



*Faking with the Bad Boy*

**BILLIONAIRE**

**GIGI REINE**

# **Faking with the Bad Boy Billionaire**

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Friends to Lovers Secret Baby Romance

GiGi Reine

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# Chapter One

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## Josephine

Walking down the catwalk in yet another outfit made for her body type, Josephine Price was just another blonde-haired, hazel-eyed model living in Miami, Florida. She was enjoying the modeling show. It was always so fast and so fulfilling. She has always loved publicity, even as a child. She used to model as a child, but now she has blossomed into a beautiful woman. She got into it early. Her parents pushed her. It was good for her, though, and there was always something to gain.

After the show, she was always flocked to. Many other advertisements sent their recruiters to hire new faces. Josephine's was one in a million. She may have blonde hair, but she was nothing like a ditzy model like those before her. Some models had left them with a bad reputation. Their witless nature is not helping her in the slightest. She was supporting herself, though. She didn't have a manager. She managed her own career after turning twenty-one. She wanted to prove to all those that she could hear she could defy all the odds and come out on top. She used to tell her childhood friend, Steven Calhoun, that she would be a better model than Paris Hilton. In her mind, she was. She

loved most of the attention. However, there were drawbacks. There was always someone hitting on her and asking her out. She was tired of having to reject them. All her friends constantly asked her about her love life or the lack thereof.

It was true. Josephine always went home after work. She wasn't really a partygoer. Josephine wanted to keep her wits about her. She played it safe. Josephine went home, prepared dinner, and always found some movie or a TV show to watch. She even dabbled in a bit of video gaming. Josephine enjoyed the little things. This day was another one of those days where she just wanted to forget she was alive.

After finishing the set for the day, she had her friends come up and greet her as they dressed back into their everyday clothes. They may have been able to keep the clothes they modeled, but they couldn't leave the studio in them. They had been seen in them, and their modeling agency never wanted them to get mauled outside with the products on—part of their protection policy. While a fan had never attacked Josephine, she had been stalked numerous times in the past. There had been several things left on top of her car before. The police had to be involved, and the guy was found and served papers showing she had placed a restraining order on him. The guy had gotten it through his head, she hoped, at least.

While she was with her friends, two unlucky men had been bold enough to ask her out. She had rejected both. This specific night, she was done with their prying and constant asking. "I have a fiancé. I'm sorry. I can't date anyone. He's all I ever need." Josephine replied to the guy who asked her out tonight. Hank Thomas.

"You have a fiancé? Where is he, and why have we never met him?" Hank asked her. He was seriously getting on her nerves. All she wanted to do was

go home and get off her feet.

"He is busy as always, but you all have not met him because I do not trust you bunch of delinquents to keep quiet about some of the stories we share."

Everyone laughed at her joking response.

"Well, tell us about him." At that moment, the server popped back up, and Josephine took that moment to pretend her phone had been going off. She held up her finger, stood, and walked out of the VIP area as quickly as possible. Josephine went into the large, overly dramatic, and gaudy bathroom with a smile on her face. The second she entered the stall, her arm went up, and she leaned against the stall door. The small groan that escaped her was not unnoticed.

"You okay in there?" A tiny voice asked over the sounds of the music leaking in through the door as it opened and closed.

"Yeah, just having one of those nights where I would rather be home than out after a long week." She responded before standing up tall and adjusting her outfit before walking back out.

"Oh, I have had those nights too." A tiny brunette was leaning against the sink and watched her come out. As soon as they made eye contact, Josephine could tell she was trying to place where she recognized her from.

"Are you hiding from something in here?" Josephine moved to the mirror and pulled a lipstick out of her small clutch before applying it to her lips.

"Just needed a break. Sometimes, the only place people leave you alone is the bathroom." Josephine smiled at the girl's answer, fully understanding the feeling.

"I completely understand." Josephine played with her hair briefly, then nodded at her reflection. "I hope your secret break is helpful. Have a great

night." Josephine opened the door, letting the music drown her own thoughts back out before making it back to the table.

"There you are! We were worried about where you ran off, too!" Lana and Hank were leaning really close to her to make sure she heard.

"Had to answer a work call, and I also had to get into the bathroom while the line was nonexistent." Josephine tried to play off her discomfort around the gossip in front of her. It was clear to her that everything she said, including the lie she told about her marital status, would be known to everyone in town by tomorrow.

"Was it about the charity dinner next week?" Josephine looked away, trying to pretend she was interested in the crowd.

"No, but what event?" Lana pulled her phone out and opened the e-mail from their boss.

"I am sure you have one too." Josephine could have kicked herself for not going through her e-mail that morning. She whipped her phone out and frantically made her way to the unopened message that went out to everyone.

"Found it! I don't know how I missed this!" She is going through the e-mail, noticing she has to reply sooner than later about her attendance.

"You should bring this fiancé of yours! We would all really like to meet him." Hank was staring her down, waiting for her to crack and say that there wasn't actually a man in the picture for her, but Josephine refused to break under the scrutinizing gaze of this man.

"I will ask him if he is available when he gets home from work tonight." She slides her phone into her clutch and stands again. "Speaking of, I would really like to get home and prepare for that." She flashed her camera-ready smile at the pair and excused herself from the table. She gave loose and awkward

hugs goodbye before shuffling across the dance floor and to the bar's main entrance.

Standing there waiting for her driver to arrive, she stared at the app. She watched as the driver slowly crept closer and closer. All she wanted to do was get out of there and back home to the safety of her little bubble. Finally, she realized she said she might bring someone and panicked. She started going through names in her phone of who she could ask. She even debated finding a dating service that would basically hook her up with someone for just the night, but then she nixed that idea because she felt like paying for someone's company might get leaked to the press. The last thing she needed was for a scandal to blow up in her face while she was at the height of her career.

Her driver showed up with a giant smile plastered on his face.

"Long night, Miss?" He seemed friendly, but Josephine was in no mood for discussion.

"Ready for it to be over." She caught his eyes in the rearview mirror and gave a small and tired smile.

"I understand that. I was almost home but decided one more pickup wouldn't hurt anybody." Josephine was extremely grateful that this man had decided to pick her up. She was unsure how long she would have had to wait for the next available driver.

"I am very grateful for your decision to stay on a bit longer." She was genuinely happy with how lucky she had been in that moment.

The rest of the ride was a quiet one. The music played low in the background while Josephine kept scrolling through names, the driver was tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel softly along with the music, and the city noise was drowned out by the fact the windows were rolled up. When they pulled

up to Josephine's apartment, she slid him an extra twenty in cash for the tip, on top of what she gave on the app, and slid out of the car.

"Thank you so much! I hope you get to go home and rest up now!" Josephine gave a small wave and stepped back to close the door.

"You're welcome, Miss! You go rest up, too!" With that, she closed the door and watched him drive off.

Josephine entered the building and stopped at the mailboxes, pulling out everything she had avoided for the last few days. Bills, more bills, advertisements, and an invitation for Steven's club event are coming up. She was about to throw them all out and text Steven that she had received it when the idea popped into her mind. She could get Steven to play along!

Maybe.

It was worth a shot.

She pulled herself together with a steely resolve while in the elevator. She exited the elevator on her floor and made her way, as quietly as possible, past Old Lady Jensen's door before taking a breath inside her apartment. She took off her heels, tossed the clutch down on the little entry table, and entered the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. She tapped her fingernails on the counter and stared at her phone. She knew she would ask a lot from her friend, but she was unsure if he would actually go along with her fake fiancé thing.

She tipped the glass back and picked up her phone. She was going to do it. She was going to ask Steven and let that be that. She typed out a few texts before erasing them, feeling like they sounded horribly cheesy and not like herself. She set the phone down and walked away from it, shaking her head, thinking that would have been ridiculous.

Her phone dinged with a text notification. She walked back and picked up the

phone, cringing instantly.

*Let us know what your man says!*

Josephine rolled her shoulders back and took a deep breath before scrolling through her contacts, finding Steven's name, and pressing the call button.

The first ring and Josephine already regretted the decision.

On the second ring, Josephine tapped her hand on her leg, trying to remind herself why she was doing this.

The third ring, and Josephine was terrified that he would actually pick up and she would have to go through with the entire façade.

Finally, she was waiting for the voicemail when she heard a low voice on the other end, "Josie? How are you?"

Josephine checked to make sure she was still breathing.

"Jo?"

"Yes, hi. I'm here." She forced the words out quickly.

"What's going on? You sound a little off." His voice was so smooth and steady. Josephine could picture him sitting in the high back chair at his large wooden desk in his office.

"So, here's the deal: I have a favor to ask of you." She spit out the initial line as fast as she could.

"Okay, what is this favor?" He sounded intrigued, but Josephine wasn't totally convinced.

Josephine cleared her throat and spit it out, "I need you to be my fiancé at this charity thing for my work."

## Chapter Two

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### Steven

Everything that could go wrong at Steven's club on a regular night went awry. He had been running back and forth, trying to clean up everyone else's messes, from the DJ to the doorman and everyone in between. When he finally got into his office, he slammed the door closed; thankful everything had slowed to a crawl in time for closing. He needed some time outside of the club. He poured himself some scotch and sat at his desk, relaxing his muscles. He loosened up his tie and stared at the security screens lining the wall. This wasn't exactly how he thought the night would end, but end it did. He is going through the promotional party plans Evie had left for him when his phone rings. He fished it out of his pocket and sat it on the desk. Josephine? He looked at the time and then answered the phone. "Josie, how are you?" He waited for what felt like forever before asking again, "Jo?" "Yes, hi. I'm here." She sounded a little anxious, which was unlike her. "What's going on? You sound a little off." Steven leaned forward against the desk on his elbows. He put one hand over the other and waited.



He heard her take in a deep breath before rambling out, "So, here's the deal: I have a favor to ask of you." Josephine never asked for favors. She was always the one to dole them out to others without asking for anything in return. Steven's interest was immediately piqued by where this conversation was going.

"Okay, what is this favor?" Steven felt the smirk pulling at his lips because he could hear her stumble with whatever she was trying to ask him.

"I need you to be my fiancé at this charity thing for my work." Her words caught Steven off guard. He momentarily forgot how to swallow the scotch he was drinking, and it started burning his tongue. He swallowed and coughed a bit at the request Josephine had asked of him.

"I'm sorry," Steven wiped quickly at his mouth, "your what?" He could hear her pouring something in the background, wine if he knew her well enough still, and waited for her to tell him she was kidding.

"Fiancé." She just said one word. There was no punchline, takebacks, or laughter on her end.

"Josie, what is this favor really?" Steven leaned back in his chair and smiled, hoping he would still get a punchline or even have someone jump out saying, "*Gotcha!*" but it never came.

"Nothing else. Just that. Fiancé for a day." She was quiet for a moment.

"Ish."

"What does the 'ish' mean, and why me? Why for this event? Can't you just tell everyone that you are single?" Steven does not get a single response for a solid minute.

"You know what, forget it," he heard her slam something down on the other end, "this was dumb. I will see if I can find a reputable dating service for this."

He let out a low groan, wondering how much this would come back to bite him. "Josephine Price, if you don't answer my questions, I will not be leaving you alone until you do, and we both know I am capable of driving you up a wall."

"I just need someone for work things. I am tired of being set up on these terrible dates with terrible men that I don't pick for myself, guys I would NEVER pick for myself. Today, I may have told everyone I was seeing someone, and it got to that point."

"So, how many shots were had before you got to that point," Steven asked, knowing she was about to dodge that question.

"That is not the issue here," he smirked at how right he was, "I need someone because I was unaware of the charity event coming up, and I said I would see if my guy could come along. Now I have to find a guy."

"And the 'ish'?" Steven poked at the timeline of more than just one date, the favor being asked of him.

"The 'ish' is just for public appearances. It would benefit us both to not be seen as a boring spinster and a reluctant playboy." She said the last part quietly, hoping he would have missed it.

"I am anything but reluctant. I am pleased with the status I have." He took another small swig of the scotch and heard her giggle on the other end of the call.

"Yeah, okay." Silence on both sides as they thought through what was all discussed.

"How long would you need me to keep up the charade for, Josie?" He looked at his calendar, noting days that this might benefit them both.

"I don't know. Can we start with this and see how it goes before we fully indulge in how this can work at multiple events?" She was trying to back

peddle on the deal because she sensed he was coming up with a plan of his own. Steven knew he was being assessed by his childhood friend.

"Let me think about it and get back to you." Steven knew it would drive her crazy, but he knew she would wait for his answer regardless.

"It is next week, so the sooner the better." She sounded a little anxious to Steven, and that made him smile.

"Get some sleep, Josie. I will call you back." Steven hung up the phone, knowing he would either get the silent acceptance from her tonight or a barrage of texts for hanging up on her.

He knew that his friend would never have asked him unless she was absolutely desperate for help. She trusted him with this colossal favor that he was sure he would never ask her to repay. The problem with this entire thing was that they are both public figures, in different ways, of course, and having his image entirely changed by a favor might have become an issue for him.

Steven sat there with his drink, sipping and staring off, thinking about it for close to an hour before finishing up with what work he did have and heading home. The entire ride, his mind kept going back to Josie and the sound of her voice. He had always done whatever she needed him to. She was the only one there for him growing up. They had been through it all together. The chaotic family problems, the bad breakups in high school, and everything else. While their friendship was no longer as close as it once was, they still knew they could depend on each other in an emergency.

Steven had just laid down in bed when his phone went off with a text alert.

*"Please don't forget," I asked. It was stupid.*

*Not stupid. I get why you asked me. I just got home. I'll be sure to call you tomorrow.*

*Night.*

*Goodnight, Josie.*

Steven chuckled to himself before flipping the phone face down on the nightstand. He knew right away from the call she was at least drinking, but now he was sure she was drunk when she called. He needed to talk to her when she sobered up to be sure this was what she still wanted help with.

He couldn't sleep that night, well, that morning. He tossed and turned, picturing her in his mind and what she was doing on the other end of the phone. He imagined her movements, how she was drinking, what Josephine was wearing when she got home from wherever she had been. He still pictured that shine in her eyes. It was always there, pushing the darkness out of his own. He couldn't help himself. Everything about her had him wishing they were as close as they used to be. Maybe helping her out with the fake fiancé bit would get them there again. He eventually fell asleep with thoughts of Josie still racing through his mind.

When he woke up close to ten thirty in the morning, Steven had a long list of texts to respond to. His head of security was wondering about what should be done with the footage of the fight in the VIP room. His vendors were calling with questions about orders he sent in late the night before. His fun-time friend, as his head of security liked to refer to her, seemed to be upset with him for not responding right on time. Steven also had one message that had him wondering what to write back. It was a simple:

*Good morning*

These two words signal Josie's waiting response that he knew would change everything around him for at least a while if he accepted. Steven bit the bullet, clicked on her name above the chat, and then hit call. He listened to the first ring, and then she picked up before the second one.

"Good morning to you, too." He tried to sound casual, but it came out a bit

flirty.

"Hey, listen, I know it was a lot to ask, so please don't worry about it."

"I want to ask you a few questions first." He listened to her take a sharp breath, "First, how are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit in the head with a truck." Josephine let out a really low groan of pain on the other side of the call.

"So, you were definitely drunk." He hears her start to protest, but she cuts her off, "Second, why do you really need someone to do this?" He is leaning over his phone on the counter, waiting for her to respond. He hits the video chat button when she does not answer right away. After two rings, she replied.

"Why are we doing a video call?" Steven looks around, trying to find where the voice is coming from, but the screen is black.

"I want to see if I can still tell if you are lying to me." Steven stood up shirtless, and he could feel her eyeing him up even though he could barely make her figure out while she was lying in the dark. "Now, why do you need someone to do this?"

"Not someone, Steven, you." They both remained quiet for a moment to let the weight of it sink in.

"Okay, why me specifically?" He felt his muscles tense up.

"No one knows me better than you."

"We haven't spent that much time together in a few years, Josie." There was some movement on her end, and she opened the blinds and one-eyed her surroundings, trying to adjust to the light of day.

"You are still the one I call when I need someone. You know my history, so we have stories to share. Plus, if people think I am off the market and I can sell it with someone I am not awkward about touching, then it will not be questioned, and everyone will have to stop trying to hook me up with

someone or hook up with me in general." She huffed and lay back down in an oversized t-shirt I recognized from high school.

"Is that my jersey?" Steven was leaning in, trying to be sure. "You still have that thing?"

"You gave it to me. So, it is not your jersey, Steven. It's mine." She spoke with such straightforward answers that Steven knew her reasons for asking for help were pure. Josephine had never used him for his family's money, she had never used him for his popularity since she was popular in her own right, and she had never lied to him like everyone else in his life who had tried to get close.

"This charity event is next week?" Steven rubbed the back of his neck, knowing he showed off his muscles to her in the chat. He watched her nod as her hazel eyes traveled the small fraction they could on the screen.

"Yeah, and I get if that's not enough notice for you." She started biting her lip, and Steven had to hold back an automatic groan.

"Send me the details and whatever else I need to know about this event." Steven felt like part of him had to do this for his friend, and the other part was excited to be the one she asked.

"Anything else I should send you?"

"Nope, I remember your ring size from helping you fill out the stupid class ring form three times when you messed it up repeatedly." Her jaw dropped open, and Steven smiled, "Talk to you later." He ended the call before she could respond. He knew which ring he was going to give her for this.

# Chapter Three

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## Josephine

He agreed to help her.

Josephine could not believe what had happened in that phone call with Steven. He was once again saving her from humiliation. All she could think about was when he stepped up for her at junior prom when her ex-boyfriend ditched her the night before for the prom queen runner-up. Josephine still pictured him in the tux from that night. He looked gorgeous, and he was all hers for the evening. That was the first glimpse she had of him as someone who could possibly be more. The day after that, he started seeing Macy Provost. They apparently had talked at the after-party when Josephine was celebrating my win with others in the back of Macy's yard when they realized they were meant to be.

So, Josephine did what she thought was best; she let it go.

Josephine rolled off the bed, went to her office in the back corner of the apartment, and scoured for the e-mail from her boss, Stella. When she finally found it, she read through the events for the day before and the company thing the day after. Josephine decided to write up an itinerary for Steven and

to send him that would be easier than just a scattered "be here this day and we can go over it then" message.

*I wrote this up, and I know it could be more detailed, but it was detailed enough for you to bring whatever you need to be prepared.*

*Itinerary for the week:*

*Monday: Please be sure to handle everything you need to be ahead of schedule when you leave.*

*Tuesday: I have a shoot this day at the Biltmore Hotel.*

*Wednesday: You get in later that day. I am working from home until 5. Catch up, order in, and I'll tell you how grateful I am a thousand times over.*

*Thursday: The Westmount Agency dinner.*

*Friday: The Rushmore Dinner for the Childhood Cancer Research Society. The event starts at 5 pm, the silent auction begins at 6, dinner at 7, the silent auction ends at 9, the band and dancing begin at 9:30, and the event is over at midnight.*

*Saturday: Westmount Agency's annual Biltmore Brunch, and you can head out after.*

*Your favorite friend in your life thus far,*

*Josie*

When Josephine was content enough with the itinerary and having it detailed but manageable, she decided it was the perfect time to send it out. No more hesitation or adjustments; he was doing this for her, and she would be grateful for him and his friendship.

