomorrow. And that means I have one day before the whole pact is up.

I haven't forgotten about it. It's been on my mind this whole time. Sure, it's silly semantics but to me it's still very real. As long as we are both still single, as long as we are both still thirty, I'm going to marry that woman.

Or I'm at least going to try.

So even though I had plans to drive my shit across the country, once again it's all in the back of a moving van, heading for San Francisco. This time though, I've got Bram driving it. He volunteered and I wasn't about to turn him down. I think he's been looking for an excuse to leave Manhattan and I wouldn't be surprised if he ends up settling down in San Francisco.

He wouldn't be staying with me, of course. I managed to move back into my old place – it hadn't even gotten one offer this whole time it's been on the market. But if he does decide to stay in the city, I admit it would be

nice. I've grown a lot closer with him the last few months. He's not really as big of a douchebag as I'd thought. Maybe, just a small one, like a pocketdouche.

When I arrive at SFO, I'm not really sure what my game plan is. Sure, I've had a whole bloody flight to think about it but there were showing a bunch of good films I'd been wanting to see.

Now I'm hailing a cab. It doesn't help that I have to use crutches because my leg is in a cast and I can't really bend over because of my ribs and I can't really use my arm too much. Luckily the cabbie is a nice fellow and he helps me out. I hate feeling so immobile.

When he asks me where I want to go though, I draw a blank. I haven't talked to James or Stephanie since they had to leave New York the next day, so I have no idea where they are and they have no idea I'm here.

I get the cab to take me to Stephanie's place first and tell him to wait a wee bit. This is going to take a while. The ring I got for her from Tiffany's feels like its burning a hole right through the coin pocket in my jeans. I have no fucking clue what to say or do and I don't know how long the cab is going to wait if it turns out she's home.

But she's not. I buzz her flat four or five times but she never answers. Finally I limp back to the cab and tell the driver to take me to James's place. I figure James will probably know where she is, or at least have an idea. I'm not sure if they stayed friends or not since everything went down but they did fly all the way to New York to see me.

It doesn't matter. James isn't home anyway. He must be at the Lion.

So the poor sucker for a cab driver takes me all the way there. At least then I'm able to send him on his way and I make sure he's got a huge tip for all the effort and all the times he's had to help me in and out of the car.

Ghostly fog moves around as I slowly make my way to the door. A hundred memories come with this place. With the muffled sounds and warm light from the bar, it's like living in the past.

I open the door and am greeted by everything that's good, everything I've missed. This place has a smell. It's stale beer and cologne and smoke that clings to the walls from decades ago and greasy French fries and cut lemons. It's actually kind of a gross smell but I love it all the same.

The first person I see is James. He's behind the counter, wiping it, and I feel like I'm in an episode of Cheers because Dan walks past me holding a

drink and says, “Linden!” And then says, “Holy shit dude, you’re fucked up!”

I pat him on the back and keep walking until James sees me. The cloth nearly drops from his hand. He’s speechless. But Penny – Penny! – is sitting at the counter in what was her usual seat, and she follows James’s vacant gaze to where I am.

“Hey!” she cries out happily, getting out of her stool and coming over to hug me. She’s gentle. “What are you doing here?” She looks me up and down, her fingers pausing at a few cuts I have on my cheekbones. “Oh god, you look so terrible. But it’s kind of hot.”

*What are you doing here?* I want to ask but then I guess it’s pretty obvious that whatever real reasons James had for breaking up with her, he’s over them now.

“I’ve moved back,” I tell her, eyeing James. “Thought I would finish my road to recovery here.”

His eyes bug out even more and finally he says something. “Are you serious?”

“Yup,” I tell him. “Bram is moving my shit across the country again as we speak.”

“Why didn’t you go with him?” he asks. “It’s probably a lot more comfortable being in a vehicle than being all banged up on an airplane.”

I exhale loudly. “Well, it’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“I know,” he says with a wry grin.

“Thirty one,” Penny adds excitedly.

“Yes. Well, I came back to follow through on something.” I look around the bar. “Have you guys seen Stephanie?”

“Oh,” Penny says, her voice drops a register. She exchanges a look with James.

“What?”

“Uh,” James says, scratching at his neck. “She’s here but she’s, uh, on a date.”

Fuck. Why the hell did I just assume she was going to be single?

“A date?”

“Yeah.” His eyes light up hopefully. “But the good news is that I think it’s only her second one with him. I mean, this time around. It’s her ex.”

“Who? Surfer dude?”

“Aaron? No. The douche accountant.”



“The vodka swiller who cheated on her?” I ask incredulously. “Captain Assbag No Fun?”

“Yep.”

“Fuck that,” I say. “Why is she with him? Where is she?”

James jerks his head in the direction of behind the bar, near the washrooms. The last time I was in those washrooms, I was fucking Steph against the wall. This time I want to grab Owen and try to flush his head down the toilet. Why the hell is she with a guy who treated her like crap?

Suddenly I don't feel even mildly ashamed of what I'm about to do.

I take off around the bar, James calling after me, “What are you doing Linden?” but I ignore him.

There, in the corner booth, is Stephanie and Owen. He's cutting up a salad with a fork (what guy orders salad at a pub?) and blabbing on about something. He's wearing a suit, now has glasses, and he's barely got any hair left. His ears are started look like Bilbo Baggins's.

Steph is sitting across from him, twirling her (very dirty) martini glass around between her fingers, looking bored. She's also looking so beautiful that I feel like I'm on morphine again. How fucking surreal it is to think about how long I've known her, to have been inside of her, to have her tell me she loves me. At that moment I'm not sure I'll ever recover from it.

She's wearing ankle boots, jeans and a long-sleeved top. She has no skin showing except for her collarbone, one of my favorite places to bite and lick. Her hair is tied back into a ponytail and she barely has any make-up on. It feels good to know that she didn't doll herself up for him, that she's not trying to impress anyone. But the thing is, she doesn't need to. She's even more stunning when she's just being herself.

She is so god damn beautiful I think I could bloody die.

But now Owen is looking over at me. Frowning. He remembers me. He hates me.

He's about to hate me even more.

Steph turns her head and once she sees me, her jaw comes unhinged. She looks so fucking cute that I'm glad for the surprise. She doesn't look angry either, which is a good thing.

She looks to Owen and then back to me. She seems like she's about to panic.

I'll make this easy for her.

I move toward them, trying to look as cool as you can look on crutches, and stop right in front of their table. “I’m sorry to interrupt the lovely evening you’re both having,” I tell them, looking between the two as they stare up at me dumbfounded. “But I have something important I need to ask Stephanie here.” I give Owen a look. “If you wouldn’t mind giving us some privacy.”

Owen dabs his napkin on his mouth and then throws it on the table. He clears his throat. “Whatever you have to say to her, you have to say it in front of me.”

Oh really? No sympathy for the cripple? I didn’t exactly plan for spectators but if I don’t roll with it, I might lose the chance. I look behind me and see James, Penny and Dan at the edge of the bar, beers in their hands and staring openly at us like we’re some performing act. I give them a wink and then turn back around.

“All right,” I say to Owen. “Stay if you must. But if you say one word, I’m going to whack this fucking crutch right in your Hobbit ears, okay?” He gulps, looking indignant but doesn’t say anything. I glance at Stephanie and can see her wheels turning. She has no idea what I’m about to do. But I know with one sentence, I can put her on the right track.

“Stephanie,” I say, squaring my body toward her. “Tomorrow is my birthday. I turn thirty-one.”

And now she knows. Surprise and fear and something I hope is a wee more positive than that all swirl in her big blue eyes. “I know,” she says softly, warily.

“Then you know that once upon a time, we made a promise to each other.” My chest feels tight but I push through it. “And I know that the promise was lost. Ruined. And it was my fault. But I can’t pretend it’s over. That it doesn’t exist. I want to know that there is still time. I want another chance to give you my heart. And of course, other things beside my heart.”

Owen makes a disgruntled sound and I jerk the crutch toward him, shooting him a deadly look. To his credit, he shuts up.