She had a quick shoot at the Cape Florida Lighthouse with Lana to prepare for. She was going to drop the bomb that her fiancé was able to make some adjustments in his schedule and be here for the event.

Showing up ready for hair and makeup, Josephine felt the bounce in her step.



She was prepared to open up about who her man was, especially since she had known him forever, but she did not want to give too much away. Josephine knew Steven had a bit of a promiscuous past, and she was unsure how much of that was still a way of life for him. She sat in the chair, letting hair and makeup get her ready for whatever Stella had in mind for the shoot when Lana walked in.

"Well, well, well, hello, soon-to-be-miss married." She leaned in for the double air kiss to avoid damaging the team's work.

"Hello, Lana." Josephine picked up her phone and kept reloading her inbox for a response from Steven.

"You took off pretty quick last night." She dropped her bag on her stand and turned back to Josephine.

"I had a video date with my fiancé. Not that you needed to know." Josephine tried loading it one more time.

"Well, how did it go?" Lana was prodding for information, but Josephine wanted to be careful about how much she put out there.

"Key West is a bit insane, so I must grab his time whenever possible." Lana sat up a little straighter and leaned forward, trying to catch a peek at her phone, but Josephine tilted it down and set it face down in her lap.

"Oh, so he doesn't even live here in Miami."

"Nope. Never said Steven did. I don't tell you much about our personal lives together. We like to be a more private couple." Lana seemed to take that in for a second before nodding in a final understanding that some people are different from her. However, Josephine also knew she would poke and prod whenever she found a shot at it.

"I am so glad he is coming up for this! You have seemed a little down lately, and you need to smile and have an amazing night with all of us!" Lana starts

frantically texting, and Josephine knows Hank is on the other end.

"I have missed him a lot while we have both been so busy, but him being here will fix all of that distance we have to put up with physically." Josephine realized that what she was saying was true. She missed her friend, and they had been apart for so long, at that point, that this whole situation would be a fantastic chance to catch up and be closer to Steven again.

"Ugh! I love love!" Lana looked excited but a little mischievous, and that alone had Josephine raising a brow.

"So, who are you bringing?" It was Josephine's turn to pry.

"Hank, of course!" Lana was leaning every which way, driving her team nuts while they were trying to prepare her. "We always go together if we can't find someone else. You know this."

"That I do." Josephine started looking at her nails and acting as if Hank's presence would not bother her.

"We will be the best-looking couple there, of course." Lana was throwing Josephine a wink when Josephine started laughing.

"That is not exactly true. Just wait until you see Steven and I together." Josephine watched Lana get a little flustered because Josephine never fired back, even in friendly jabs.

"A friendly competition for the night it is." Lana and Josephine made their small pinkie promise motion from the separate chairs and returned to looking at their phones when an e-mail popped up.

*Itinerary adjustments.*

*Some things needed to be addressed and changed to improve the sale of our engagement.*

*Monday: I will handle all of my appointments for the week with vendors.*

*Tuesday: I will be in Miami for a meeting with a club promoter who would*

*come to me, but I told them I would just be up there instead.*

*Wednesday: I will be by you at five sharp with dinner in hand. You have the movie choice ready to go.*

*Thursday: I will have a meeting in the morning, but I will return to take you for a drink before dinner.*

*Friday: The event.*

*Saturday: Brunch, Beach, Boat*

*Sunday: I head home to Key West.*

*More time is needed to build this relationship back to its former glory. There is no need to make any further adjustments. I will see you soon.*

*The most accommodating fake fiancé ever,*

*Steven*

Josephine laughed at his entire response, feeling so comfortable with the banter.

The shoot on Sunday had been amazing for Josephine and Lana. Stella was so happy with how the shots turned out. Monday went by without a hitch. Tuesday was the day that Josephine was completely caught off guard. She was in the client's tiny bikini, looking like she just got out of the pool. The photographer was praising Josephine for how great Josephine was doing in the shoot. Everything was going great until she heard a high double whistle from across the pool. She knew whose whistle that was immediately, and she lost her footing and fell forward on the chair next to her. One of the assistants instantly ran to her and tried to help her. Josephine pushed them off and started walking around the pool.

There was no stopping her from slamming herself into his arms in the biggest hug she could muster. He squeezed her, and she felt like everything was just right at that moment.

"I thought you had a meeting today?" Josephine grabbed the barely there swim wrap the assistant ran over behind her and wrapped herself in it.

"I did, and it went well. It was also just inside, so I figured I would come and check out my fiancé, the professional model, out here at the pool." Josephine watched the Cheshire grin spread across his face, lit her up inside.

He was there, right in front of her. She was excited and hopeful that this was a good sign of how the week would go. He had made the best friend effort she was used to when they were younger, and she did not even have to drop hints about it in the e-mail about going the extra mile. He just knew it had to happen. He always knew what to do for her whenever she asked for help, and things were no different when she needed him during her own personally built chaos.

## Chapter Four

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### Steven

Reading over the itinerary made Steven chuckle. He could hear her voice within the words of the e-mail. Steven wanted to see her sooner than later, so he set up a meeting at the Biltmore the same day as her shoot. He would refrain from telling or seeing her face-to-face before Wednesday; at least, that was the plan. He spent the next day organizing his business needs for the week. He took thirty minutes to pack what he needed for the events. He took one more look at his phone and called it a night.

Steven arrived at the Biltmore on Tuesday for his meeting with Javier and was checking his watch when he spotted her by the pool. She was just as beautiful from top to bottom as she was the day he moved to Key West. Video calls did not do her justice in his mind.

A throat cleared behind him, causing Steven to whirl around, "Seems we get a show with drinks today." Javier's words sent a weird tickle to the back of his mind. It was an irritating tickle, but it was there.

"Sadly, we are back this way," Steven directed Javier around the bar, taking one last look at Josie before returning to the task.

"Shame." Javier always had a joking tone, but something in him told him Javier had a side of him he never had to deal with before.

A waitress approached their table, and Steven watched Javier eye her and bite his lip, making her blush. Steven chuckled and tapped one finger on the table. "Thanks for meeting me here, Javi."

"No problem. Is there something I can help you with?" Javier pulled his attention from the waitress walking away.

"I need a promotion handled for a few events this summer. You have been one of the best for the club with the events we do, and I figured we could work through a few more of the larger events of the year." Steven knew that buttering him up always sold Javier much quicker than sticking solely to the business. The man needed a stroke of the ego.

"The Lock and Key party, I am assuming?" Javier winked at the waitress when she brought the drinks back.

"Absolutely. That party will always be your promotional bid, as promised." Steven and Javier nodded to each other.

"How much time do I have?"

"I was thinking to start with what was done last year, change up the colors, add in some extra deals and events leading up to it, and some new drinks and drink specials." Steven was going through the list that Mandi, his assistant, gave him when she was walking through the bar Monday morning, trying to tick off as many specifics as he could.

"A level-up plan, basically." Javier took a sip from his drink and started typing things, supposedly notes, on his phone.

"Two other events would be the Royal Beach Bash and the Saints and Sinners weekend." Steven is trying to remember everything they did the year before,

but he was also insanely wasted for the latter half of last Summer. Macy had come out and stomped on his heart, chewed it up, and spit it back at him.

"Easy." Javier waved Steven off with that and kept tapping away. Javier started talking, and Steven grumbled through everything without paying attention. After Javier's attention drifted back to the waitress, Steven took that as a sign that he could sign off.

"If we are all settled here, then I will let you attend to," Steven gestured at the waitress staring and flirting from across the room, "that, and I have another meeting to get to."

"I will be in touch with you about the events." Javier waved him off.

"Make sure to send them to Mandi as well." Steven pushed his chair in and quickly buttoned his jacket up before going out to the pool.

Josie laughed and posed while the people around her directed her. He watched her for a few minutes before letting out his signature whistle. Steven watched her posture change. She tightened up and started looking around the pool until she made eye contact with him. She moved so fast that she tripped over a chair, causing Steven to bite his lip to try to hide the laughter. A small woman chased her, trying to help, when he watched her push them off.

"I thought you had a meeting today!" The small woman caught up with her and gave her a wrap to cover up her beautiful body. Those hazel eyes hit Steven, and he felt like he couldn't breathe.

"I did, and it went well. It was also just inside, so I figured I would come and check out my fiancé, the professional model, out here at the pool." He felt the grin spread over his face, and she seemed to glow brighter at his words. She was right there before him, and he felt nervous for the first time with her.

"I have to finish up one more quick round of shots. Have you already checked into your hotel?" With the last question, Steven almost stopped breathing.

"I was under the impression I was staying with my fiancé, but I can get a room if you would feel more comfortable." Steven watched Josie's eyes widen, and she seemed to falter momentarily.

"Of course, you are staying with me! I just was not sure since you got in early." She pulled him in for a kiss on the cheek and a long hug. Her body pressed against his gave him a new kind of reaction to her that he had not experienced before.

"I will just wait for you and take you back to the apartment." He rubbed her arms and pulled her back for another quick hug, "Now go finish this shoot so we can get out of here."

Steven watched her work and could not help but admire her dedication and ease of being comfortable in her own skin. He rarely saw women who could do that. There was always something in their eyes that told the world they were worried about one aspect or another, but the confidence she was wearing had something else spreading through him.

Steven realized he was seeing what every other guy friend he had was seeing this entire time. He saw her as his best friend, confidant, and go-to person. He would call her to complain about Macy, about the short-term women, and to bitch about his day. Watching her and being with her in that moment, something sparked. Steven was instantly questioning if he were attracted to the one person he swore he would never let himself be drawn to.

He barely noticed when she walked back up to him, "Listen, they want to try to get one more set in. Could I meet you at the house in an hour or so? I will send you the address."

"Yeah," Steven fidgeted, hoping she did not notice what was happening in his mind, "I know you weren't expecting me, so I will give you some extra time to clean up the apartment." He smiled at her, and her jaw dropped a little bit.



"I have no clue what you are talking about. My place is always clean!" She tried to keep herself from laughing at how defensive she got. Steven knew her too well for that.

"Oh, I am sure it is as clean as can be, but in the off chance it isn't, I will see you in an hour." He laughed and waved his phone at her, walking away.

"Give me an hour and a half!" She shouted at him, and he gave a quick turn and shrugged at her before disappearing inside.

Steven returned to the house, realizing that he still knew her just as well as he did in high school. Something about that fact eased things for him. He was sure they would not be as in sync with one another as they were then, but they were. He got in his car and let out a breath he did not even know he had been holding in while standing in her presence.

Steven drove around for an hour running random errands that did not need to be done and had a few bags from stores with him. Some were groceries, things he thought she would want, and some were just random items acquired while killing time. Steven had a pile of random bags on top of his luggage when he pulled up. He did not even have time to beep the horn when he noticed her coming out of her house in sleep shorts and a cut-off top with her blonde hair up in a messy bun, looking more like herself than the woman he caught up with at the Biltmore.

He took a deep breath, let a genuine smile grace his features, and exited the car, ready for anything that would happen during the trip.

# Chapter Five

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## Josephine

Josephine felt she would pass out when she saw him leave his car at her apartment. She was not prepared to have him in her space, which she felt was still not tidied up enough, and sacrificing himself for this week. He grabbed a few grocery bags from the back and pulled out his luggage. His muscles showed through his open suit jacket and slightly unbuttoned shirt.

He stopped walking in front of her, and she felt herself moving to kiss his cheek and pulled his hand inside. At that moment, she was a little off-kilter trying to make everything more her. The place they had stepped into was bright and had barely any extra decorations. It was extremely bare, and she knew he was thinking so, too.

"So, tomorrow, I was thinking we could do our brunch, and you could fill me in on the events we have to survive as a couple." He set his stuff down next to the couch, and Josephine scrambled to grab it and lug it down the hallway.

"Brunch tomorrow sounds perfect. I want to go to the beach as well!" She was talking through the walls as she set his things down, silently beating

herself up. "I have nothing for dinner since I didn't plan on you being here until tomorrow."

"I said I would have dinner in hand," Josephine said as he walked back into the main living area, pointing at the bags on the counter. "I did not disappoint."

"Lasagna?" Josephine was trying to peek in the bags before making it to the counter.

"I am making lasagna." He seemed more confident to her. It wasn't that he wasn't confident, but something about how he had carried himself since he surprised her at the pool made him feel more confident.

"Since when are you a chef?" He chuckled at her question, and she watched him turn to walk into the kitchen. She followed behind him and watched him move around, looking for things. Eventually, they had gotten everything he needed, and he waited for her to sit and relax. He poured her a glass of wine, rolled up his button-up sleeves, and got to work.

"How is the club doing?" Josephine ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass. His eyes focused on the food he was preparing while her eyes were studying him.

"Great! We have the Lock and Key party coming up. I was meeting with the promoter about that today." He was finally layering the lasagna to prep it for the oven, and Josephine seemed to lean further over to inspect what he was doing.

"I am sorry I haven't made it down there yet, but maybe I can come and do some promoting of my own with a few model friends when this is all over." Josephine watched him pause at her words.

"This is not an I help you, and you pay me back favor, Josie. This is me just showing up for you because you asked me to. Like always." He seemed

almost irritated at the thought of being paid back by her. "You are always welcome to visit and have a great time."

"Just visiting for fun it is, then." She wanted him to know it was not a friendship based on favors. He seemed to think that was what she was implying they were now, and that could not be further from the truth. He finished layering the lasagna and popped it into the oven. Josephine watched him walk around behind her as he hugged her from behind at the shoulders. He rested his chin on her head, and she leaned back.

"I missed you, Josie."

"I missed you too." She did. Nothing made her feel better than having him around in person to talk about things, to vent to, and to scream and cry when everything was falling apart for him to make her laugh and put it back together.

They spent the next two hours catching up, eating dinner, exchanging looks neither could place from the other, and drinking all the wine. Eventually, when everything was loaded in the dishwasher and cleaned up from the cooking mess, they would head their separate way for the night when he pulled her in for one last hug. Josephine took the deepest breath she could muster to cling to his scent, a mixture of ocean, sandalwood, and sage. He looked down at her, and her stomach started fluttering. Something in her seemed to move her of her own accord when she lightly turned his cheek and slowly kissed him. It was as if the air was sucked out of her lungs. She patted his shoulder awkwardly and moved to get behind her bedroom door as fast as possible. She swore she heard him chuckle as the door clicked shut.

"What was that?!" She whispered, screamed to herself as she dropped on her poofy bed. "This is about to be a long week."

Sleep came easier to Josephine than it had in months. She had her best friend

just down the hall for the first time in years, and it felt right to have him there. She made her way out of bed around ten o'clock and got ready in a comfy yet casual outfit for brunch, but when she got out of the kitchen, there was a note on the counter.

*Josie,*

*I had to head out for another meeting this morning. I thought it was something that could wait until I was back at work, but things got a little crazy. I will be back in time for dinner tonight. You can fill me in on everything I need to know then.*

*Steven*

Josephine no longer wondered why he had let her sleep in so late that morning. He had left her there with barely an explanation. She was happy he did not bail out of town after that awkward goodnight moment. She spent most of the day cleaning and shooting off e-mails when a text came in.

*Sorry about this morning. Bringing home tacos. Get your favorite. See you soon.*

Something about him saying he was bringing something home sent her heart and mind on overdrive. It had barely been a day, and she loved having him with her. She loved the calmness he seemed to radiate and the happiness she felt in his presence. She shut down any feelings for him when Macy entered the picture, but she was worried they would make an appearance at any moment.

*All good. See you soon.*

She pulled out plates and silverware for dinner and lit a few candles on the counter to set a comfortable ambiance. She was trying to make it comfortable and yet not romantic, but it all felt a little too romantic for her. There was a knock on the door when she was about to blow out the candles. She left them

because Steven would know if she had blown them out to adjust things. He was always too observant for her liking, but it was how he wound up knowing everything about her so well.

"How was work?" She heard how that sounded after she asked it.

"It was great, dear. How was your day?" He chuckled while holding out the food bag and waiting for her to take it.

"I am not sure how I feel about 'dear.' could we find another name to use before tomorrow?" Josephine felt her nose scrunch up and took the bag from him.

"Babe, baby, love, darling," He was listing things off now, trying to find one that seemed to roll off his tongue, "pudding."

"Absolutely not!" Josephine laughed as she plated the food, "Babe or love is fine. Simple to remember, and I called you Babe so much in high school that I am sure it will return to natural."

"You called me a babe?"

"No, I called you Babe, not a babe. There is a big difference."

"I bet you called me a babe." He kept joking about it. Josephine relented to rolling her eyes at him. She slid the plate across the counter to him before sitting next to him on a stool.

"So, a few people you need to know about. My boss, Stella, has a big personality and an even more straightforward attitude. She is cautious of who she talks to, so try not to let anything seem like you are prodding." Josephine took a bite and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"Got it. Tiptoe around the boss. Who else?" He focused on his food, but Josephine knew he was paying full attention.

"Lana." Josephine took a moment to try and figure out how to discuss Lana with him. "Well, Lana is a lot like Mia was in high school. Just a full-grown

woman version of her slapped inside the body of a model."

"There is another Mia out there in the wild?" He almost choked on his food when he asked. Josephine knew Steven and Mia did not get along, so that he would hold back a lot with Lana. He would still be kind and whatnot, but she knew this would not be easy for him.

"Sort of, but not really." Josephine took a drink of her wine and then another bite, trying to avoid all eye contact.

"Great." He looked up at the ceiling, and Josephine knew he was already regretting doing this.

"When you think of Hank, think," Josephine searched her mind for the name of the creepy football friend, "Preston. Easy on the eyes, fun to be around, pushes to date me too hard, and sometimes pushes the buttons to see what he can get away with."

"So, what you are telling me is that I came up here to do this, and there is built-in competition waiting for me?" Steven swallowed his wine in almost two large gulps.

"There is no competition; we are engaged, remember?" Josephine shot an eyebrow to the ceiling, waiting for a response.

"Oh! That reminds me." He stood up, disappeared into the room, and returned with a little black box. He took her hand and got down on one knee, making her insides tingle. "Josie, my best friend since childhood, my long-lost partner in crime, will you be my fake fiancé?" He smiled brilliantly at her, and she just about fainted at how surreal the sight of him on one knee in front of her was.

"Absolutely." It came out almost a whisper, and she watched him slide the ring into place. "This thing could take someone's eye out." She stared at it for what felt like hours, wrapped around her finger.

"That it could, so swing lightly if you have to." He was trying to make their circumstances comfortable for both of them. They were taking another step further into uncharted territory with one another.

"Yes, sir." She swore she saw his eyes darken slightly at that, but she brushed it off.

The rest of the night was filled with questions about what to expect at the agency dinner and the event. Most were basic once he knew who to watch out for. They tucked in and settled for the night, watching some reruns on TV. They kept catching each other staring and shifting multiple times before Steven called it a night.

The next day was filled with work for them both. She worked out of the office, and he worked out of her kitchen once he returned from another meeting. They gave each other space but were still on the same coffee schedule. They would praise one another for being so on top of things, but at around six, she sped into the room, yelling about being late for dinner.

"It is okay; get dressed, and it is fine if things are not perfect. We can say we were busy getting in some alone time before we went to dinner." He was trying to bring some comfort and ease to her. She was getting more and more nervous as things got closer.

"Right. Fun missed time activities, got it." Josephine pulled her little black dress with the deep V on it from its hanger and pulled it on, followed by her black do-me pumps, as Lana likes to call them; she whipped on her necklace and earrings, let her hair fall down, and stared at the ring on her finger. She walked into the hall and knocked on his door. He opened it up and let out a low whistle.

"Well, aren't I the luckiest fake fiancé in the world?" Josephine smiled at his praise and turned around, showing the undone zipper. She had never been



excited by recognition from anyone else, but from Steven, it sounded right. It felt right.

"That you are; a little help would be appreciated." He helped zip her up the rest of the way before running his hands over her bare shoulders. She knew he could see the goosebumps that trailed after his touch. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, give me two minutes." She nodded and finished throwing on light makeup so they could run out the door.

When they arrived at the agency dinner, everyone was enthralled with Steven. She hung tight to his arm, not wanting to answer anything by herself, so there was no chance of slipping up. Lana and Hank both made introductions, but they were clearly a little more mischievous than friendly that night with all the questions they asked. Josephine was glad they had known each other so long that answering them was not a problem.

Back at the apartment, Josephine took off her shoes and padded barefoot to the kitchen.

"Well, that wasn't so bad. I am pretty sure your boss undressed me with her eyes a few times." He chuckled.

"Pretty sure we all did," Josephine said low enough so he couldn't hear her. If there was one thing she could not deny, he looked deliciously good. The next night would be the actual task. They couldn't make introductions and hide behind the meal to avoid deeper conversation. They must be more open to questions and act like an all-out couple. This meant she would have to ask him for a couple of moments of straight affection, which would be an exciting conversation for them both.

# Chapter Six

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## Steven

The next day went pretty similar to the one before, except they had paced themselves on work to prepare for the Rushmore Childhood Cancer Research Society Event. He studied up on who would be there throughout the day. He wanted to ensure his homework was done so there were no slip-ups that would make Josie look bad. With that in mind, he also considered how she looked at the agency dinner the night before. He almost did not let her leave the house. The idea of keeping her there with him was tempting, but he knew she would never go for it. At least, he thought she wouldn't.

"Hey, so we should talk about something." Her voice pulled him straight out of his thoughts of her the night before and placed them on her at that moment.

"Shoot."

"We will need to be a little more affectionate tonight. We really have to sell this." Steven felt his throat go a little dry, and he watched her stumble

through the conversation. "Me just hanging onto your arm and us doing gentle hand-holding is not going to sell this."

"So what are you proposing for sales?"

"You can kiss me a few times, run your hands over me when we dance, do the whisper in the ear thing, and do the normal affectionate arm around me and kiss on the forehead and cheek." She was playing with the end of the sweater she was wearing. "I need it to be enough for them to leave me alone about dating other people."

Steven was trying to think of a response that could be quick-witted and fun, but all he could muster out was, "Sounds good." He turned back to his computer, pretending to read it. Steven stopped working when she did not walk out or away, and he turned to look at her. She walked right up to him and put her lips on his. They were still for a moment until they both felt more relaxed. Steven felt his heart speed up, his mind could not stop wanting more, his body was starting to react, and he pulled her in to deepen it. She let him in momentarily before pushing herself back and walking towards her room to get ready.

"There, now it won't be awkward." She shut the door, and Steven just stared at it.

Steven took the next hour to shower and get himself ready to go. His black-on-black suit hung on the back of the door, waiting for him to be prepared for this. Everything in him after that kiss said his relationship with Josie after the Gala would not be the same. That kiss was still running through his mind. It ran through his mind so much in the shower he needed to give himself some relief at the thought of her mouth on him. He could no longer see her as just his best friend from childhood. He saw her as more. Much more. He would try to take this event and, this time, show her what could be between them.

Steven slipped on the suit jacket and added the watch Josie sent him a few years ago. This way, he would be wearing something from her just as she would now be wearing something from him. The thought suddenly popped into his head, "*She is still wearing the ring, and she never took it off,*" it made him smile. She openly said she was his when she wore it, and he liked knowing that. He liked having that feeling of assurance with her. He would convince her to keep it. She would fight him as always about gifts, of course, but she would relent eventually.

He walked into the living room, and she had yet to appear, so he sat back down at the computer to get another e-mail or two sent out before they had to head out.

When Steven caught her reflection in the window, he felt his lungs stop working. He stared at her in the window as she stared at his back. He was about to help her put on the show of a lifetime and was unsure he could ever stop. Her black satin gown dropped down between her cleavage. It kissed the floor lightly around her heels. The slit went up to the top of her thigh, and the bodice was tight in all the right places. She did a little turn, and the fabric was in a deep V to the bottom of her spine; a light silver chain dangled from the black choker at her neck. He felt himself hum in appreciation before he heard himself. When he looked into her eyes, her cheeks were red, and something was looking back at him. It was a mutual appreciation for how astonishing they were about to look standing arm in arm at the event.

"So, is this to your liking," she hesitated momentarily, "babe."

"I have never seen anything more to my liking than what is right in front of me." He reached a hand for hers and spun her in a circle slowly.

"I am so glad you approve," she smiled, "because I will not attempt to get into the other dress I bought. That was ridiculous, and I have no idea what I

thought when I spent three grand on it."

"This is simple, beautiful, perfect, and completely you." He looked her up and down several times before turning her to the door. He gave her a little pat on the butt, "Now move it, future Mrs. Calhoun. We don't want to be late like last night."

"Yes, sir." Steven really needed to talk to her about doing that. It did something to him when she said it as opposed to anyone else, and while he genuinely appreciated it, there was something about the way she had said it this time that could get them both into a world of trouble with one another.

The pair made their way outside, where Steven found himself helping her into the car; Josephine had to fight her way in so that her dress would not wind up ruined. She did not want a wrinkle to be seen. Steven had flashbacks of getting her in the car and to the prom in her prominent, poofy, princess-red dress and started laughing at her.

"What is so funny?" Josephine looked a little offended.

"Think prom, Josie. It will come to you." By the time he got into the car, they were both laughing about how she probably looked then and, at that moment, getting into a vehicle of any size.

The drive over to the Miami Convention Center was not exactly quiet. They filled it with small talk and memories of prom. He liked to remind her this was not technically their first date because of the prom, and she wanted to remind him that he was always her knight in all-black armor.

He pulled up to the valet and got out, handing his keys to the first valet while watching the second valet make his way over to help Josephine out of the car. He was almost sure he felt jealousy when watching someone else take her hand in their own. Steven straightened his suit before meeting Josephine to walk her inside.

"I can already tell you will be the most radiant woman in the room." He wanted to take her attention off the valet, who showed her the most winning smile he could muster.

"We aren't even inside yet, Steven." Josephine started playing with her dress and making adjustments before cameras could start snapping their photos on the red carpet into the building.

"I know." He smiled winningly at her while looping his arm through hers, feeling they were ready to walk into this event like a real engaged couple. They posed and smiled briefly, making sure to show her ring off against the dark black of his suit.

"Don't worry about it. They are eating this up." He whispered into her ear. Her shoulders visibly relaxed, and she smiled innocently at him.

"Thank you. For everything. I know you didn't sign up for the publicity." Steven took that chance to lift her chin with two of his fingers and gently kiss her lips. He leaned his forehead on hers and smiled. Their eyes were locked momentarily before someone moved them along on the carpet.

"Just take a breath before we walk in there." He squeezed her arm, and they took that step through the door. There would be no turning back now. It was time for them to put on the show of a lifetime.

# Chapter Seven

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## Josephine

Walking up to the Convention Center was a beautiful sight to see. Everyone was wearing a golden ribbon for the amazing cause they were there to support. The lights were bright with a sparkling golden filter all the way through the main hall. The room was set up beautifully. Tables decorated with golden accents, black tablecloths, white lilies, and fairy lights line the room. The mirrored ceiling reflected everything back into the room, making the lights brighter. The glow made everyone look even more beautiful than they already did, and Josephine was taken aback by it all.

This event brought the whole community together, no matter which part they came from or who they had problems with. Businesses donated many items, time, and money to help needy children. There were always rival agencies, hotel big-wigs and their spouses, and some of the number one stores and restaurants in the area were here, and then she spotted it, the table full of doctors and hospital big-wigs. They seemed to be surrounded by everyone thanking them for help in the fight.

"What would you like to do first, love." Hearing Steven say love sent Josephine's heart fluttering through.

"I think we should go and make our rounds at the Westmount Agency's table." She squeezed his arm, and he kissed her cheek gently.

"Let's go greet your friends." He started walking and pulled her away from where she was admiring the room and the beautiful setup.

Arriving at the table, the first two people Josephine spotted were Hank and James. Both were clearly sizing up Steven and were zoned in on how the couple's arms were locked together. Steven noticed, but he ignored them as he greeted Lana.

"Hello, you two!" Lana leaned in for some air kisses and touched Josephine's side to compliment and admire her dress. Steven gave a hum of appreciation and moved his arm around her waist. He started moving his thumb up and down her ribs on her left side. Josephine stared up at him and then smiled back at the group.

"You look lovely, Lana. Good to see you again." Steven knew how to schmooze with the best of them.

"You are looking sharp yourself, Mr. Calhoun. I still wonder why it took her so long to tell us about you!" Lana put her hand on Steven's arm, and Josephine looked at it and then back at her face with a warning look.

"We like to keep things private. We are both in the public eye in different ways, and this was just easier for us to keep doing things without having people take over our lives on social media." What he said made sense to her and eased the questions from everyone else. It helped ease Josephine's reactions to everything going on around her.

"Well, we just saw the ring for the first time yesterday, but I want another look at that bad boy." Josephine let out a fake laugh that only Steven



registered as fake. He tried to cover up his laughter with his hand, but Steven caught it.

"Josephine," Hank's voice reached her ears, and she stiffened slightly, "How are you, sweetheart?"

"Sweetheart? I thought you said you didn't like other men calling you nicknames?" Steven said it loud enough to make Hank zip his lips.

"Only you, love." She gave him an affectionate tap on the chest right over his heart. She was trying to see if his heart was beating as hard as hers was.

"Is this why you turned down my dinner offer last week?" James questioned.

"This is why she has probably turned you down more than once," Steven looked Josephine in the eye, "correct?"

"Completely accurate," Josephine remembered all the times Steven stepped in to keep bad dates from happening. He tightened his grip around her, letting her know he was right there with her.

"So, how long have you known our girl here?" Hank threw out a possessive question.

Steven and Josephine locked eyes, "All our lives." Josephine let him give her a light kiss on the lips, "Our parents were friends growing up, we lived down the road from one another, we went to prom together, and everything in between." Josephine's heart was fluttering as he kept talking.

"Best friends to lovers, then? So cute!" Lana was practically squealing at how cute the story was.

"So, why the distance?"

"Business opportunity took me away for a while, but we have always been us, so the logical next step was to continue growing together." Josephine felt herself blushing at Steven's words. She did not realize until then that she

would have grown with him had she paid more attention in high school. Maybe he would have felt the same as she did.

"Excuse me, Mi Amor. I need to use the restroom. I will be back before the auction starts." Josephine kissed his hand as she went to let go and walked away.

Josephine felt her feet picking up quickly as she tried to reach some space. She needed to breathe and sort through the things that were said. She went to the bathroom and fanned herself down. When she was walking out, Lana walked in.

"I thought you were kidding when you said you were engaged! He is amazing!" Lana moved to the mirror and started adding on a new coat of lipstick.

"I know he is." Josephine was trying not to get sucked into the fake engagement.

"You haven't had any champagne yet! Let's go get a drink before this auction starts." Lana dragged her out of the bathroom to the nearest server with a tray of full flutes. The strawberry in the bottom of the golden drink made Josephine focus on something else momentarily. They went to the men's talking shop about events at the club and when they could make their way out. Steven must have noticed the worry she was carrying. He gave her a brow-raised look, and she just shook her head. He held his hand out for her, and she grabbed on like she was holding onto a life raft.

"Are you okay?" Steven was leaning in close to whisper in her ear.

"Yeah, I am okay. Just a lot of people that I have to smile at and put this work mask on for," she whispered back.

"You are with me. You don't have to wear a mask while I am around." He wrapped his arm around her and gripped her tight.

"I never wore a mask with you," She leaned her head on his arm, "and I never intend to. However, with all of them," she made a small gesture, "it is part of the job."

"I do the same thing sometimes." His admission made her look up into his eyes with a bit of surprise.

She went to say something else to Steven when an announcement began, "Ladies and gentlemen, the silent auction is about to begin. Please go down the main hall to see the wonderful pieces, offers, and prizes raffled off for a wonderful cause." The announcement was over, and the masses slowly entered the hall to see what they wanted to bid on.

Josephine decides to bid on a spa weekend, a few items like a purse and wallet set, and a few small trips. Steven paid attention to what she was bidding on, asking questions about why each one, who she would go with, and why she liked certain places. He always asked many questions but genuinely tried to understand her motives, wants, and needs.

Steven commented about getting a drink and disappeared for a little while, leaving her to wander and converse with doctors, survivors, current patients, and families. She signed a few autographs and took a few photos when she felt him watching her more than she physically saw him watching her.

She excused herself and walked over to Steven, "You were gone for quite a bit."

"Just wanted to see if I could win some things and got myself a drink." He reached the table behind him and grabbed a fresh and full champagne flute for her. "I saw you with some of the families and wanted to give you some space."

"Well, thank you." She sipped her champagne and looked around when a little chime sounded overhead, signaling dinner. Josephine took Steven's arm,

and they entered the main hall for a costly and tasty meal.

Josephine was not one to eat in public. She would snack, eat small out, and then eat whatever she wanted when she got home, but Steven noticed she wasn't eating when he leaned over and whispered, "I need you to eat if you are going to keep drinking tonight." Josephine visibly shivered at his words and put a forkful of the salmon in her mouth.

Josephine kept drinking more and more as the night went on. The food was good, the company was okay, but her partner in crime was perfect. He held onto her leg and squeezed a few times throughout the meal, reassuring her that no one would be judging her, even if her coworkers visibly were, and letting her know she could just be herself with him.

The pair made small talk with everyone while they waited for the auction to finish up, and when it did, Josephine was in for a big surprise. The name Steven Calhoun was called four separate times as a winner. With each win, Josephine realized it was everything she bid on, including the trip to Hawaii, that she had never thought she would win. She was wondering how much money he just spent on her that evening.

"Well, someone hit the dinero jackpot." Lana was staring at the pair. Josephine just sat there with her mouth open for a few minutes.

"Babe! What did you do?" Josephine finally found some words, and that was what came out.

"I made sure you got everything you wanted, and I donated to an amazing cause." Steven kissed her cheek, "Just enjoy it. We are engaged, and my job is to spoil you with reckless abandon. Just say thank you and give me a kiss." Josephine did what she was told and smiled at him, shaking her head before giving him their second deep kiss. They were so involved with each other

that they did not realize the entire table was watching as she let out a low moan.

Steven pulled back from the kiss and handed her the champagne flute. "I think we need to go and get you a refill." They spent the next half hour being thanked for his donations and congratulated on the wins of the auction.

When the music started, Steven directed her to the dance floor, "This is a classy event, love, no grinding, no twerking, and no exposing things."

Josephine laughed so hard she snorted. Her hand flew over her mouth, and she moved her hand when she calmed down momentarily. "I make no promises, Mr. Calhoun."

When the final song came around, he spun her around the dance floor, held her close, and took her breath away. With the last song, he began pulling her closer, with a light touch burning the base of her spine. His fingers made their way into the edges of her dress, and he played with the chain. His other hand was holding onto hers. He held her as close as he possibly could, and her body was thrumming from the champagne. He smelled of whiskey, ocean, and sage. It was taking over all of her other senses. Every single place he was touching was on fire. Everything he smelled of took over her sense of smell and taste. Her eyes were locked on his, and all she could hear were the sweet little jokes he whispered.

When the music stopped, he collected their things from the table and walked her out to wait at the valet. He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He started kissing her neck, and she couldn't help falling back to rest against him.

"Are you sure you should drive?" Josephine's voice pulled both of them out of the trance they were in.

"I sipped on one the entire night. I wasn't going to drive us home like that. I

will have another one or two at the apartment." Josephine always felt a jolt of excitement whenever he called wherever she was home.

"Sounds perfect to me." The car pulled up, and he walked her to the door and closed it once she was secured inside. She watched Steven tip the valet and climb inside.

# Chapter Eight

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## Steven

Steven looked around as he climbed into the driver's seat, watching other couples leave in front of them and behind. The car was filled with silence before Josie reached forward and turned on some low music to fill the void. Steven was very aware of every tiny movement she made. There was this electricity in the air around them that had only been growing throughout the week. Steven reached over and placed a hand on her knee. She took a small, sharp breath, and he felt her relax under his touch. When he started rubbing his thumb back and forth, Josephine's head leaned back against the seat, and she slowly looked at him.

"Did you have a good night?" Steven's voice was almost raspy and strained as he tried to talk to her.

"It was wonderful. Thank you so much for doing this for me." Josephine placed her hand on top of his and gave it a squeeze.

"I would do anything for you, Josie. You know that." He squeezed her thigh tightly, and he caught her biting her lip out of the corner of his eye. She

squeezed her legs together a bit, and Steven was fully aware that she felt the spark, too.

"Did you know I thought we would be together after prom?" Josie's voice pulled everything since that night straight down in his mind. His memories of every interaction went crashing out of what he thought he knew.

"So did I, but you found Tyler," Steven remembered seeing her between him and the side of the house. She was tugging on Tyler's suit, pulling him closer. He leaned in and kissed her, and Steven had to look away. He went and found Macy. He asked her out. Josie and Steven started drifting apart little by little after that.

"No, you found Macy, so I went to Tyler." Josie's correction of what happened had him spiraling internally. It was his fault. Macy was in his lap by the fire before he removed her to find Josie, but he didn't know Josie had found them first.

"I don't remember that."

"You wouldn't," Josie let out a small snort, "not with all the awkward barely boobs in your face."