I turn back to her, stoop over as much as I can, and grab her hand. It’s so small and soft. It’s so *mine*.

“I did a terrible thing. The worst thing. I had your love – it was all the love in the world – and I threw it away. Because I was an idiot. Because I was scared. Because I was afraid of doing the wrong thing and being the bad guy. But then I became what I feared and I lost thing I cared about most

of all. I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for giving up on us and for letting go when I promised I wouldn't. But I hope and pray that you can. That you will give me another shot. Because I've seen your soul, baby, and it's real and it's rare. And once upon a time, you were kind enough to give it to me. I want to have you again. I want what's true." I take in a shaky breath. "We are true. We always have been. I hope we always will be."

I grip her hand, feeling her pulse and then, while she's gazing at me with heartfelt eyes, I attempt to drop to one knee.

But of course, I'm on crutches and I can't. I wobble there for a second, nearly tilting over, before Owen actually sticks his arm out to steady me. That was nice of him. Douche.

"Normally I would go on one knee," I tell her, feeling my cheeks go hot. "But I might not ever get up again. So let's just pretend that I am." I reach into my ring pocket. "I can still give you this though."

People in the bar gasp. Someone lets out a giddy squeal (Penny, probably).

But Stephanie isn't shocked. There's a single tear rolling down her cheek and she has one hand to her chest but she doesn't seem surprised. I guess she knows me better than I think. Or maybe she's feeling sorry for me. Not many men would propose on crutches.

I keep my eyes glued to her, trying to convey everything that isn't coming out of my mouth. "I have been your best friend for nine years. I want to be your whole world for ninety more. You are everything I could ever want – a friend, a lover, *family* – wrapped up in one fantastically hot package." I grin at her and she blushes. "I've learned so much with you all this time and I want to learn more. I want to grow with you, evolve with you, laugh with you, and please you, until I'm old and grey, until I can't speak or hear, until the only thing I can do is love. That's the one thing that will never end – my love for you."

The insides of my nose grow hot and through blurred vision I present the ring, holding it out for her. It's platinum, with a big honking diamond framed by tiny black ones – beautiful but edgy, just like her.

She whimpers a little at the sight of it, a little "Oh my god," escapes her lips and she's starting to shake.

I clear my throat, determined to stay strong. "Stephanie Robson, baby blue, my best friend and the woman with my heart. Will you do me the

honor of becoming my wife?” I take a moment to compose myself. “Will you marry me?”

The whole room seems to collectively hold its breath along with me.

It feels like a fucking eternity.

She stares at me, the ring, then me again. Seconds tick by. You can practically hear people across the room swallowing.

I feel like I might just die. My heart is prepared to plummet.

But then she laughs. Loud. A wide, gorgeous grin spreads across her face.

“Yes!” she cries out. “Yes, yes, yes!”

My heart is bursting out of my chest. I am almost too overjoyed to slip the ring on her finger but somehow I manage to get it on. It’s only then, that her sleeve slips up a bit and I see that she’s wearing the bracelet I had gotten her for Christmas. She must have still opened it, still loved it. She still loves me.

I couldn’t be happier. She gently throws her arms around me, laughing, crying, holding me tight. It hurts my chest a little but I don’t care. Beside us, Owen slips out of the booth, grumbling, and takes off. Suddenly corks are flying across the room and people are cheering and gathering around us.

But I only see her. I’ve always only seen her.

I carefully grab her face in my hands. “I love you,” I tell her fervently. “I love you, I love you, I love you. I never stopped.”

“And I’ve barely even started,” she says back. “Thank you for coming back to me.”

I pull her into me and kiss her forehead. “Thank you for saying yes. To the pact. To this. To me. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You know, I can’t wait to play nurse to you again.” She kisses me on the lips, soft, sweet, wet with tears. I kiss her back, lost in it, in her, in joy.

Suddenly James and Penny are standing beside us with four glasses of champagne.

“I know we toasted to this almost five years ago,” James says, beaming at us. “But let’s do it again.”

I straighten up and give him a heartfelt nod as I take the glass from him. Even though our friendship has been tested and is no longer the same, I’m confident we can survive it and possibly come out of it better. Maybe that’s what all friendships need to do – evolve, adapt and change. Just like life.

The four of us raise our glasses in the air.

“To Steph and Linden,” Penny says.

“To friendship,” says Stephanie.

“To love,” says James.

“To us.”

# EPILOGUE

31

STEPHANIE

You know how they say it's bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other before the wedding? Well, I think it's good luck if they fuck each other before the wedding. But, you know, with blindfolds, so it's not actually breaking the rules.

Okay, that was actually all Linden's idea but I'm obviously game for it. That's why I'm standing outside of the downstairs coatroom at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Tiburon, in my wedding dress and with a blindfold in one hand.

I knock on the door and wait, nervously looking around to see if any wayward guests have spotted me. The ceremony is starting pretty soon but this was one of those things we promised to do. We pinky swore on it the other day, and I know we don't break those with each other.

"Who is it?" Linden asks from the other side of the door.

"Disney princess," I answer, adding, "bride."

I hear a chuckle. "All right baby blue. You better have your blindfold on. We can't see each other, remember?"

"Hold on," I tell him. I take note of where I'm standing, how far away the doorknob is and then slip the blindfold on, tying it behind my head. "I would much rather you tie this. Much sexier that way."

My world goes dark. My hand goes on the knob. I slowly turn it and cautiously step inside the coatroom.

It smells of leather and potpourri and sage. That last scent is all Linden. Big, strong hands grip my arm and then pull me further in. Heavy breathing fills the room as the door clicks shut behind me.

"Please tell me you're wearing your blindfold too," I tell him, feeling so vulnerable and out of sorts in the blackness. "Or this is ridiculous."

A hand goes on my shoulder, the other around my waist. It's awkward, like he's unsure, but confident at the same time.

"I can't see shit," he says. "And I turned out the lights just in case. Don't worry, I'm taking your whole *don't see the bride before the wedding* bullshit seriously."

“It’s not bullshit,” I tell him and now his lips are on my neck and his hands skim my breasts, my hips, my thighs.

“I can already tell you look beautiful and this dress is amazing,” he says, voice rough and low in the blackness.

I grin. I had my wedding dress custom-made actually: halter neck, fitted through the hips and then flaring out mermaid style. It’s white but the ends are hot pink, ombre, like it’s been dipped in color. I’ll be the first to admit I was totally inspired by Gwen Stefani’s wedding gown way back when.

“You’ll see it soon enough,” I promise him. “Now why are we meeting like this again?”

“Because I can’t go twenty-fours without being inside you,” he murmurs, his mouth finding my neck and sucking on my sweet spot.

I moan slightly, succumbing to his lips and tongue. “Right. I thought maybe you were nervous and needed to be reminded of what you were getting married to.”

“That too,” he says bringing his mouth up to mine. “That too.” He kisses me, so open, warm, and strong. His kisses claim me, call me as his, and though I feel I’ve always been his, in heart and soul, in the next hour I’ll be his legally, as his married wife.

Wife. Husband. After the pact, after so many years, it’s finally happening. I still can’t believe it and some ways I don’t want to believe it. I like waking up each morning in his arms and thinking I’m in a dream. Now I’m going to be married in one. I’m one lucky bitch.

As usual, his kisses leave me yearning for more. He holds me by the waist and turns me around, so good at physically moving my body with such ease, such raw masculinity. My hands fly forward, grabbing onto the pole where all the coats are hanging. It reminds me of the times we had sex in the storeroom of my old shop. Now that the Fog & Cloth is completely online, I no longer have the physical store but the good news is that business is up and my work hours are down. There’s still a learning curve in the dot-com world, but I’m finding my niche in the industry and using it to my advantage.

My thing now? Everything skulls. Rubber boots with skulls, scarves with skulls, skirts with skulls, hats with skulls, lamps with skulls, frying pans in the shape of skulls. Sometimes I think I should change my store name to the Fog & Skull but it hasn’t come to that yet. We’ll see.

Linden groans in hunger and his reaches down, his hands traveling up my legs, hiking my dress as he goes. They pause at the garter belt around one thigh.