Steven could not help but laugh with her about Macy. There were some inside jokes about how Macy always pretended to be larger than she was, but the whole school knew the truth. Except for the padding in her shirts, there wasn't much going on inside.

The rest of the ride was quiet. Steven wanted to tell her the truth from his side of things, too. Josie had given him a glimpse of her feelings, but he kept himself fairly shut off during his whole trip there. Steven got out and opened the door for her when they approached the house. He held a hand out for her to take, and there was no hesitation. She took it and squeezed in reassurance



that they were okay. He watched her walk to the door. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he wanted to make her all his.

He was leaning on the car. She was opening the apartment door when she turned and watched him staring at her while he leaned on the car, "Are you coming in or staying out here?"

Steven hesitated before stepping towards her, "I wanted it to be you that night." He walked up to Josie, grabbed her by the back of her neck, and pulled her into a deep kiss. She didn't let him in at first, but eventually, she leaned into him, accepting the kiss. Their tongues danced with one another effortlessly. Steven's heart was beating so loud he was sure she could hear it. His free hand moved down to grip her butt and lifted her so her legs were wrapped around him. He moved them inside and kicked the door shut behind them.

"Wait." Josie separated her mouth from his, and he immediately missed her warmth. He set her down and watched her take two careful steps back. Steven watched her smooth her hands over her dress and stop on her abdomen.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." Steven lifted his arm to rub the back of his neck and turned so she wouldn't see him struggling to understand what shifted between them.

"No, I am okay with what just happened. " Josie moved past him to the small bar in the corner by the dining room table, "I need a drink."

"Anything over there for me?" Steven took a more complex look at the cart, wondering if there was something harder than wine to divulge that would try to help him forget what he had just done.

Josie turned around and put two shot glasses on the counter, "Drink up." She took the shot of tequila without being phased, and Steven had to try to choke it down. "You good?"

"That was," Steven coughed, "not enough." He tapped the glass and watched her pour them another.

"So, are we going to talk about this whole thing or ignore it?" Josie was bolder than she had been a few moments before. Steven appreciated that he hadn't been kicked out right after kissing her, but he was worried about how the entire conversation would go down.

"What do you want to talk about?" Steven tried playing dumb but knew it did not work when she gave him her signature glare.

"Oh, I don't know," she poured her second shot, "we both admitted we had feelings back then, and you know, with that kiss... I want to know if it's like, we need to talk about it, or if we need to talk more about this thing." She took the next shot and stared Steven down. He could feel her nervousness roll off of her in waves.

"I always loved you."

"As your best friend, right?" She wasn't staring him in the eyes. She was looking down, fidgeting.

Steven leaned forward and lifted her chin so she could see him and his intentions clearly. "Josephine Price, I loved you for a long time in high school. I figured you were not in love with me since you moved on after prom." She tried to look away, but he held her gaze on his. "Moving away from you was to get the distance I needed. Seeing you with someone else was hard, but I heard your voice every time when you called. I needed you just as much as you needed me."

"I always need you in my life, Steven. I don't care how I have you in my life as long as I have you." Josie leaned into his touch.

"You have me." He kissed her again. He was more gentle than he was outside, but she picked up the aggression level herself. She pulled his shirt

out of his pants, and he grabbed her hands to stop her.

"What? Do you not want this?" Josephine looked utterly torn on whether she should run or stay still.

"I absolutely want this. I need to know when things progress, we won't let it change who we are as best friends." Josie walked away from him and put some space between them.

"I think we can figure things out as we go, but we have never let things change no matter what we went through." She removed her hair from the updo, one bobby pin at a time. The locks fell one by one in blonde curls that framed her face and fell over her shoulders. "I don't think sleeping together and fooling around will change it. Nothing else has shifted the dynamic." She started running her fingers through it, groaning with evident appreciation.

Steven slowly took small steps towards her, "This might even make things stronger between us." His feet moved in more significant steps before he could comprehend that they were reducing the space between them to barely anything.

"Are you saying you want to sleep with me, Steven?" Josie looked at him with her hooded hazel eyes. They held so much promise of things to come.

"I am saying that I want everything, in this moment, with you." Steven pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I want you more than anyone or anything I have ever wanted in my entire life." The words were heavier than anything he had ever said to a woman before. Her eyes were locked firmly on him. They were holding him in front of her. He could not look away from those eyes he memorized as a kid, the eyes that kept bringing the light through the darkness in middle school and high school, and the ones who would pop up on camera when he needed a quick reassurance that everything would be okay.

He never let a woman as close as Josie had been to him. He never thought anyone was as worthy of knowing all the dark secrets, all of the faults, and all of the mistakes as Josie was. There was too much to share with anyone else. There was so much to build with someone else before they got to the point they were, and he was always told to make someone your best friend before being in a relationship. Why wouldn't he try to see if the best friend he ever had would want to try to move forward from where they were? Why wouldn't he be open to growing with someone who grew with him instead of trying with all of the one-night flings?

"Are you sure about that?" Josie let her hands roam down his chest, unbuttoning his shirt. She was staring him directly in the eyes, waiting for him to tell her to stop. When she got to his pants and started to unbutton them, he stopped her again.

"Are you one hundred percent sure that you do?" Josie tried to keep going, but he would not let her continue until he answered. He watched her weighing her options on how to respond to him. She was as still as he was while he held her there. He refused to look away, scared that the moment would pass and that he would never get another chance to take the opportunity with her.

"If I were not sure, Steven, I would have stopped before we started this conversation." Steven lessened the grip on her wrists, and she started slowly undoing the button on his pants.

# Chapter Nine

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## Josephine

Josephine smiled at Steven mischievously up through her lashes and decided to slide his shirt off his shoulders instead without taking her eyes off his. When the shirt hit the floor, she stood back and took in his body with complete appreciation. She let her hands roam up his abs, chest, and shoulders and then down his arms until she took his hands in hers. She had always known they belonged just like this.

They barely made it into her room before Steven slowly slipped the straps off of her shoulders, causing the entire front of the dress to drop to her waist, exposing her naked breasts to the chilliness of her air-conditioned room. The fan above was providing an extra little bit of breeze, enough to make her nipples pebble. He reached out and lightly ran his thumbs over both before squeezing them. He was staring at her like a man starved for, and she was the only thing he needed to survive. He took the right one in his mouth, teasing her ever so slowly while his left hand massaged the other one. His right hand held her, at her lower back, to him. He was giving her no room to move. He was no longer giving her any sort of out.

Josephine had dreamed of this moment with him for as long as she could remember. She dreamed of what it would feel like to have his hands on her. Her mind was drifting momentarily until he switched from her right breast to her left. She let out a low moan, and her head lolled back while she stood held up by both of his hands. She felt him unhooking the small hook at the dip of her dress, and then she barely registered the zip until her dress hit the floor. He moved her back and held onto her hips.

"You weren't wearing any underwear at all tonight?" He was staring at Josephine's mound, and she was unsure how to respond to the growled-out question.

"No, sir. I was not." He bit his lip and spun her around. Josephine just wanted to touch him as much as he was touching her. She ran her hands through his golden blonde hair and pulled slightly to make him look directly at her.

"You need to be careful when you do that." Steven looked darker than she had ever remembered, but Josephine could not help herself.

"Yes, sir." She knew she was pushing her luck with her words, but she wanted to see how far he would let her go.

Steven grabbed her by her thighs and picked her up. He spun her around and dropped her on the bed. Her entire body shivered with anticipation. He leaned over her and took both her hands in his. He put them above her head and had her grip the post behind her.

"Do not move them from this spot until I tell you." He slowly let his hands roam down until he got to her throat. He tightened his grip and then moved his hand further. As he slipped his middle finger inside of her, Josephine arched her back and almost let go. When Steven noticed the slight movement, he stopped and removed his finger. Josephine gripped harder and adjusted her hold.

"That's better." Instead of inserting just one finger, he slid two inside, causing Josephine to arch straight off the bed. She moaned, and Steven hummed in appreciation.

"More, Steven, I need more." Josephine felt her body building towards an orgasm, and she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. She felt a shift on the mattress when he moved from his position, hovering over her. Then she felt his tongue brush against her clit, and she lost it. Her thighs tightened against his head, holding him in place. She felt her walls tighten around his fingers as wave after wave of pressure built up inside of her.

He did not relent, and Josephine could not get out any words to tell him she needed a minute to return to Earth. Instead, Steven flipped her onto her side and kissed his way up her spine. She heard his movements behind her and waited for him to come up behind her. He rubbed his way up her calves, up her thighs, and up her back. She felt his body fully against her, and she trembled in anticipation. He had hooked her left leg in his left elbow and brought it up towards her chest, twisting her lightly.

"Steven, I need you." That was all it took from her to set him off. Steven slid himself fully inside her, causing a gasp to slip out of her full lips. He gave her only a quick moment to recover before he started moving again. Josephine was feeling euphoric as he started pumping faster and faster in and out of her. She felt a release in pressure as he let her leg go and slid his arm up to her hand. "Let go." Josephine let one arm drop to grab onto his hand. She took his hand and gripped it onto her breast, having him massage and pull at it. He growled low and bit into her neck, causing her to give a jolt. When Steven let go of the spot he bit, he kissed over the spot and onto her shoulder. His pace picked up, and she couldn't stop herself from screaming his name over and over again.

"I told you to let go, baby." The sound of his voice giving her that command sent everything in her building up until they both went over the edge together.

They lay connected for a few minutes, catching their breath before he finally moved. She felt him let her go, and she rolled over to face him.

"That was..." Josephine put her arm over his abdomen and snuggled closer to him, "incredible."

"Yes, it was." Steven looked her in the eyes and kissed her gently a few times. Josephine felt complete at that moment. Her best friend was with her. He was the one to make her feel what no one else had been able to before. She had felt orgasms, but nothing like what she had just experienced with him. His silence was driving her crazy.

"Are we..." she stopped herself from pushing further. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

"Are we what?" Steven pulled her in tight. His eyes were locked on her.

"You don't regret that, do you?" Josephine watched him pull back with wide eyes.

"Why would you even ask me that?" Steven seemed genuinely offended.

"You got really quiet, and I thought you were just," She took a breath and covered her eyes, "ready to leave or something."

"If I could stay here forever in this exact moment in time with you, I would." He leaned in and started kissing her face lightly. Josephine felt a lot better with each small and tender kiss. He shifted so he was above her again. She moved her legs to wrap around his waist and pulled him in close so they were pressed firmly together.

"I just thought you would think it was a terrible idea," Josephine practically whispered her fear out loud to Steven, as if scared she would make him run



away from her.

Steven slowly rubbed himself against her core, and she felt how hard he was, just for her, almost immediately after they finished the first time. "Do you feel this?" He put his hands on each side of her face while balancing on his elbows. Josephine nodded at him. He held her gaze locked on his own and pulled back before seating himself entirely inside of her. "I asked you if you felt this."

"Yes." Josephine closed her eyes and tried to tilt her head back, but he held her in place, "I feel every inch of it." She squeezed her legs around him and started moving at his pace. She gripped onto his shoulders and let her nails dig in as they dragged down his back.

"ARGH!" The bite of her nails made him pick up his pace. "Do it again."

Josephine rubbed her hands back up to his shoulders and raked them back down again, "Babe, I'm going to..." Josephine's eyes started to close no matter how hard she tried to keep them open.

"Keep your eyes on me." Steven ground the words out, causing her to let her eyes land on him. Josephine felt herself start to erupt as soon as the eye contact was made. She felt as if her soul was latching on to his forever. Steven kept pumping in and out of her, but Josephine was unsure how long she could keep going. Her legs felt like Jell-O, and every muscle in her body was shaking.

Steven pulled out and flipped her over before pulling her back up on her knees. She felt her hips go back past her ankles, and she was about to say she could not do anything else. He started pounding into her faster and faster until she was screaming for him. When he got her to orgasm one more time, he let himself fill her up. Every single inch of her tingled with satisfaction.

They fell asleep tangled in each other's arms, not wanting to move from the

moment they were locked in. The last thing she remembered was hearing his heartbeat. They only got a few hours of sleep before their alarms rang ominously, alerting them of the need to wake up for brunch. Josephine felt Steven lean over her, pinning her to the mattress and heard the alarm shut off. He kissed her on the cheek and snuggled in close.

"We should get up." Josephine looked at the closet for the yellow sundress and white heels she planned to wear.

"Or..." Steven nuzzled against her, "We should just stay here for a while longer, enjoying our time as an engaged couple." He started nibbling at her earlobe, and Josephine bit her lip again with a small groan of appreciation.

"I need a shower." Josephine was honestly trying to make it to her work event, but Steven's chuckle let her know she would miss the agency brunch in an hour. He had other plans for her. Honestly, she also had some more plans for him.

"We can do that." Steven slid away from her and off the bed while wiggling his eyebrows at her. Josephine giggled and covered her mouth, watching him walk out of the room completely naked. She was completely lost in the feelings of love and fulfillment he gave her in the hours leading up to that moment. The shower went on in the bathroom, and she lifted her head to look at the door.

Steven's head peaked around the corner, and he had a playful grin plastered on his face, "Well, are you getting in the shower with me, or am I doing this alone?"

He disappeared around the corner as Josephine stretched out to the best of her abilities and giggled, feeling just the right amount of happiness and soreness. Her bare feet padded down the hallway, and she stopped just inside the

bathroom. He was like a Greek god in the shower. His body is entirely sculpted and good enough to eat.

Josephine opened up the glass shower door and stepped in right behind him. She shut the door and ran her hands up his chest. She let her hands run down his tan sculpted front and wrap around his thick cock. She started moving her hands at an even pace. Steven placed both hands on the wall to hold himself up. When he started pumping himself in her fist, she reached down and massaged his balls, causing her to pick up pace. She let go of his balls and moved in front of him. She got down on her knees, and his eyes opened as he felt her tongue lick the precum from him.

"Oh, shit. Josie," He did not get the chance to get anything further out because she took him in her mouth as far as she could. She started moving slowly initially, with her fist meeting her mouth to make up for what she couldn't take. The other hand gripping his firm thigh to hold himself and herself in place. She let go of his thick length to hold onto both of his thighs. He started pounding in further and further. He gripped her hair in one of his hands to make her look up at him. Her eyes were watering, and her nails looked like they were breaking skin. He let out a hiss of appreciation at the sensations she was giving him. She started taking control, moving him further and further down her throat while she breathed through her nose. She felt him getting thicker and thicker. His pace began to stutter. She groaned around his cock, causing him to moan and swell while the warmth trickled down the back of her throat. She ran her thumb over her lower lip while she stared into his eyes.

"Fuck, Josie."

Josephine felt so proud of herself with the satisfied look gracing his features.

"That was the hottest thing I have ever seen."

They finished their showers while occasionally fondling one another. When Josephine got out after him, she saw him on the phone at the counter. He ended the call while she walked up to him in her towel.

"Hey. Was that work?" Josephine was being pulled back to reality. He would leave today to return to work, home, and life.

"Yeah, I have to head home a little earlier than I thought. There were some problems at the club I have to handle." Steven dropped his phone on the counter and pulled her to him. He kissed her forehead and stood up while hanging onto her.

"I get it. I have so many shoots over the next two months, and I don't know when I can get away from here." Josephine felt her smile drop into a slight frown. "I don't know when I will be able to come see you."

Steven hugged her tight, "We will make this work, Josie." He sounded so sure to her. She was hopeful that no matter what happened, he would find a way to make it work for them. He kissed her on the forehead and then went down the hallway. Josephine went back into the bathroom and finished drying her hair. She took a few deep breaths to check herself before saying or doing anything stupid. She returned to her room and threw on some comfy clothes. She did not want to make it look like she was trying too hard for him when they said goodbye. She returned to the living room in time for him to put his luggage next to the door. He was waiting to say goodbye. They both knew something changed permanently for the pair of them.

"How long were you waiting here?" Josephine was surprised to see him leaning against the wall by the door. He looked like a full snack in his suit, and she just wanted to take him back to bed.

"I just got out here." He put his phone in his pocket and fixed his watch before walking up to her for a big hug. Something about the hug had

Josephine feeling safe and loved more than she had in a very long time.

"I miss you already." Josephine leaned in and gave him a quick little kiss before he pulled her in for an even bigger one.

"I will find a way to get up here soon. We still have that Hawaii trip I won."

Josephine felt pure excitement at his words. He was planning a trip with her. He won everything for her. She had been sitting on cloud nine with him for the entire week.

They were no longer childhood friends or even best friends. They were just more. So much more.

# Chapter Ten

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## Steven

Waking up next to Josephine was something Steven never realized he wanted until it happened. He felt actual joy for the first time in a long time. He knew it was a bubble that would not last, but he wanted to be stuck in that bubble for a while longer. After she joined him in the shower, Steven knew that he was done for. She was everything that he wanted and needed. He knew they would have to talk about everything, but he just wanted to live in the moment for a while longer.

"How long were you waiting here?" Steven looked up to find her staring at him. Those eyes locked him in place. She was not dressed up, but he just appreciated everything about her. His new favorite sight was seeing her without makeup, with her hair up, and in her comfy clothes. He finished appraising her when he realized she had asked a question.

"I just got out here." Her eyes were locked on his, holding him steadily in place.

"I miss you already." Josie leaned in and gave him a quick little kiss before he pulled her in for one he hoped would linger on her lips for days to come.

He put his all into the kiss but knew he had to let go. He wanted to ensure she would never forget a moment of their time together.

"I will find a way to get up here soon. We still have that Hawaii trip I won." He was trying to let her know that this was just the beginning for him. He did not want to go back to where they were before.

She walked him out to the car and hugged him tightly one last time before he got in and took off. The entire ride back was painful for him. He wanted to turn around and toss her in the car to bring her home. He wanted to relive every moment, from the kitchen to the room and the shower with her, not just in his mind.

Work the following week was rough, and when they texted each other, it was about their insane schedules. Neither one of them could line anything up so that they could get together. She was all over the country, the world, doing every show she could be scheduled for, and he was locked into so many events and meetings. The last one he sent her a month after his trip up was simple.

*I miss you.*

It took her forty-eight agonizing hours to text him back.

*I miss you too.*

Four words felt like someone shoved a knife into his chest.

Steven felt her drifting from him the longer they were physically apart. After two months of not seeing each other, he fell into bed with a few of the club bunnies who knew he was in it for a good time, not a long time. He was handling Josie's situation as a full-blown breakup at this point. He was fully invested and ready to spend every minute of every day with her. Now, she was nowhere to be found. She was not responding to his e-mails, texts, social media comments, or any messages. A part of her had taken over everything

he was, and he was determined to drown it in liquor and women to try to kill it off. They did not even have a chance to talk through things.

She shut down and took their friendship with her.

He started feeling a bit better about things when there was a knock on the door, "Hey, boss." Joey, his head of security, opened the door.

"What's up, Joe?" Steven had his head buried in work, trying not to focus on anything outside of that. Every moment was filled with thoughts of Josie, still.