“That’s the something blue,” I explain to him as he snaps the lacy fabric against my thigh. “Your mother gave it to me, which is kind of weird. But she said it’s in your tartan from Deeside or whatever. Red and blue.”

“Aye,” he says, sounding extra Scottish. “That fucking turns me on.”

“That your mother gave it to me?”

“Don’t mention my mum for the next while,” he warns. “I mean the tartan. The fact that you’re wearing it means a lot to me. I know our name is spelled without the *A* nowadays, but we’re still the MacGregors.”

My heart melts a bit. “You mean a lot to me. And I’ll take any name you choose.”

I can feel his hot breath on my neck. “Are we seriously going to get emotional here in the closet or are we going to fuck?”

“Man, you’re pushy,” I tell him.

I hear his pants unzip and, after a moment, he presses his warm cock against my thighs. “Oh, I’ll show you pushy.”

He puts a hand between my shoulder blades and pushes me forward. I’m grateful that my hair is groomed back and shellacked with hairspray, completely out of the way, but even so I arch my neck so it won’t get ruined. And if it does, so fucking what.

He can ruin me all he wants.

Linden teases me with his finger, soft and gentle and needy, before he eases himself into me. In the dark, with my sight gone, my other senses are heightened. I can feel every inch of him as he pushes in, slowly, until his whole length is deep inside me. Then I feel every inch as he teasingly pulls out. His breath is hot in the dark, and loud, and the occasionally groan is borderline animalistic. I feel like I’m being fucked by a stranger but a stranger that I love.

Because I love Linden more than I can say.

When we’re all done, my cries muffled into our guests’ coats, he slides out of me. There’s a tiny part of me that hopes his seed is still in me – after all, he fucked himself so hard and deep, I felt he’d never come out. Not that I want children right away but I do want them someday. We both do.

“I guess you can’t tell me if I look okay,” I say, catching my breath as the afterglow warms through me. I still pat half-heartedly around my updo,



making sure no hairs are wildly out of place.

“You look beautiful,” he says, kissing my cheeks delicately. “I don’t need light to see that.” He grabs my hand. “Well, baby blue. Are you ready to become husband and wife?”

“Yes, cowboy, I am,” I tell him. “And if I knew where to kiss you, I would.”

“You can always find me,” he says and with gentle fingers on my jaw, he leads my mouth toward his where he gently places his lips on mine. “Even in the dark.”

I return his kiss slowly, not wanting it to end. But time is running out on this stage of our relationship and if I know the crowd at all, they are getting restless. I sigh. “So…”

“I guess I should go first,” he says, sounding resigned.

“Just another hour,” I tell him, “then we’ll be together.” The hardest part of this whole wedding has not been the dress or the venue or the seating chart, but not being able to see Linden for a day or two. Considering he’s not only my betrothed but my best friend, it’s hard not to be able to have him with me every single step of the way. That’s why I knew meeting him in the closet, blindfolded, was more out of reassurance than anything else. Besides, we do plenty of kinky shit at home.

I can hear Linden smile in the dark. He kisses my forehead, squeezes my hand and leaves. I feel the air withdraw from the small room and the door shut behind him. I wait a few minutes, enough time for him to disappear, before I take off my blindfold and step outside.

Someone, I think one of my older cousins on my dad’s side, sees me from the end of the hallway. She looks puzzled at where I’ve come out of. I shrug. “This isn’t the bathroom,” I say to her, gesturing to the cloakroom in fake confusion. She looks vaguely horrified and moves on.

I sigh and then go to the actual bathroom on that floor, making sure that I look as perfect as my hair and makeup artist intended. The reflection staring back at me is a bit flushed but she is glowing. She is happy.

Before Linden proposed to me, I felt like everything in my life was just hanging in the balance. Leaving him in New York and going back to my normal, empty life was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do, but for the sake of paying bills, and protecting my heart, I didn’t really have a choice. Of course, I had left Linden a few texts checking up on him but knowing he was in the hospital, I wasn’t surprised that he didn’t respond.

Bram responded though. He filled me in on Linden's progress but he never once hinted that Linden was moving back here or that he was even helping him. I was totally in the dark until I saw Linden enter The Burgundy Lion, all beat up and bruised and on crutches.

Ironically, I was out with Owen. It was our second date, something I didn't even want but I felt so bad about bailing on the first one. I guess the second one didn't go too well either. Not many dates end with an accepted marriage proposal – to someone else. Let's just chalk it up to Owen's karma.

But the minute I saw my battered, broken Linden come toward me and plead his heart out, I knew that he was finally fighting. He was fighting for me. And I believed and trusted in his love. It was real, raw and true. I'm sure some might have considered it a risk after what had happened between us, but I knew the reward would be too sweet not to risk it.

The reward is sweet. I'm going to marry him. I'm going to marry my best friend, my lover, and so much more. I'm going to marry my Linden and there's nothing I've ever wanted more. So far, this year with him has been better than my dreams, and now that we're taking the next step, I know my dreams will keep on expanding. It's not always easy – my job has growing pains and when the tourist sector dips, Linden's not flying so much out here. Sometimes families are a pain in the ass, sometimes friends are. Sometimes I want to smack Linden in the face.

But through it all I'm learning to appreciate all the grey between the black and white. And just like the Bay Area fog, grey can be absolutely beautiful.

The ceremony ends up being short and sweet, just the way we wanted it; cut the sentimental crap, let's go straight to the bar. My father gives me away, Nicola and Kayla are my bridesmaids and James and Bram are Linden's best men. Our officiant is a man that Linden used to work with and he cracks jokes like you wouldn't believe. Some of them are incredibly lame but at least they make people laugh and let us relax.

Even my ex, Aaron, is here. There were never any hard feelings between us – not like with Owen – and by the end of the evening, when everyone is drunk and breaking glasses and dancing to bad eighties music, I spy Aaron hitting on Nicola, who is once again single. I'm not sure what will come of their connection but I know he's a good guy and she deserves someone like that...even if his idea of fun is going paintballing.

That said, I know Linden and I aren't much better on the maturity level. As we slow dance the night away, swaying past James and Penny, his parents, my mom and dad, I know that even though we're over thirty now, we're still not as adult as we'd hoped to be. I don't know if wearing a ring and signing a certificate will change that. But that's okay. Because as the days go on, I realize life isn't a linear journey. Sometimes it's one step backwards, two step forwards and then a jump out to the side. It's kind of like the "Time Warp," when you think about it.

Life follows many directions and hopefully, eventually, your mind and body and life and love, all catch up with each other.

I know that I'll be fine going any direction life takes me – but especially if Linden is by my side.

As the stars come out over the bay, I hold my husband tighter and smile. With Linden by my side, my soul is at peace and the rest of my life...well the rest of my life is just beginning.

## Acknowledgements

There was never supposed to be a “Pact.” Meaning, in my super-packed writing schedule, this book was never on my radar. I had other books to write, books that had been in the line-up for quite some time. But on November 19<sup>th</sup>, my husband and I were waiting for our plane for our annual vacation to Kauai. I was just flipping through a Glamor magazine – one of the few times I buy magazines is when I’m flying somewhere – and saw an article that made me think. Now, I couldn’t tell you what it was that made me stop and read it, after all it was just the usual “Dating dos and don’ts” and “When to have the talk” and all that kind of stuff geared to people on the dating scene.

It did make me realize how far removed from that shit I am. I’m married now and I sometimes forget that there are people out there going on dates, trying to find the right girl or guy, getting to know people every weekend. I loved being single when I was single, so it made me reflect on what a fun, exciting time in your life it is. Then I started to think about being single in your thirties and why there aren’t really any books that deal with “that” time of your life. It’s always “new adult” now, which is great, but what about “adult?” Don’t adults deal with dating woes too?

Granted, being in your thirties means shit because I don’t feel old and I certainly don’t act old and I’m sure you can gather that from the characters I write. But it gave me an idea anyway about writing about thirty-somethings in an urban setting, dating and dealing with what life throws your way. Then I started thinking about how many friends “jokingly” make a marriage pact when they are younger, how thirty seems to be the magic age for that, and suddenly – a plot was born.