"You have a visitor."

Steven's heart started beating rapidly, "Who is it?"

The door opened wide, and Macy peeked around it. "It's your favorite girlfriend."

Steven's heart shattered all over again. She was anything except his favorite. He felt his face heat up, and the anger rolls through him. "How much do you need this time, Mace?" She always came around when she wanted something. Most of the time, it was as if she could sense he was miserable.

"I just wanted to see you, Stevie." Macy flicked her hair over her left shoulder, trying to do whatever she could to get his attention fully on her.

"Do not call me that." She adjusted her barely-there cleavage in front of him and pushed it up a bit as if to try and entice him.

Macy put on her fake pout and leaned forward, "I have been worried about you. I stopped in before Lock and Key, and Joey said you were out of town."

She stood up to try and get him to look at her when he dove back into work.

"Then I saw you with Josephine on socials, and she had a ring! You didn't tell me you were getting married!"

Steven finally looked at her and saw the smirk did not match the pouty voice.

"It is none of your business." There was a picture of Josephine and himself on



the wall near the door from the Charity Gala that his eyes drifted to. He remembered holding Josie in his arms. She felt so right against him. Everything about that moment rushed through his mind whenever he saw it.

"You look like a happy couple there, so what is with the sour puss face?"

"I will only ask you one more time before I have Joey remove you," Steven sat back, placing his elbows on the chair and folding his hands in front of him while staring directly into her dark brown eyes. "What do you want?"

"I missed you and wanted to know if I could use the club for a party." Her high-pitched voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard compared to how he used to hear her.

"No." He was trying to be straightforward and stern with her. He could not be more direct about his stance if he had tried.

"But, Stevie, I already told my friends I would have bottle service and the upper level rented out." Steven rolled his eyes. "Please?" She always tried to use him for things, and he usually caved. However, that was no longer who he wanted her to be. He would give her something to make her go away, but now he just wanted her to go away.

"I already gave you my answer, Macy." He stood up, straightened his black jacket, and walked past her tiny frame to the door. "Now, I need you to get the hell out of my office. Tell your friends the club is closed."

Macy stood up, walked over to him, and stopped to put her hand on his chest, "I don't know what is going on, but I will come back when you are feeling better." She went to kiss his cheek, and he pulled back from her. Everything about Macy was turning him off and shutting him down. He wanted her to be out of his presence. He could not stand anything about her anymore. She was the complete opposite of Josie, of everything that he wanted, and he needed her to go.

"Please," her brow furrowed, "don't." He guided her the rest of the way out, looked at Joey, and stared back at her, saying, "She is banned. Do not let her anywhere near my club again." With that, he slammed the door while she yelled at it. That was the first time he felt good since the last message from Josie.

Steven decided to reach out five months after he left Josie at her apartment. He took a deep breath and started typing.

*Hey. How are you? I know it's been a minute, but I just wanted to check in. We still have that Hawaii trip to put to good use.*

When he felt it was good enough, he sent it. A few days go by, and I am still awaiting a response. Finally, his phone goes off. He does not look at first, hoping it is her, but is not ready to accept it if it is not.

*I am okay. Just busy. I am still determining when I will be able to go to Hawaii. If you go before we can go together, send me some pics. XO*

Steven got that message and went off the deep end. His heart had shattered into a million and a half pieces. Nothing could have prepared him for the dismissal and distant response from her. He was ready to see her, but she had yet to be on her social media pages to give him a clue about where she was.

He got drunk for what felt like six months straight after that. He could barely remember when or where he was. He moved from event to event, sleeping with everyone who wanted to. He would rather drown himself in other women than reach out again just to get shut down. Nothing stung worse than realizing Josie had sobered up and did not want him anymore. He hit darker points than when he split from Macy two years before Josie.

Finally, he pulled himself out of his stupor and opened a second club in Miami. He was ready to keep building for himself, and he would let her know one way or another that he would be there for her whenever she needed him.

Over a year after he had left her, he showed up at the new location, preparing it for opening day to go over everything. He was walking around, pointing at small things that needed to be adjusted, lighting colors around the DJ booth, setting the tables up, and trying to perfect the behind-the-bar flow. Some of the bartenders were there prepping things and working on new drink specials. "That looks great, everyone." Steven started sipping some of the drinks from shot glasses. He tried the first two, giving a hum of approval at a red and bright blue one. He got to a green one and practically choked. "Okay, we can skip this one."

The bar manager, Stacey, started laughing, "Sorry, Steven, we will eliminate this one from options."

Steven laughed and retreated to his office up the stairs. When he stepped onto the upper deck from his office, he looked down and saw a blonde woman pushing a stroller. His heart stopped beating, and his breath was not able to leave his lungs.

"Who is that?" Stacey had walked up at some point and stood next to him. Steven could not speak. His eyes were following the stroller down the road. "Steven?"

Instantly, Steven was doing math in his head. He could not see the child but was trying to get a glimpse. His eyes kept moving up to follow the woman and then back down to the stroller.

It was not just any blonde woman; it was Josie.

His Josie.

With a baby.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Josephine

Josephine had been getting sick for a few months now. It was not every day, but it was pretty bad. She knew that if it was the flu, it would have come and gone at that point. She was always tired and hungrier than usual, even if she knew she would probably not keep anything down.

She was on a photo shoot one day, about three months after her night with Steven, when she got sick again. Lana was sitting beside her getting her makeup done when Josephine threw up in the trash bin between them.

"Well, that was disgusting." Lana's nose scrunched up, and she leaned away from her.

"I'm sorry. I've been having trouble keeping things down lately." Josephine dug in her purse for one of her disposable toothbrushes that she became fond of and made a break for the bathroom. She felt another wave of nausea wash over her, and she just made it over the toilet bowl. She slumped beside it and waited to ensure another wave would not overtake her.

"Jo?" Lana had cracked the door and brought herself to Josephine's stall.

"Give me a few minutes." Josephine wiped at her mouth and leaned against the wall of the overly decorated stall. She finally noticed the heavy white door, the mirror over the toilet, and the beautiful sink to the side.

"You okay? I never see you sick." Lana was not a worrier typically, but this was not the first time she had seen Josephine sick lately. "Did you go and see a doctor?"

"I probably should at some point, huh?" Josephine stood up and took her two steps over to the sink. She looked at herself and studied her exhausted appearance. Her blonde hair was a bit longer, her hazel eyes were not shining like usual, there were bags under her eyes, and she looked thinner. She opened the disposable toothbrush and started slowly brushing. When she was done, she took a small paper towel and soaked it in cold water. She folded the small piece and set it on the back of her neck. She let herself cool down before opening the door to the waiting area of the women's room.

"I think you should call and make an appointment." Lana held out a bottle of water for her. She had one leg up straight out and one bent at the knee. She had a raised brow and a rare serious look across her face.

"I know. I will do it right after the shoot." Josephine opened the water and took a long drink. The cold water calmed down the burning left in her throat. Josephine would walk out of the bathroom, and Lana put her hand on the door to hold it closed.

"I think you should call now." Lana reached into Josephine's pocket and pulled the phone out to hand it to her. She waited until Josephine conceded and took it to look up her doctor's number.

Each ring felt like it lasted forever.

"Hello, Dr. Neumann's office. Are you calling to schedule an appointment or for a follow-up?" The voice on the other end was so chipper that Josephine

thought she would throw up again.

"Hi, this is Josephine Price calling to make an appointment with Dr. Neumann." Josephine felt an odd weight in her stomach.

Please let me know what the appointment is about.

"I have been having trouble keeping food down. I am exhausted, and I feel off." Josephine wrapped her arm around her stomach and watched Lana take in all the information.

"How long has this been going on?" Josephine was running through the mental timeline in her head.

"For about the last six or seven weeks. It has gotten progressively worse." Lana's eyes practically popped out of her head.

"Weeks?" Lana whispered, yelled at her, and threw her hands in the air.

"Dr. Neumann has an available appointment for tomorrow morning at ten thirty. Does that work for you?" Josephine placed the call on speaker and opened her calendar to ensure no shoots were scheduled.

"Yes. That works for me." Josephine put it in her calendar while the woman kept rattling about arrival time and insurance information before saying a quick thanks and hung up.

"You didn't tell me it has been like this for weeks!" Lana looked genuinely offended.

"I know, but no one wants to know how someone is eating or using the bathroom... or vomiting." Josephine practically vomited, thinking about being sick again.

"We are best friends, Josephine Price! We tell each other all the gross and weird things." Lana looked down at Josephine's hand and backed up, "Things like how you took the ring off last week and haven't put it back on."

"That is different. My ring finger is swollen, and I couldn't get it back on!"

Lana smiled at her, and Josephine felt really weird about it.

"Do you want me to drive you in the morning?" Lana was trying to show Josephine that their friendship was a major priority for her. At least, that was how Josephine saw it.

"I would love that." Josephine hugged Lana tight for a long minute.

"I will be at your place to pick you up at ten." Lana smiled and put her arm around Josephine's shoulders before returning to finish the shoot-up with her. After a long day, Josephine found herself walking around her house, looking at all the spaces Steven had taken up while he was there. His presence lingered for her, and she wanted him back.

*Finally, I had a shoot at home. I have an appointment tomorrow and will be back on the road. Hope everything is going well for you. Miss you!*

She knew that sending that text seemed a little desperate to hang on, but they talked less and less as time passed.

*Glad you get a night at home. The events are starting up, so it is hectic. I miss you too.*

His response was short and sweet, but she knew he was busy this time of year. She was more worried about if she caught something weird at one of the location spots. For the time being, she decided that sleep was the most important thing. She had an appointment in the morning that she could not afford to miss.

When the alarm clock went off, Josephine rolled over and knocked her phone off the bed while reaching for it. She groaned and cracked an eye open to try to see it. When all hope was lost for an easy grab, Josephine sat up, bent forward, grabbed her phone, and stood slowly. She was not looking forward to the day at all. She dressed in comfy clothes and brushed her teeth while

waiting for Lana to arrive at her door. She wanted to be ready to go and truthfully just wanted the problem to be an easy fix.

Lana pulled up and beeped the horn twice. Josephine was already full of regret that she asked Lana to take her. She was sure Lana had a day full of planned activities that she pushed off, and Josephine did not want to be a burden. Josephine locked up her apartment and threw on a fake smile as she climbed into the passenger seat.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Lana was supremely chipper, and it was making Josephine want to vomit.

"Morning." Josephine got her purse wedged between her feet before buckling in. "Listen," Josephine started, and Lana sat back with the car still in park, taking her hands off the wheel to look at her intently, "I just want to thank you for taking me today, but I feel bad. If you have other plans, then you should just—"

Lana waved Josephine off, "No. I told you I am taking you today, so we are on our way." Lana moved back into position and put the car in drive. The car ride was short, but Lana was loud. By the time they checked Josephine into her appointment, she had an insane headache she was sure her friend had caused.

They waited for what felt like an eternity when Josephine's name was called. She let Lana know she would be right back out, but Lana picked up a magazine and waved it back and forth. "I have all the time in the world. Just go figure this out." She threw a wink and then opened up the magazine.

The tiny little nurse directed Josephine back into a room. She was friendly and polite. She could tell Josephine did not want to answer more than the basics, and she excused herself quickly.

About five minutes later, Dr. Neumann walked into the room. "Josephine!



Lovely to see you again. I was going over your chart and what you told the nurse." Dr. Neumann paused, and Josephine waited for something to come out.

"Did I miss a question?" Josephine was genuinely confused at this point.

"No, but I did want to double-check something with you to see if that is okay." Josephine nodded at Dr. Neumann's question. "When was the start of your last cycle?"

Josephine went to mentally check when it was, and then she raced to her phone app, where she kept track. She swiped her finger down the screen to go back in the calendar, and she was stunned when she realized that she had not gotten one since the week before Steven had arrived. Josephine instantly felt her stomach roll over. She jumped off the bed and nudged her doctor out of the way. She grabbed the trash bin, and the barely there contents within her stomach landed inside.

"Miss Price, I will ask you for your urine sample now. I assume it is safe to say it has been a little bit?" Dr. Neumann tried to sound understanding, but Josephine just wanted to bail out of that office and never return.

"I can do that." Josephine looked up to the ceiling and felt the tears welling in her eyes. "It has been about three months since my last cycle." Josephine held her hand out, waiting for her doctor to place the specimen jar in her palm. She already knew what it would say. The math alone put her at about eight weeks. There was no question who the other half was, but Josephine did not want to believe this entire thing was real.

After shaking through the sample collection, Josephine washed her hands and looked in the bathroom mirror. She put her hands on her stomach and closed her eyes. She could not believe that this had happened to her. She took a deep

breath and nodded at herself in the mirror. She put the sample in the little door and alerted the nurse she was done.

She waited for a few minutes before Dr. Neumann stepped inside.

"Just say it, Doc." Josephine knew the words were coming but needed to hear them to verify what she already knew.

"Josephine, you are pregnant." Josephine blew out the breath she was holding in.

"Okay." Josephine sat there, and the doctor started talking. She could barely hear words or register what was happening then but wanted to call Steven. Then she thought about Steven and everything he had going on. She knew one of them would have to uproot their lives, and it was not about to be her. She decided to go visit him a few weeks later to give him the news.

"The nurse will be back in with all of the paperwork, and we will have scheduling give you a call to set up your appointment with your OB."

"Sounds great. Thank you." Josephine could not believe she used the word great, but she did. She was sure she ran out of words to describe what she was feeling, so she used the first thing that came to mind.

Back in the waiting room, Josephine walked past Lana and out the door. She did not even hear her name called until she was bent over, trying to catch her breath by the car.

"Jo?" She started rubbing Josephine's back. "Are you okay?"

Josephine nodded and then stood up, trying to show fake composure. "I am fine. Can we just get out of here?"

"What happened?" Lana was not going to let her get away with dodging the question.

"Just let me in the car, Lana." Josephine yanked on the handle a few times and then stared Lana down. Lana unlocked the door and scooted in beside

her.

"I'm pregnant," Josephine whispered so low Lana thought she misheard her.

"You're what?" Lana yelled.

"Pregnant." Josephine took a deep breath, "I am bun in the oven, baby on the way, pregnant."

"I need a drink." Lana leaned back and stared out the window.

"I can't have one, so drink some for me." Josephine bounced her head twice on the headrest and then looked out the window.

She was running through every single moment with Steven in her mind. Every deliciously dirty moment and that was when she realized that he did not pull out, nor was she on any birth control. They never had that conversation. They should have taken the time to do so, but they both were so caught up in the moment. It was everything she wanted from him. It was everything she craved and needed. He was.

Steven.

The perfect man who was nowhere near ready to be a dad. The ideal man who worked in another city. The perfect man who would expect perfection from her. She had known him almost her entire life, give or take a few years apart, and she knew where he sought perfection. Despite her imperfections, she celebrated them. How could she tell him that she was pregnant and expect him to agree with whatever she wanted to do?

Josephine had to think long and hard about the whole situation. What she came up with had better be a solid idea.

Josephine stopped at the club once, five months after Steven left. He sent her a text that made her think of things. Ways it could have all worked.

Josephine had driven down to see him at the club, but some beautiful woman was there talking to him and hanging on his arm. It lasted a moment, but his

smile told her everything she needed to know. He had moved on, and so would she. He might have mentioned Hawaii, but when she did not answer, he moved on quickly. So, Josie got in the car and shot a message back to protect herself and her child.

*I am okay. Just busy. I am still determining when I will be able to go to Hawaii. If you go before we can go together, send me some pics. XO*

She felt justified sending it, and she did not regret a thing.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Steven

Steven watched her pull the small boy out of the stroller. She gave him little kisses on the nose. She sat at a table at the café across the street. She let the little boy hold himself up and slowly walk along the table's side. When the boy fell on his butt, she picked him up and cuddled him close. She was so tender and loving. It was as if she could sense him staring because she started looking around. She had not seen him yet.

He could not believe how unbelievably beautiful she still was. Everything in him wanted to reach out to her and pull her into his arms, but then there was something telling him to confront her. He was ready to see her. He had been for a long time. Sometimes everything melted together in a pile of crap because she was not there keeping him level. He knew he could not put everything on her, but she had shut him out so many times he gave up on the idea of keeping track of time. He thought she would first reach out to tell him she missed him. He just wanted to hear her voice.

Steven picked up his phone slowly and dialed her number. He watched her pull the phone from her purse rapidly, and she set the boy in his black

stroller. She started rocking the stroller slowly back and forth while she rummaged around. She handed the young boy something. He thought she was about to ignore the call right before his waiting eyes. He watched her even more intently as the ringing continuously went off in his ear.

He could see her as she closed her eyes and took a breath, puffing out her cheeks to release the air in her lungs before answering his call, "Hello, Steven." He was almost too stunned to respond to her.

He took a second before falling in line with the safest greeting option, "Hello. It's been a long time." Steven watched her for a long moment from above before slowly making his way downstairs out of sight. He felt as if he drifted out the front door back to where he could see her. She still had yet to spot him. He was a little amused at the moment she was oblivious to his presence.

"How are you?" Her voice was still as sweet as he remembered. Something about her was still entirely captivating. Too captivating. The closer he got, the more he forgot his initial mission with the phone call.

"I could be better." Steven took the first few steps to the side of the road, waiting for her to register his presence. Nothing hit her yet, but she started looking around, "I have been trying to get a hold of my best friend for about a year and a half now, and when she finally answered," Steven was across the street from the club when he held his breath as he crept closer to take a look at the bouncing baby boy, "she has a young boy with her who looks a lot like me." Steven hung up the phone and watched her entire body still. He was pleased at how well his presence had still set her on edge. He liked making her body react in time with her mind.

Steven shoved his phone into his pocket and leaned over Josie to look at the boy closer. "His name is Lucas." He tried to devise a reason for her to choose that name, and he definitely got hit with it.

"Lucas?" Steven left nothing hanging in the air except for that question. All of the air left his lungs. She was so beyond selfish to keep secrets from him, and she used his middle name for this child. A child he had never met and a child he knew nothing about. If his best friend would name a kid after him, he would know about it.

"He is my son." Josie looked defensive and scared. Steven had never given her reason to feel that way before, so she had to have been seeing someone else. She would have told him if it was his; he was sure of it. The boy was still so young. He could not even be a year old yet. He still had the chubbiness in his cheeks, the rolls on his arms, and the little baby belly sticking out.

"I see." Steven pulled a gold luck coin that Stacey had given him out of his pocket and started to roll it between his fingers. He could feel anger ramping up from interacting with her and needed to focus on something.

"Do you?" Josie sat up straighter, looked at the coin rolling over his fingers and back, and stared him directly in the eyes. "Because you are acting fairly weird about it." She gave a slight nod to the coin.

"Whose child is he, Josie?" Josie's jaw dropped wide open. He could have asked anything else, but that was the first thing that popped out of his mouth. He was automatically hostile to her and felt he had the right to be.