I put the magazine in my carry-on and started writing when I got on the plane to Lihue. My husband and I wrote every single day that we were on vacation in Hawaii (he’s writing something else, don’t worry). We had three weeks so we had plenty of time to surf and have fun in the sun, but still I used up the “free” time that I had to get this book out there. Once I started writing Linden and Stephanie, it all came so easily, I just couldn’t stop. It was a hell of a lot of fun.

I knew it would be a departure for me because people usually expect grittiness in my books. I knew that it would be a hard sell because people

want to either have their mind fucked and twisted or their heart ripped up, crying buckets for days because of the emotional upheaval. I knew this book wouldn't have that – it was going to be sexy and fun, a quick but (hopefully) enjoyable little read. I wanted people to close the book (or shut off their Kindle) and smile and enjoy the last five hours they spent reading it.

I wanted to leave people happy.

So, I hope you're happy with *The Pact*! If you're smiling right now, then it means I've done my job.

As usual, there is some big thanks that have to go out, especially since this book was put together on SUCH a short notice. Scott, for encouraging me to write while on vacation (in some ways, those writing sessions on the lanai with ahi poke and Kona longboards are some of the best memories for me). Laura, Shawna, Amanda, Kelly, Stephanie, I couldn't have done it without you. Hang Le, I couldn't have had this much interest without your stunning, amazing cover, so thank you! Danielle Sanchez for her insistence on promoting this thing :D Thank you to Mollie Caselli, Marc Paschke, Mike Patton (ha!), Bill Gould, Tami McColgan, Helen Gordon for all your San Francisco love. It still remains one of my most favorite cities in the world and I'm a lucky bitch that I get to travel there so often. And to Nadine Colling, who is nothing at all like Nadine in this book.

Please keep reading for an excerpt from my upcoming romantic suspense thriller, *Dirty Deeds*, coming February 2015.

# Dirty Deeds

## An Excerpt

The call came at 6:30 a.m. from a voice I recognized but couldn't place. The fact that it sounded familiar was surprising, though. The turnover rate for these guys was exceedingly high. They were shuffled around to different *sicarios* like a game of musical chairs. Sometimes I wondered if the ones giving me the orders – the narcos just underneath the bosses – ever lasted more than a few weeks. Did they go on to have long careers doing the dirty work of the *patrons*? Or were they so good at getting the job done, that they were held on to for a long time, even promoted, just like any assistant manager at McDonalds?

It didn't really matter. I took these calls, I carried out the orders, and I got paid. I was at the bottom of their food chain but as long as I wasn't tied to just one cartel, then I didn't have to worry about long-term security. You didn't want long-term security when working for the narcos. You wanted to stay as distant – freelance – as possible. You wanted a way out, in case you ever had a change of heart.

That was unlikely for me. But I was still a bit of a commitment-phobe. Freedom meant everything, and in this game, freedom meant safety.

The girl next to me in bed moaned at the early intrusion, pulling the pillow over her head. She looked ridiculous considering she was completely naked on top of the sheets. Was it Sarah? Kara? I couldn't recall. She was so drunk last night I was amazed she even made it to my hotel room. Then again, that's why I was in Cancun. I could pretend to be like everyone else, just another dumb tourist on the beach.

I took the phone into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Yes," I answered, keeping my voice low.

"I have a job for you," the man on the other line said. His English was pretty much perfect but relaxed, almost jovial. Sometimes they gave me orders in Spanish, sometimes in English. I felt like this man was trying to extend a courtesy.

"I assume I've worked for you before," I said.

"For me?" the man asked. "No. For my boss? Yes. Many times. But this has nothing to do with him. Let's just say this is coming from a whole new

place.”

None of that concerned me. “Tell me about payment.”

He chuckled. “Don’t you want to hear the job?”

“It doesn’t matter. The price does.”

“One hundred thousand dollars, US, all cash. Fifty now, fifty upon completion.”

That made me pause. My heart kicked up. “That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s an important job,” the man said simply.

“And what is the job?”

“It’s a woman,” he said. “In Puerto Vallarta. She should be very easy to find for someone like you.”

“I need a name and I need her photo,” I told him. Though the price was quite higher than normal, the man was ignoring the basics. It made me wonder if he had ever done this before. It made me wonder a lot of things.

“I have the first, not the second. As I said, she should be easy to find. You might even be able to Facebook her.”

I waited for him to go on.

He cleared his throat. “Her name is Alana Bernal. Twenty-six. Flight Attendant for Aeromexico. I want a bullet in her head and I want it front page news.”

It was a common name, which is probably why it sounded familiar. I had wondered what she had done, if anything. Usually when I was sent to kill women, it was because they had been involved with a narco and had overstayed their welcome. They knew too much. They had loose lips in more ways than one.

I was never really given time to think about it. You weren’t with these types of things. There were a few minor alarm bells going off in my head – the high price for someone minor, the greenness in the man’s voice – but the price won out in the end. That amount of money could get me away from this business for a long time again. I saw a lengthy hiatus on my horizon, one that didn’t include fucking drunk chicks on spring break just because I was horny, a hiatus that didn’t include bouncing my way from hotel room to hotel room across Mexico, waiting for the next call.

I told the man I agreed to his terms and worked out the payment plan. I wouldn’t get the other half until she made the news. Considering how rare shootings were in Puerto Vallarta, I had no doubt it would happen. And I would be long gone.

I hung up the phone, feeling almost elated. The promise of a new life buried that worm of uneasiness. One more job and then I'd be freer than ever.

I came out of the bathroom to see the chick sitting up in bed and looking extremely nauseous. Once she saw me though, her eyes managed to light up.

"Wow," she said. "You're fucking hot."

I tried to smile, hoping she didn't find me enticing enough to stay. "Thank you."

"Did we have sex last night?"

I stood beside the bed and folded my arms across my chest. Her mouth opened a bit at my muscles. I still had the same physique I had back in the military and it still got the same reactions from the women. They never knew the real me – knew Derek Conway – but at least, with the way I looked, they thought they did. Just another built, tough American boy, a modern G.I. Joe.

They had no idea what I did.

They had no idea who I was.

"No," I told her, "we didn't have sex. You stripped and then you passed out."

She looked surprised. "We still didn't..."

I gave her a dry look. "Sex is only fun when you're awake, babe." I stretched my arms above my head and she stared openly at my stomach, from my boxer waistband to my chest. Okay, now it was time for her to go.

I told her I had stuff to do in the morning and needed her to move along. I could tell she wanted to at least take a shower, but I wasn't about to budge.

I had a plane to catch.



Alana Bernal was extremely easy to find.

At least, for me. She had a Facebook page under Alana B. Her privacy settings were high but I was still able to see her profile picture, one of her in her Aeromexico uniform. She had a sweet yet beautiful face. Her eyes were light hazel, almost amber, both stunning and familiar at the same time. They glowed against her golden skin, as did her pearly white teeth. She looked



like a lot of fun and I could imagine all the unwanted attention she'd get from unruly passengers in the air. She looked like she could handle them with a lot of sass.

Once again I found myself wondering what she had done.

And once again I realized I couldn't care.

That wasn't my business.

Killing her was my business.

I drove to the airport and for the next two days, began to stalk the employee parking lot, using a different rental car each day. Most of the flight crew I saw looked a bit like her but lacked that certain vitality that she had. So I waited in mounting frustration, just wanting this job to be over with.

On day three, just as I was driving past for the forty-second time that morning, I spotted her getting out of a silver Honda and wrestling with her overnight bag. I quickly pulled the car around again and parked at the side of the road, plumes of dust rising up around me. There was nothing but a chain-link fence between us as she began the long walk toward the waiting airport shuttle. Her modest high heels echoed across the lot and she tugged at the hem of her skirt with every other step. Not only was she beautiful, but there was something adorably awkward about her.

What had she done?

No, I couldn't care.

I looked down at the bag in the passenger seat and took out the silencer, quickly screwing it on the gun I was holding between my legs.

She only had a few seconds of life left before I put the bullet in her heart.