"He is my child, Steven. As I said before." She stood up and pulled a twenty out of her wallet. She slammed it on the table and shoved her purse in the bag underneath. Steven palmed the coin and pocketed it, knowing she would try to make a quick escape. When she tried to walk past him, he grabbed her arm gently but firmly enough to hold her in place and swung her to face him. "Let me go, Steven."

"Who else does this child belong to?" Steven did not care who else was

watching or that the little boy was watching him with his head tilted. All he felt was the pure surge of anger taking over him completely, "Tell me."

"Me. He belongs to me. No one else." Josie leaned into him, took both hands, and shoved him away from her as hard as she could. He could not believe that she tried to push him away from her. He never knew her to try to run like she was attempting to do.

"That isn't how babies are made, Josephine Price, and you know it." He stood firm, and his eyes bored fiercely into her. "Did you sleep with someone else right after I left?" He could feel the last inches of calm clinging on.

"Are you insane?!" Josie looked genuinely offended that he would accuse her of sleeping with someone else, but he tried not to show the instant regret that he felt when the words flew out of his mouth. He needed the confirmation that she did not cheat on him, but that would mean she did something else entirely.

"No. I want to know the truth." Steven's heart was racing uncontrollably. "Who is this child's father?" The more he pushed her, the more he was unsure he was making the right choice, pushing for answers.

"Are you sure you want to know?" Josie pasted a vicious smirk on her face, and her eyes narrowed at him. She had started to toy with him. She was being defensive, and on one hand, he could not blame her. Steven regretted pushing her like this, but he had to hear the words coming from her mouth.

"I didn't sleep with anyone else after you left Steven. The only one I have been within the last two years..." Josie leaned in and shoved hard again, making him take a step back from her, "is you."

"No." Steven shook his head and backed up another step. He got what he wanted. An answer, but that meant something even more damaging was done



between the two, and it could not be taken back. "There is no way this child is mine."

"How can he not be?" Josie looks at him and rubs his cheek. "The hair, those eyes, and that crooked little smirk. He is all you babe." Josie looked back up, her hazel eyes drilling into his.

"Not a chance in Hell." Steven leaned in, finally caring about the spectators. "You would have told me if I had a kid out there. Not hidden him away from me." Steven was trying to get her to say she had been seeing someone else. The reality of what she said made everything so much worse than if she had just been with someone else.

"Would I?" Josie got both hands on the stroller and walked slowly towards him. "Or would I have kept him to myself since I knew this would be your reaction?" Her face was tinted a deep red.

Steven felt the heat rise in his cheeks, matching his to hers, and he finally yelled the only thing he could think of, "You are a bigger liar than I thought you were." With that, he turned away and walked back into the club. His entire staff stood there with their mouths wide open at the scene unfolding.

"Boss, are you..." Stacey was silenced entirely by a large hand waving her off. There was a scoff that made Steven look her way, and yet he did not even care.

"Get back to work!" Steven's voice sent everyone scrambling to return to anything they could, even if they were done with whatever it was. There was no patience left in him for the day. The anger was fueling him.

Steven was completely lost in his own head. He was running through the timeline and the messages again and again. Nowhere in them did she ever mention having a child. He was kept in the dark because she thought he

would push them away. Well, he did a hell of a job at just that when he yelled in her face.

Steven grabbed a glass and filled it with scotch from his personal bar. He again ran through everything in his mind. The boy's face was all he could see, and Josie's pain and anger were written on her face.

"Shit!" He threw the glass against the wall and watched the liquid drip down as the glass tinkled across the floor. He dropped into his chair, leaned forward with his head in his hands, and gripped his hair.

His entire memory of the last two years with her had been tainted by the scene they had outside the club. The scene of her walking up should have made him smile. He could have approached everything differently, but things would have to be handled entirely differently from how he wanted them to. All because he could not keep himself levelheaded.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Josephine

Josephine could not believe how Steven had acted. He wanted to keep pushing her away. He tried to deny that Lucas was his. He was the only one she had been with. She was not the type to sleep around with just anyone in front of her. She had trysts in the past, but nothing only dwindled down to a one-night stand. Josephine was walking quickly with the stroller to return to their little house's safety. Once inside, Josephine slammed the door, waking Lucas up abruptly.

Lucas was crying and screaming. Josephine leaned over the bar of the stroller, her forehead on her hands, staring at the ground. She wanted to pull herself together momentarily before picking up her child. She did not want him to feel the anger coming off of her. She tried to keep everything about their small bubble nice and calm.

"Hey, honey." Josephine reached in to touch his cheek. "It's okay. Mommy was just upset." She pulled him out of the stroller and started rocking him while pacing the length of their living room. Lucas calmed down and sniffled up at her. He gripped onto her shirt and nuzzled into her.

"Are we okay now?" Josephine kissed his forehead, and he giggled. "There we go." She set him up in his mini-play area with a movie on the TV. He started playing with his toys while she stomped into the kitchen. She started doing the dishes and wiping down the kitchen aggressively, cleaning away any thoughts of Steven. She wanted the entire room to be shiny and brightened up.

She was wiping down the baseboards when her phone rang. Lana

"Hello," Josephine answered, mildly irritated. She wanted nothing to do with anyone. She wanted to be alone to wallow in the entire interaction and the overwhelming results.

"Hello, love!" Lana sounded so chipper, like usual, that it made Josephine want to scream. "How is my adorable nephew today?" Lana was the most doting aunt and godmother that Josephine was lucky to have in her corner. She was there for every appointment. She made sure that she was at all of the classes. She showed up and stayed with her the entire week Lucas was born and until Lucas turned two months old. No matter what anyone said, Lucas always had two adults who loved him wholeheartedly. He always would.

"Well, he met his piece of crap father who denied him on the spot." Josephine took a deep breath, "So, he is great." Josephine knew how Lana felt about Steven. She never owned up to the fake fiancé part, but that was because it felt genuine to her. She thought it was just how things would be until they got married. Instead, everything just fell apart on her.

Lana started choking on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry. What?! He met who today?"

She heard Lana clear her throat a few times before she proceeded with any information she could give her. "Yeah. We went to the café, and guess who popped up right behind me?" Josephine whipped the rag onto the ground.

Tiny water droplets landed on the cabinets, and she groaned angrily while moving to wipe them off.

"I am on my way over." Lana was shifting around on the other end of the line. "Stop angry cleaning."

"I'm not cleaning," Josephine said, looking around at the rag and bucket on the floor. "At least not at this moment." She could hear Lana's keys jingling on the other end of the call. When she heard the door click shut, Josephine knew she had limited time to get ready for company, even if it was just Lana. "Stand up, put on comfy clothes, and pull down the bottle of wine we have been saving. I want you to calm down, and we will break it down from the start." Josephine hung up the phone and made her way to her room. She changed out of her cute outfit and did what Lana told her to do. She got into comfy clothes and pulled down the wine.

About twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Josephine got up to get it when Lana let herself in. The door swung open, and she took two steps inside, dumping an overnight bag, a grocery bag, and a bottle of wine in a pile next to her.

"What is the point of ringing the bell if you have a key?" Josephine smiled at Lana and gave her a quick squeeze.

"To alert you to my presence." Lana held her arms out and gestured them up and down her body as if she needed to try to add any flair to her sudden appearance. It was like a grand entrance for a character in an ancient movie.

"No one needs an alert. Everyone knows when you walk in somewhere." Josephine laughed and went to open the wine bottle. She peeked at the label to see what she grabbed in her hasty travels. Pinot Grigio. Her favorite. At least, it was for the longest time. She had not tried it after Lucas was born because of the time she got sick before she knew she was pregnant.

"Well, this is a risky move." Josephine pointed to the label.

Lana started pulling snacks out of her bag and setting them on the counter. "I brought all of the necessities for this conversation." She opened up the cookies and bit into one. "Plus, that was a year and a half ago; who knows if it will make you hurl up your liver again."

"Thanks." Josephine rolled her eyes before she looked at the mini-spread and debated where to start.

"So, start at the beginning." Lana walked over to pick up a thrilled Lucas and gave him a bunch of quick kisses on the neck. She sent him into a fit of giggles. That sound always did something to Josephine. Her heart was instantly healed, and she was happy hearing about her son.

"I took Lucas for breakfast at the café. We sat outside because it was so nice today, and my phone rang." Lana started pouring wine. "I picked it up, and it was Steven. I was shocked he called. It's been how long, right?"

"I mean, I would have thrown the phone. It was like he was trying to curse you with a bad day." Lana took a sip of her wine, and Josephine took a sip of hers. She realized that she had thought about throwing it at him right away. She pictured how that would have looked from the outside and chuckled for a bit.

"I thought about it for a split second." Josephine took another sip, "Then conversation, he is standing over me looking at Lucas in the stroller! There was no time to get rid of the bad day curse once he stood directly over my shoulder staring at him!" Josephine heard her voice rising in volume and tried to shake out all the anger. She was not with Steven. She was with her best friend and her child.

"Okay. How creepy is that, though? Was he following you?" Lana's eyebrows rose up into her hairline. Then she leaned on the counter, holding herself up

with her arms, and made a face down at the counter. The look she made had Josephine practically cackling at her.

"I have no clue where he came from, but he showed up and instantly started accusing me of cheating on him!" Josephine heard her voice going up again, and she took a gulp of the wine, trying to calm herself down. That was the barb that hurt her the most. He thought she would have just moved on from him and treated him like dirt. She had never done that to him in their entire friendship, and she would never have done something like that to him once they were together. At least, she thought they were together.

"He told you that you had to have cheated on him?" Lana set her wine down and brought Lucas back to his play area. "What is wrong with that man?" Lana was turning a little red from the wine or the anger. Josephine was not sure which one it was.

"So many things!" Josephine stared down at the counter and took a deep breath. "Of all the things he could have said, he first asked who the father is." Josephine felt her heart breaking as she repeated the question to Lana.

"Did you tell him?" Lana asked, devouring cookies. It was like watching a cartoon where friends were fighting, and another friend was in the background watching them while shoveling popcorn in their faces and missing their mouths. Her eyes got more expansive with every bite.

"You look ridiculous right now." Lana stopped shoveling the cookies in her mouth and hugging the little bag before Josephine continued, "I didn't want to at first, but he just pushed my buttons repeatedly." She slammed the rest of her wine and held the glass out for Lana to refill.

"So, what did he do?" Lana was getting as ramped up as Josephine at this point. She was leaning back on the tall chair and slamming her wine.

"Denied him and walked away." Josephine felt the tears welling in her eyes.

All the things said to her took her back to high school. Her ex thought she was in love with Steven. He wanted her to tell him that she had cheated with Steven. She never gave confirmation on something that was not true. It did not stop the rumors from getting to Macy, though. She had more than a few things to say about her friendship with Steven and tended to take things too far.

"He denied my sweet nephew?" Lana finally raised her voice. "I swear... when I see that man!" Lana looked at Lucas on the floor. She stared, and the room got silent for a few minutes.

"Don't worry about it. I will handle him." Josephine thought about it for a while. She always had to "handle" Steven when they were younger, but now, handling a grown man with an enormous ego than the boy she knew would be something else altogether.

Lana was playing with Lucas on the floor when Josephine snuck into the backyard. She stared at her phone and opened it to find his name. She clicked on the video chat button. It rang a few times before Steven picked up. She peeked through the window to see Lucas lifted in the air over Lana, and she hoped he would not throw up on her.

"How dare you accuse me of cheating on you!" Josephine knew the entire neighborhood probably heard her yell that at him. She realized, though, that she did not care at all. She needed him to listen to the words that were leaving her mouth. She needed him to realize how badly he messed up.

"Well, a child popped up magically in your life. How could I not?" Steven looked frustrated. He set his phone somewhere, probably on his desk. She could not help but think how good he looked, even through the video call.

"You are the only one I have been with in about two years! You asshole!" Josephine was steaming. She had not been this angry with anyone in a very



long time. Everything in her was telling her to go with both barrels at him. She had a lot to say, and she was not sure she even had enough words in her vocabulary to express how livid she was with him.

"How would I know that, Josephine? We have only talked a few times in text since I left." He leaned forward toward the phone and tried to stare her down on the screen. Josephine was watching his face for the usual little ticks. His defensive manner set her off even more.

"You were supposed to trust in me. You have been my lifelong friend. Now, am I a cheater and a liar in your mind?" Josephine sat down on the porch swing. Looking out at the yard, she set the phone down in her lap so that he could not see her anger turn to sadness and disappointment in him and herself.

"You can say everything you want, but Lucas couldn't be mine." Steven's words slapped her in the face again. She could not believe he was still denying her. He knew her better than anyone else in the world, and yet he was rejecting her truth. The whole truth.

"We didn't have any protection, you moron! He absolutely could be yours!" Josephine was bawling at that point. She had to wonder if he had forgotten that critical fact. She wondered if he had forgotten every detail of that night. It was etched into her mind, but she just asked, "What? Did you forget about that?" The "that" was a loaded question. It held the meaning of everything that happened from the start of his visit to the moment he left. Was it only as remarkable in her mind? Everything he said to her since she saw him again burned into her heart. He was not the Steven she knew and loved for as long as they could remember.

"Josie..." Steven huffed out a breath, clearly thinking everything over in his mind. Josephine hit the end button and let that be that for the night. She could

not accept that he forgot things when she never could. When she looked up, Lana was standing at the door watching her.

"You, okay?" Lana moved to sit down next to her on the porch swing. As soon as her butt landed on the swing, it swayed a little harder and picked up a slight breeze for them both. Lana liked to swing on it, not just sit in it.

"Not even a little bit." Josephine leaned on Lana's shoulder. She was trying hard not to cry all over Lana, but she could no longer hold it in. The tears burned as much as the words she had heard.

"I heard him. I heard all of it." Lana grabbed Josephine's hand. "He seemed so great at the gala. Then, when he left, you were heartbroken and distant from him and the rest of us. Now, he is completely the opposite of everything you said." Lana was right; as much as he had changed, he had also changed her.

He shifted her into someone she was unsure she would recognize if she could go back in time and tell her younger self what would happen. She would not change it, though. "I know. I just needed some time after that trip, and then the whole pregnancy happened. It was just a large boulder coming at me down the hill." Josephine was so far from who she was even a year and a half ago, and she was proud.

"A train that you couldn't stop anymore." Lana was trying to understand where she was exactly coming from. Her friend looked as though she had some secret growth wounds of her own swirling around in her mind.

"Exactly." Josephine wanted to pick her next words very carefully because as much as Lana supported her, she knew she might not fully understand the reasoning. "I planned to tell him, but my focus was only on Lucas. It had to be. My son is the most important being on this planet. He keeps me grounded, sane, and happy."

"He isn't even mine, but he keeps Auntie happy, too, with all the cuddles and kisses." Lana was always there for them whenever they needed her. She was happy to spend time at the house if Josephine wanted to try to get some work done on her computer. She was so glad to help her get back into shape and happy to just be there.

"We are so fortunate to have you, Lana." Josephine was trying to remember if she had expressed this before. She remembered how Lana was there when Lucas was born. She held him and told him she would spoil him senseless.

"Oh, I know you are." Josephine laughed at her. "Everyone is, but I am lucky to have you both, too."

"We know." Josephine knew the two simple words were honest. Lana had no family left. It was just her, so when Josephine and Lucas needed her, that was it. They became their own little family unit. That was automatically cemented the second she drove her to the first ultrasound appointment.

"Now, can we finish our movie and eat the ice cream in the freezer?" Lana was on a mission to fill all the voids with food that night.

"Yes, please." Josephine said, "I still have cookie dough in there, right?" Josephine raised a brow at her, knowing what she wanted the answer to be.

"Oh," Lana let go of Josephine and picked up her pace. "I finished that while listening to your call." With that, Lana disappeared inside, and Josephine rolled her eyes laughing. Still, she walked behind her friend and into the house to look at her son's beautiful face.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Steven

Steven had been thinking about how poorly he had handled the café interaction when his phone started ringing. It rang two more times. It was a video call from Josie. He cleared his throat and hit the green button.

"How dare you accuse me of cheating on you!" Josie was utterly irate. Steven felt like he just got punched in the gut. He knew she would yell at him at some point, but he did not anticipate it the second the call had connected.

"Well, there was a child that magically popped up in your life; how could I not?" Steven's frustration built. He was confident he was right. He never thought she would be keeping something so big from him, not after everything they had been through. He adjusted his phone to a spot on his desk. He was not sure how long she would yell, but he knew she was going to.

"You are the only one I have been with in about two years! You asshole!" Josie was turning bright red. She was finally letting her feelings out in the open. He wished it would've been another situation that was not so large, but it was happening. It was all happening so fast.

Steven ran a hand down his face, "How would I know that, Josephine? We have only talked a few times in text since I left." He leaned forward towards the phone and tried to stare her down on the screen. He knew she was studying his face, trying to read him. He was refusing to let her get a read on him.

Steven realized how long it had been since he had taken the time to notice even the most minor things about her. They had not physically talked much, if at all, since he had left her house. Promises hung in the air, and then they were gone. He left, and then she left.

"You were supposed to trust in me. You have been my lifelong friend. Now, I am a cheater and a liar?" Josie was not just angry; she was hurting. He had hurt her.

"You can say everything you want, but Lucas couldn't be mine." Steven could not handle the fact that Josie went through it on her own. He could not bear the thought of her not needing him or either of them not needing him.

"We didn't have any protection, you moron! He absolutely could be yours!" Josie was crying on the other end of the call, and As Steven realized what was happening, his heart bent a little.

"Josie..." Steven huffed out a breath, clearly thinking everything over in his mind. Josie ended the call before he got a chance to apologize for talking to her that way. He knew he was wrong. The only thing he wanted was to take it all back, to take back how he reacted, to take back every negative thing he had said to her in the heat of the moment.

"Boss?" Stacey had knocked twice and opened the door, as per her usual, before poking her head in. She waved a napkin through at him and smiled.

"Funny," he watched her toss it onto the table near the small seating area, "What's going on?" Steven rubbed the back of his neck roughly. The stress

was tensing up every single muscle within him. He was waiting for Stacey to ask, but he was also not sure she would try to get answers out of him until he was fully calmed down.

"The main floor is almost done. We should be able to get a trial run going this weekend." She was tapping away on the tablet, marking things off her checklist. She was the best member of his team, and at this point, she was also his best friend. He was lucky.

"Perfect. Can you get the invitations out for that, then? I would like the obvious investors, promoters, and the staff from the Keys location." Steven wanted to show it off and give the staff who wished for an option the chance to head up to Miami to start somewhere new.

"Sounds good." Stacey set her tablet down and looked at him. "Anyone else?" He smirked, knowing the prying was coming at some point and having it happen were two completely different things.

"For now, no." Steven gave her an awkward and crooked smile. "Sorry about earlier, Stacey. I was caught off guard by someone."

"I saw, so are you going to tell me?" She sat back. "Is there something to tell?" There was a Cheshire-like grin across her face.

"Right now, I can tell you that I am a jackass." Steven looked up to the ceiling and groaned out.

"That I do know." Stacey laughed and stood up. When she turned, she found the broken glass on the floor from the glass he had thrown earlier. "Also, I am not cleaning that up."

"Understood." Steven stood up and looked at the pile she stared at. "Thanks, Stacey."

"Anytime, Boss." Stacey disappeared behind the door. As much as Stacey was a big part of Steven's life and business, they both had an unspoken

agreement: their relationship is that of a best friend who owns a business and the other best friend who helps maintain it.

Steven sat there wondering about every moment, every kiss, every touch, every word of his night with Josie. Not once, in his memory, did he stop to put a condom on. Not once did they discuss birth control. Neither of them thought about things as they went down the delicious rabbit hole of passion. They just dove all in it together.

Steven closed his eyes and realized that it was the truth. Every single word that came out of Josie's mouth was the truth.

Lucas was his child.

Lucas was their child.

Steven had to fix everything he destroyed in a day's worth of bad spur-of-the-moment decisions involving Josie and Lucas. He wanted to sleep on it and try to start things over again in the morning. If she would let him, he hoped she would give him a chance to fix his mistakes.

The next morning, Steven woke up and got ready for his day. He pushed back all of the appointments scheduled, and he went on a hunt to find out where he could locate Josie and Lucas. Once he was so sure that he knew where to go, he picked up her favorite muffins, some smoothies, and, just in case, some apple juice. The next stop was flowers. He knew she loved lilies when they were growing up, so he hoped she still did. Then he picked up a stuffed polar bear from the flower shop.

When he pulled up and saw two cars in the driveway, he wondered if someone else was living with her. He was worried that someone else had taken on the role he should have been in. He was concerned his son would call someone else "Dad," and the reality of being a parent was settling in.

The doorway loomed over him, and he cleared his throat several times before

knocking. His hands were full, and he almost dropped things when the door opened wide.

"And here I thought you were getting the message she didn't want to talk to you last night on the phone." Steven ran through a few names in his mind before he remembered who the woman in front of him was.

"Lana. Always a pleasure to see you." Steven held up the bag of goodies and the smoothies in front of her.

"You can come in, but I don't think anything you have will be helping you now." Lana moved to the side and let him pass her.

Steven looked at the high, vaulted ceiling and the brightness of the space. He took in the mess of toys in the living room and the messy boy in the high chair. The boy was cooing and smiling, sitting upright. Steven walked to the counter and set everything down. Josie was nowhere in sight.

"My nephew deserves better than what you said to his mother last night." Lana grabbed the green smoothie and pulled out a muffin. She took a long drink and then a bite of the muffin.

"I know." Steven took off his sunglasses and set them on the counter. "Can you take him somewhere so I can talk to her briefly?"

Lana studied him momentarily, "His name is Lucas, and yes, I can. I hope you don't screw this up. If you ever tell her that she cheated again, I will mess you up."

Steven tried not to laugh at the seriousness of Lana's expression, "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. She was in the shower. She should be out in a minute." She wiped off Lucas's face and pulled him out of the high chair. "I will give you thirty minutes once I leave the driveway."

"Thank you." Steven smiled at her.



"Don't thank me yet. I might have to pick up a shovel on my way home."  
Lana waved and chuckled on her way out the door.

"Great," Steven mumbled under his breath. He paced the length of the kitchen counter twice before he started cleaning up the mess Lucas left behind. He was still washing off the tray when Josie walked into the large open area.

"What are you doing here?" she shouted, moving quickly through the house.  
"Where is my son?"

"Our son is with Lana. She let me in and took him on a walk." Steven watched as Josie's face became even redder than it had been the night before when she had spoken to him on the phone.

"Why would she let you in here?"

"I bribed her with smoothies and muffins." Steven pointed and turned to go through the cabinets and find a plate for Josie to use. She stood with her arms crossed, watching him move through her kitchen. "The rest is for you and our son."

"Now he is our son?" Josie was appalled at his words, and he could see the shock written across her face.

"Yes, and I know what you are going to say..." Steven tried to continue but was cut off.

"Oh, do you?!" Josie slapped her hands down on the counter.

"Yes. I was a complete jackass yesterday." Steven set the tray back on the highchair. He was trying to keep moving so he did not have to look into her eyes.

"And every single day, you did not call or talk to me after you left." Josie's words caused him to halt all movement.

"Phones do work both ways." Steven was starting to get irritated, "I texted."

"Texting was not open communication. You left, and it became all about how

our schedules didn't align and work. We never talked about anything real." Josie was calming down a little bit.

"So, why didn't you ever say something like we need to talk or tell me something happened?" Steven tried to mirror her demeanor so he would not be cut off from continuing. He wanted to keep going so they could get to the real point of the conversation, where they talked about Lucas.

"What would you have done? Shown up, been here, or gave in to your desires with the woman who was in your office hanging on you? Maybe you would have turned her down." Steven was trying to remember who was hanging on him when it hit him that she had come down at some point.

"You were there?"

"Yes, I was."

"The only woman I have been around in my office besides my number one Stacey was Mace."

"That was Macy?! You are still involved with her?"

"What?! No! She showed up and demanded money and VIP access to the club. She was hanging on me and flirting, so I kicked her out."

"Oh." Josie deflated a little bit.

"Why were you there?" Steven took a step around the island to get closer to her.

"I came down to tell you," She took a deep breath, "about Lucas."

"When was this?" I asked. It occurred to me that I may have seen her in the club for a moment without realizing it, which made me miss her. I don't remember seeing her, though.

"About five months after you left." Josie barely whispered it out. He almost missed it. She shifted back and forth on her feet, trying to pull herself back into the conversation.

"All of this could have been different. I would have been there from the start. I want to be there now. I can make you both happy. I know I can." Steven felt his heart sink, knowing that one moment, being spotted with Mace sent everything spiraling downward. "I want you to be happy. I have always wanted you to be happy. I want you both to be happy. I want to give you everything you want."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Josie's exasperation hit him in one big tidal wave.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Josephine

"All of this could have been different. I would have been there from the start. I want to be there now. I can make you both happy. I know I can. I want you to be happy. I have always wanted you to be happy. I want you both to be happy. I want to give you everything you want."

Josephine could not believe the words that came out of his mouth. "Are you kidding me right now?" She looked at the front door as it opened, and Lana came in with Lucas. Josephine slipped into her sandals, backed the stroller out, and glared at Lana.

"Josie, where are you going?" Steven yelled after her.

"Away!" She started walking up the walk, and she heard Lana following.

"Oh, no! You let him in there, and now you can get him out."

She walked for a little bit until she heard his footsteps behind her.

"Go away, Steven." Josephine tried to pick up the pace but knew he could make it to wherever she was twice the time with his long strides.

"I'm not going anywhere." His resolve stopped her in her tracks. She felt her heart stop and her world tip on its axis. She had always wanted to hear those

words from him, and they also were words she knew to fear from him. He was never going to let her and Lucas go. They were a package deal, and he was like a dog with a bone.

"Now, after every terrible thing you said about me and thought about me, you just want me to move forward like it didn't happen." Josephine felt the tears coming, but she steadied herself, holding onto what little dignity she felt she had left after the last twenty-four hours of dealing with him.

"I know what I said, Josie. I messed up. I didn't think-" He grabbed at his hair and flung his arms out to his sides.

"No! You didn't!" At this point, Josephine was sure the neighbors were peeking out at her, trying to hear every word. Old, nosy Mrs. Jenkins had always pried for information about Lucas and his father. After all this, she would have every piece of information she needed on her child.

"I didn't think that you would have kept something from me. It did not matter if I was talking to someone else, sleeping with someone else, or seeing someone else. I thought you would have come to me immediately if it was true because my Josie, the one standing before me, loved me and would never have hurt me like that." Steven slid his sunglasses on his face and over his eyes. Josephine could no longer look into them for the truth behind his words. He was shielding himself from her, and in a way she deserved it. In another way, he messed up, and there is no taking back everything he said.

"I did not think you could have moved on so fast, but come on! MACY?!" Josephine pushed ahead on her walk with her child. Again, she tried to get away from him and the conversation, but to no avail.

"Josie, I already told you that nothing happened! I had her removed from my office and my club. She has not been back since." Josephine kept walking, and Steven growled, "Stop walking away from me. He is my son, too."

"No. He is my son." She hissed out in his face. Every single ounce of anger bubbled to the surface, "You lost every right the second you looked me in the eyes yesterday and called me a liar. You lost every right when you denied him. He does not need you to give him money and a good life. I have been doing that. I have been here for every cough, cold, hiccup, dirty and explosive diaper. I held onto him for his shots. I cuddled him when he had trouble sleeping." Josie stepped back while clinging to the stroller, "So, no, Steven. He is not your son. He is mine."

"You didn't even give me a chance. You are shutting things down when they get hard. Like you always have, like you always will." Steven followed a few steps behind her. To her best guess, it was so he could stay out of arms reach. "I want the chance to get to know him, provide for him, care for him, and be a part of his life."

"You are unbelievable." Josephine turned the stroller around and walked back to the house. She knew he would stay a few paces behind her, which gave her the chance she needed. She got the stroller in the front door and whipped around to slam the door directly in his face. She clicked the lock and looked at Lana sitting at the island, finishing her muffin and smoothie.

"So, I take it that went well?" Lana sipped from the bottom of her empty smoothie cup, immediately annoying Josephine. "His keys are on the counter. He can't leave."

As if on cue, a knock sounded at the door. "Josie. I kind of can't leave. You have my keys." Steven said as if he had won, but Josephine was more prepared than that.

Josephine grabbed them from Lana, unlocked the door, and chucked them in the air. He scrambled to catch them, and she took that opportunity to slam the door shut and lock it again. Lana had bent over, cackling at how fast

Josephine moved. Josephine took Lucas out of the stroller and set him in his play area. She turned on a sing-along video and snagged a smoothie off the counter. He instantly was making little noises, trying to mimic the TV. He was up on his knees, crawling a little bit at a time. Her son was the light of her life, and that was no exaggeration to her. He made what was a dark and confusing time seem bright and joyous. He made all of the doubt Steven left her with fade away. Every bad thing she thought about herself did not exist after Lucas was born.

"You know he will come back now, right?" Lana tried to say it in a light and teasing tone, but it had such a serious undertone that Josephine felt the weight of her friend's words weigh her down until she sat on the floor with her back against the island and her knees tucked up to her chin. She knew that the fight for Lucas would begin at some point, and it would be sooner than later.

"I should have never engaged with him. I should have not answered the phone. I should have kept Lucas all to myself." Josephine felt the tears she had held back finally fall down her cheeks.

"He clearly wants to dote on you both. It did not seem like his goal was to take Lucas. At least from the parts the neighborhood could hear." Lana put an arm over her shoulder, and Josephine rested her head on Lana's shoulder.

"Don't side with him on this." Josephine was so mentally exhausted from everything she had to endure from both rounds of arguing with Steven.

"I would never side with him over you, but I will side with my nephew over anybody. I know you will, too. However, I think you are closing yourself and Lucas off to the possibility of Steven being involved." Lana was quietly tiptoeing through the conversation. Josephine knew she was not trying to pick sides, but it sounded like she already had.

"I hope my makeup stains your shirt." Josephine kept crying on her shoulder.

"I can always get a new one." Lana sounded like nothing bothered her, and that bothered Josephine. "Now, do you want to tell me why you decided not to tell him?"

"I thought I saw something happen, and it wasn't even what I thought it was. It was all a complete screw-up on my end. I slowed down talking to him. I cut him out. I pushed him to be with someone else, and in the end, I pushed him away from his son." Josephine felt the final straw of withheld emotion give way. She was sobbing.

Her sobbing sent Lucas into a fit. He was in tears and reaching for Josephine, but when she did not move, Lana got up. "Hey, my little buddy. Do you want Auntie Lana to get you some milk for naptime?" She moved around to heat up his bottle and took him out of the room. Josephine sat still in tears when Lana walked back into the kitchen and held her hands out for Josephine to take.

"Thank you." Josephine stood up and brushed herself off.

"Anytime, but you know that this is now the reality where he will want to see his kid."

"My kid."

"No. His kid and your kid." Lana was always a realist, and it drove Josephine crazy. She never wanted to admit when Lana was right about the big things, but she usually was.

"Well, OUR child has never known him. I have shown him pictures, but I don't think he understands who his dad really is." Josephine was still trying to find ways to push Steven out.

"And now is the chance for that to change. You either work with him, or he decides to go to court for it. He does not seem like a man willing to just give up and walk away." Lana took another muffin from the box. She started



picking at it, and Josephine's stomach growled. "Just eat one. They are not going to kill you."

"You never know." Josephine's words halted Lana's movement, and her friend shrugged before shoveling a large bite into her mouth.

"If this is how I go, I am totally okay with it." Lana chuckled and shoved her mouth completely full.

"I cannot argue with that." Josephine finally relented and took a large bite. The chocolate practically melted in her mouth within the muffin. She groaned out a happy groan, and her stomach grumbled in a satisfied reply.

"So, what are your next steps with him?" Lana was trying to get her to think about things she was not ready for, but she knew it would have to happen.

"I have no clue, but I know I am going to have to work through all of this crap with him. I do not want to put Lucas or myself through court. I am just not ready. He needs to wait until I am." Josephine was being a bit selfish, and she knew it. She did not want to risk giving up Lucas for any time. He was her baby. Not theirs. Not yet, anyway.

"You know that he won't wait. He has been out of his life since he was conceived, and now that he is nine months old, almost ten, he won't want to miss anymore. He is clearly determined to get you back in his life."

"No, he isn't. He is determined to do what he has always done, Lana: win. He wants to win this- by this, I mean me and our son. He wants to pretend none of it happened and that we can just pick up where we left off. He wants to win by claiming me and our son as his. He wants to win by being the one who does the right thing."

"So, you do the right thing first, Jo! Do not give him the chance to best you and win- if that is what he is trying to do." Lana was getting fed up with

Josephine's pity party. She was about to tell Josephine what needed to be said, and she was not ready to hear Lana say it.

"Don't."

"You know better than to try to stand in the way of your child's happiness. You never have before, so why would you start now." Lana said what Josephine had feared. She was standing in the way of her son's happiness. She knew she could not bend to Steven quickly, but she would have to be flexible before things went too far.

Josephine was eating the muffin slowly when the doorbell rang. She was rooted to her spot, hoping it was not Steven again, and she got her wish. What was on the other side of the door made her heart skip a beat.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Steven

Josie kept thinking she could get farther and farther away from Steven, but he knew his strides had him walking at a normal pace while she rushed. He kept up behind her but did not want to risk being slapped, which meant keeping a distance slightly more than arm's length away. Steven realized he was not paying enough attention when the large door slammed in his face. He walked to his car feeling mildly defeated and then realized his keys were still inside her place. A warm and winning feeling fell over him.

He strode back to the door and knocked hard, "Josie. I kind of can't leave. You have my keys." Steven felt like he had won when the door whipped open. The next thing he knew, his keys were tossed up high in the air just a bit behind him. He reached for them and caught them as he saw the door close again and heard a lock click. He debated trying to get her to open the door again, but he realized the conversation was a lost cause for the day.

There were a few ways he always won Josie back after a fight while they were growing up. He would buy her chocolates. He would take her shopping for her favorite clothes. He would take her to the movies. He would then

watch those movies with her. He enjoyed watching her face contort with cheesy or horrific scenes, and he was always taken aback when she cried during the sad moments, mostly the dogs, kids, and old people. Something so simple about being with her seemed to make their fights melt away. The problem with that thought process was that she wanted nothing to do with him.

He spent time digging through his mind and decided to do what he did after their post-prom fight. He bought her three dozen red, yellow, and pink roses and had them delivered to her. He wanted to put the exact words from prom on there, knowing it would spark that memory for her too, so he asked the florist to write out a note that said, "Roses are red, violets are blue, you stole my heart, let me steal yours too." Granted, in high school, he wrote it to try to steal back her attention more than her heart. She had been so mad that she started spending time with other guy friends and people in general, and it got under his skin. He always told her she was the only one who truly knew his heart, so she was the only one who could steal it.

Now, he wanted to steal hers back.

The thought behind it made sense to him. He knew what the message was intended to do: to bring back every memory they made together, to get back all of the smiles and good moments. He knew that they both made terrible choices surrounding their son, but he was going to do whatever it took to rectify his mistakes.

Once he paid the florist, all that was left to do was sit and wait for her to get them. He had hoped she would contact him right away, crying her happy tears, but he also realized she might still be pissed enough to just toss them and the message in the trash.

Steven started busying himself with projects around the new location. He

began by wanting to change some of the colors behind the bar. He liked the mirrored wall, but he wanted the lights above to be something other than red. He played with the settings until he settled on light green. He rearranged some things when Stacey walked up behind him and tilted her head at the changes.

"Why are we doing busy work and changing everything I worked so hard on?" She was anything but thrilled with his changes. He watched her run her hand over the bar, touching every little thing. When she started running her hand across the shining bottles, Steven knew she was about to move them all back to where they were.

"I needed to keep my mind off of other things." Steven would not even look her in the eyes. He kept staring and rearranging further down the bar from her.

She grumbled something under her breath and followed his path for another three or four minutes before turning to him. "Okay, you have not brought it up, but I will ask anyway. Is this about the woman and the child in the stroller?" Steven felt his shoulders tighten up. He knew she caught the movement when she started chuckling. "So, it is yours!"

"Lucas is mine." Steven was finally saying the words to someone other than Josie, and he was feeling a little weird about it. The admission to having fathered a child was something he never thought he would do.

"Who is the woman?" Stacey had barely recognized her, but she thought it was the woman he was spotted out and about with online from an event when he went missing for a week a while back.

"That is Josie." Steven felt her name leave his lips, and it did not taste as sweet as he remembered. He missed the sweetness that came along with it. Just her name held a lot of weight within his history.

"As in, the Josie, the Josie who you fell in love with and ghosted you?" Stacey was shocked. He could see it on her face. He had told her stories about what they went through as kids, and he told her how he felt when he realized he fell for her. She watched how he reacted after he left and things fell apart.

"She ghosted me when she saw me here with Mace." Steven sneered out her name. "I screwed up. I just gave up. I didn't tell her Mace was still around. I don't keep her around; she just is, but I still did not tell her. The history there... it's not a good one." The history between Josie and Mace was too much to get into, but he knew something happened that neither told him about after prom.

Stacey walked around him, moving swiftly for the shot glasses. She set them on the bar and poured a shot into each one. The dark amber liquid was calling to him. He needed to take the bite off the rejection that he had endured from the person he loved. The shot burned going down, but he opted for a second one right away.

"You know what I think?" Stacey tilted her head, studying him.

"I bet you think many things, Stacey. I also bet they are inappropriate to say out loud in polite company." Steven smirked at her. Over the past year and a half, they had become closer. It was not like he was trying to replace Josie, but Stacey sensed he needed a friend, which was how she was. She never wanted to see anyone alone.

"True," she pointed at him, "but also not the point." Her second shot made her make a face of disgust, and Steven laughed. "I think that you always thought that no matter what, she would forgive you, then you said things you regretted immediately. However, you absolutely suck at admitting you are wrong at the moment. You would rather walk away feeling like you have the upper hand, even when you don't, than admit you messed up in the moment."

"If you were anyone else, I would fire you." Steven felt himself turning red. He had been called out by yet another friend. He had been called out by the only person other than Josie who could have made him think about things he never wanted to think about.

"But I'm not, so you won't." Stacey smiled and hopped up to sit on the bar, swinging her legs back and forth. "You just don't like that I am right."

"Can we change topics now?" Steven walked away to the other end of the bar.

"Sure. How are you going to fix it?"

"I went over this morning." Steven looked down, pretending to adjust things everywhere.

"I take it that went about as spectacularly as yesterday." Stacey's sarcastic ways drove Steven to the brink of yelling at her. "What are you going to do now?"

"She threw me out. Twice." Steven leaned on a table on his elbows. "I sent flowers with an inside... not joke really... a memory."

"You're hoping she will run right back into your arms like all is forgiven?" Stacey laughed mercilessly at him.

"Yeah." Steven huffed out. "Kind of."

"You are absolutely hopeless." Stacey was sure of herself, but Steven knew the truth. Josie and he had a more profound connection than just any other friend in his life. They were meant to hold on to each other. They were the types of friends who would forgive each other for anything. The entire situation was just a more significant issue than anything they had ever had to work through in their long friendship. They were no longer just friends, though. They were parents.

Josie had kept that fact from him, and while he wanted to try, he was unsure

they could work through this just like any other disagreement. He was going to try to remind her of how they worked through things, but he was also worried that she would shut it down. Not because of his words. No, he was afraid because if she shut it down, their entire friendship would be blown to hell. It would be different for them if she reached out after his gesture. He knew the new reality was possible, but he was unaccepting.

"I am not hopeless, Stacey." Steven pulled out a chair and dropped into it. He did not want to tell her he felt that way, but he did. He felt it, amongst other many other things. "I am worried. I might lose my best friend, my kid, and someone I love all at one time." The admission was heavy in the air. He wanted to put his fist through a wall but did not want to take the time to repair anything he broke before the dry run.

Stacey sighed and moved to join him, "I don't think there is any way possible for you to lose her now. You have a kid together. I do think there is a break that could happen between you both. You said some harsh things to her, and she said some harsh things to you. Sometimes, we have to accept the reality of the outcome when it happens. There is never a right answer either."

"So, I just let things run their course?" Steven felt bewilderment run through his mind.

"Basically. If you push too hard, Steven... she just won't return to you. At least not in the way you want her to." Stacey squeezed his arm tightly and stood up from the table. "I will be back in an hour for the dry run. I need you to be changed out of that," she pointed at his jeans and t-shirt, "and into your usual suit ensemble."

"Yes, boss." Steven saluted her as she walked toward the back door.

"Oh, I like the sound of that." Stacey winked at him over her shoulder. Steven got up and began to get ready, even though the dry run was the last thing he



wanted to do. He just wanted to go back to the day before and stop himself from saying such stupid things.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Josephine

Josephine looked at the roses the delivery guy was holding out to her. They were stunning. The card's envelope had beautiful silver foil around the outside. The ribbon that was tied to it was a silver one and a light blue one. The dozens of roses smelled amazing as the breeze blew their scent into the house. The large vase was filled with water and gorgeous shimmering beads at the bottom.

"Ma'am, are you going to take them?" The tall, lanky teenager was holding them a little closer to her. Josephine held her arms out and gripped them tightly as they were placed in her arms. They were heavier than she expected, and the vase weighed more than it looked like it would, too.

"Sorry." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Thank you." She clung them tightly to her chest and slammed the door with her foot. She knew where they came from, and she knew what they meant. Her hands were shaking as she pulled the envelope from the top. She did not want to open it yet. She set the envelope down in front of her on the counter. She leaned on her elbows over it. She slapped her hands down and stood up straight, still staring at it.

"Nope. Not doing it." Josephine walked to the fridge and pulled a bottle of water out. She took a long drink before looking back over her shoulder at the unopened envelope. "Nope. Not giving in just because he sent me flowers." She realized she was talking to herself and went to the couch. She flipped on a show and then changed it four minutes in. She did that for about thirty minutes until she stood up and walked back over to the solitary envelope. She tapped her fingers and finally picked it up.

"I should make some food for Lucas and me." She started pureeing some different foods for Lucas. She was getting it into packets and organizing everything when she noticed a splotch on the envelope. She grumbled and wiped it off. She tapped the bottom of the sealed card on the counter. She tossed it back down and started making some food for herself. She settled on spaghetti. It was simple and easy.

Josephine stared again and almost caved when she heard Lucas cry out for her from his room. She walked out of the room and away from the temptation of the envelope. She had a guess as to what could be inside. Her mind flipped back to the Friday after prom weekend.

*Steven showed up with his jersey on. He was solo, and she was happy. She sat on the porch with a book in her hand. The lights wrapped around the porch in a beautiful low setting, and the flowers climbed the trellis behind her. He had red, yellow, and pink roses in hand, with a silver and light blue bow around them. He had a card in his hand, and my eyes narrowed at him.*

*"Josie. I know I shouldn't have taken off with Macy after the dance. I screwed up." Steven held the flowers out for her. He shook them slowly back and forth in front of her.*

*"Yes, you did." Josephine put her finger between the pages and closed the book around it. "Let me see the note." Josephine gave up and closed the*

*book, hoping to find her place later.*

*Roses are red, violets are blue, you stole my heart, let me steal yours too.*

*"I stole your heart?" Josephine was whispering out at him.*

*"Well, yeah. You stole it when we were little. You are the only one who knows everything about me, and you hold onto my heart so I don't get hurt. I want to be the one protecting your heart, too." Josephine was about to respond when Steven's phone rang, "Hold on, it's Mace."*

*"Oh," Josephine let the tiny shred of hope go. She realized he meant she was protecting him as his best friend. She set the card down and the flowers on top of it. She opened the book, scouring for her spot in it. "Go ahead. Get it." She knew Steven could tell she was irritated, yet he still answered the phone. Josephine shooed him off the porch so she did not have to listen to the call. A few minutes later, Josephine looked up, and Steven was watching her.*

*"Sorry. She was wondering when I would be there to pick her up for Tony's party." Josephine felt the sharp pain in her chest. She knew he did not feel the same way he did, but for a moment, she hoped. That hope just about crushed her where she sat on the swing.*

*"Well, you don't want to keep her waiting." She knew her words were bitter and angry.*

*"Josie, I don't like when we fight." He stood directly in front of me, stopping the swing with his knees.*

*"Neither do I, but I am really angry with you." Josephine knew she was overreacting. She knew that they were not more than friends, but she wanted him to have the same reactions to her that she had to him.*

*"Please, Josie. I need my best friend." Steven's eyes filled her with butterflies.*

*"I might be with Mace, but she will never take the place of my best friend."*

*"Steven. She and I do not get along, and you know that. So, why would you*

want to be with someone who does not want your best friend around and someone that I personally don't want to be anywhere near?" Josephine got frustrated and stood up, so they were chest to chest. "I love you, Steven," She let the words hang in the air long enough to confuse him, "but doing this to me is not okay. You knew when it happened, this wouldn't end well."

"What happened with you two?" Steven was as clueless as it came.

"Nothing for you to worry about, but if you are willing to end up separated from me, then fine. Go for it." Josephine shoved him back and started to walk away. "I am mad, but I forgive you. I always forgive you." Then she turned around for her flowers and card. "Thank you for these."

"You're welcome." Steven kissed her forehead and let her walk away. "Love you too, Josie."

Josie shook her head and pulled herself back to reality. She changed Lucas and brought him out to his play area. She sat with him on the floor for a little while, studying all of the little things that were a reflection of Steven. She was lucky. Her best friend was the father of her child. He was the product of love. While it was not the kind of love that she expected to blossom at any point, it happened, and she was given the most beautiful gift she had ever been given.

After another hour, she finally caved and opened up the letter. She had the card still flipped over, but she knew what was coming.

*Roses are red, violets are blue, you stole my heart, let me steal yours too. For real, this time. -Steven*

She felt herself take in a deep gasp. Even though she knew what would be written there, she still could not believe what was in front of her on the piece of paper. She missed a lot about Steven and his friendship, and she knew he missed a lot when it came to Lucas.

Lucas was staring at her from the television as she went over all of the things Steven had missed. His commercial was the cutest thing to grace television screens, at least in her opinion. He had been a fortunate baby. Not only did she make money modeling on her own, but she also made money modeling with her son and letting him have his own little bit of fame. She wanted to make sure that no matter what, Lucas would never have to worry about the cost of anything. She wanted to make sure his future was secure. She never did anything that would be exploitative, but just enough to get him a good little savings. Her career got them the house of her dreams.

She wondered if Steven had ever seen him on the television. She wondered if he would recognize Lucas now that he got the chance to meet him. Would he be proud of them? Would he be proud of her? It was weird for her to think about. She never wanted someone to be outwardly proud of her before Lucas. She knew he would be proud of her one day. He would grow up and be grateful for everything his mom did for him while he was young.

"What do you think, Lucas? Should Mama call Dada?" She looked at the little boy and touched his cheek while he sat there hanging onto his toy. She picked him up to hold onto him while he stood. He was close to ten months old and growing so quickly. He was pretty advanced with certain things, and it was humbling. She was not sure how she was so lucky. She also never thought she would be staring at a little baby, thinking he was her whole world.

"Mamamama." He had only said it a few times, but it made her smile brightly every time he said it to her.

"That's right, baby boy. I am your Mama." Josephine eased him back to sitting. "Should I call Dada?" Josephine held up her phone to show him, and he giggled at her. Josephine put the phone back down and decided that

playing with their son seemed like the better option for the day. She knew he would want to hear her forgive him, and he would like to establish some ground rules.

"I feel better without the rules right now, honey. Let's make Dada wait for a while longer." Josephine sat next to her son. She decided to cuddle and watch a bunch of movies. She sang along to some of the songs. A couple of the movies played, with the commercials loading up occasionally. She loved pointing out to Lucas when he was there. She would giggle and be incredibly proud. She would tell him how proud she was time and time again.

"What do you think we should do today, Bubba?" Josephine stretched out and decided it was time to stop moping around the house. She knew her son needed to be out and about. Her pity parties were not worth dragging his life into a slow crawl for. He deserved her at her very best, no matter what. Any sadness she felt could wait for naptimes or bedtimes. She was meant to be happy for her son during all awake time. She decided they would be heading out to the zoo. She got him dressed for a zoo day, pulled herself together for a zoo day, and then loaded up the diaper bag. Seeing animals would make both of them smile.

"Alright! I think we have everything we need. Let's get going!" Just as they were going to walk out to the car, there was a knock on the door. She flung the bag over her shoulder and opened the door to find Steven on the other side.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Steven

Steven stood in his office, pacing back and forth. He was trying to figure out what to do next when he realized how long it had been. He turned on the television and let a gameplay in the background. He needed the distraction. He would lose his mind if he didn't have one, wondering if he had just made things worse by trying to contact her.

He made it through a batch of e-mails and phone calls about things happening at the Key West location, some people causing security issues, some bar problems that needed to be addressed, and some plans for events that needed to be fine-tuned, but he was moving on to problems with the current location. He thought he handled everything earlier, but there are always issues when construction and design are involved. One significant matter causes five smaller ones when dealing with a business. He was putting out fires left and right when his head of security walked in and brought up that he had a visitor who, while banned, was refusing to leave the property.

"Give me one minute to call the police before you let her in here," Steven called the police and told them about Macy's situation. He wanted her



removed almost as soon as she walked through the office doors. The police sent a car to escort her off the property, and it would arrive shortly.

"Okay, bring her in." The head of security smirked at him, knowing how this was about to go. "Stay in here with us when you bring her in."

"Understood." The tall, burly mountain disappeared behind the doors and appeared five minutes later with a very angry-looking Macy.

"Why am I being told I can have no contact with you? They were not going to let me in here." Macy was disheveled and outraged by the whole interaction.

"Because you are not allowed on any of my properties, Mace. I told you enough times I was done with it, and you chose not to believe me. Well," Steven gestured around the office, "here we are." He dropped his arms and caught sight of the baby on screen over Macy's head.

Macy swiveled to look at the screen and turned back to him with a large and crazy grin, "I can give you one of those."

Steven looked at the screen and realized it was Lucas. He smiled but then lost his smile when his gaze met Macy's. "I already have a child, Mace. That child, actually." Steven went to pull out his phone and text Josie, but he stopped himself.

"No, you don't." Macy looked furious at this point. "That is just some kid modeling for a commercial. The chances that you know him are astronomically low."

"Actually, they are pretty high when I know his mother is a model." Steven searched his memories of billboards, buses, commercials, shows, and movies for other times he may have spotted his child without realizing it. At that point, he knew he had seen Josie and Lucas in ads together. He did not realize

it was Lucas at the time, but he could see it now that he knew it was their kid.

"You are so full of it." Macy moved closer. "Come on, baby. Don't you miss this? Don't you miss us?"

"Macy, I have never wanted to..." Steven stepped back and smiled when he caught sight of the squad car pulling up, "Tell you to get out more than I do right now. Josephine would not appreciate you being near me, and Stacey outright hates you. So, if I were you, I would leave on my own before I was dragged out by police."

Macy scoffed, her jaw hitting the floor. "What does precious Josephine have to do with anything?" she said. Then she looked at the television and back at him. "No way did you knock up that idiot."

"She is not an idiot." Steven felt his face redden in anger. "She is the mother of my child, and I did not knock her up... I got her pregnant. No need to be so crass all the time." Steven sat in his chair behind his desk and put his feet up, waiting for the door to open to the police.

"She should have listened to me in high school about you," Macy growled out, and before Steven could ask what she meant, the police walked into the office and took her out in cuffs for trespassing, harassment, and she added aggravated assault when they watched her throw a vase at him before they could cuff her. She put up a hell of a fight when they dragged her out, but Steven had no regrets.

"Sir, if everything is all settled here, we want to make sure you are certain about pressing charges." The young officer must have felt pity for her. She kept looking at the woman yelling in the car.

"I am sure. She followed me up from the Keys. I have no desire to deal with someone who has followed me from one business location to another."

Steven's words seemed to resonate with the officer.

"Have a good day, Sir." The officer gave him a pitying glance and walked out.

It was almost lunch when Stacey popped back in. "I hope I am not interrupting, but I was told something about an unhinged woman being taken away in a police car?" She looked around and saw the shattered vase. "Tell me you did not have Josie arrested and are stashing the kid somewhere."

"No!" Steven started laughing at her, "What is wrong with you?" He picked up the large chunks and chucked them in the garbage bin behind him. "Mace showed up again. I warned her she was not allowed on the properties, and she persisted. So, I had her forcibly removed, she threw a vase, and she got an extra charge from it. Now, she is in jail."

"Wait. You pressed charges?" Stacey started belly laughing. She was close to tears. "That is the best thing I have ever heard in my life!"

"I knew you would be thrilled." Steven bit his lip and looked down to keep from laughing as hard as she was. "Sad you missed her epic rant?"

"I am devastated! I would have been here with popcorn!" Steven watched Stacey stand up quickly and raise an arm up in the air, "I would have been here with a flag saying 'Go Steven!' on it!" She dropped back to the couch and started laughing so hard she cried.

"I am so sorry I did not wait for you then." Steven looked over at the television, hoping for another glimpse of Lucas.

"You should be! I have so many insults that I did not get to use!" Stacey fake pouted and started listing all the things she disliked about Macy. "I feel like it was such a missed opportunity!"

"I took such an opportunity from you?" Steven feigned sadness and regret, "How dare I?"

"Well, at least I don't have to warn everyone about her showing up at the dry run. That is one thing off the never-ending list." Stacey leaned back on the black leather chair and looked over at Steven. "You keep staring at the television like someone is going to jump out of it."

"I wish. I caught a commercial, and Lucas was in it." Steven glanced away and back every few seconds.

"Your kid was in a commercial?" Stacey was staring just as hard, trying to find him. She did not even know what he looked like, but she still tried.

"Apparently, he has been in a bunch of things." Steven pulled up some shots of Lucas and Josie together in an ad campaign. He looked up the commercial to show her and found some solo shots of Lucas.

"He is the most adorable child I have ever seen." Stacey kept scrolling and looking for a bit before she opened a picture of Josie and Lucas together. "Is that her?"

Steven stared at Josie's posed form in the photo, "That is definitely her." He handed the phone back to her and tried to pretend he was doing work-related things.

"She is gorgeous." Stacey smirked at him, "So, is there a reason you haven't gone over there yet? I know it is killing you to sit here in the office."

"What do you mean? Is there a reason? You," Steven pointed a finger at her, "told me not to!" Steven's mouth dropped wide open, and his eyes were practically bugging out of his head.

"I remember saying no such thing." Stacey's eyes gleamed with mischief and humor. She walked out of the office carrying her laughter with her.

Steven grabbed his keys out of the top center desk drawer and locked it up. He stood and grabbed his phone. He opened it up to Josie's name and almost called her first. There was no way she was going to answer for him after the

last argument. He locked up the office, and his head of security walked him down to the back door. He would show up and hope for the best at that point. He hoped the flowers would soften whatever blow she would be prepared to throw at him.

The car seemed so silent on the way to her house. He remembered how much he enjoyed the silence as long as she was with him. Sometimes, they were just there. That was the beauty of their friendship. They always found the best of life in their quiet moments.

*The summer they had turned sixteen was the most vivid moment he could remember with her. It was his favorite place to go when things started spiraling out of control around him.*

*The sun was setting over the tops of the trees, and the sky was red and orange. It was a deep red, not a bright red, and it lights everything in the world up a little differently. Steven looked to his right at Josie lying on the hammock beside him. She squinted one eye to see him and smiled. She adjusted herself into his side, and he put an arm over her shoulder.*

*A few hours earlier, his mom was screaming at his dad. He tried to avoid being involved in any of it, but his father always asked his opinion. When Steven gave it, his father did not take it kindly.*

*The waves crashed in the background somewhere. The beach had always been their favorite place to hide out. His family house was the perfect getaway until his father showed up and inevitably ruined it. Steven looked down and realized that Josie had fallen asleep tucked against him.*

*All of the bad had melted away.*

*She always did that for him. She gave him the calm and quiet he craved and the small moments he did not know he wanted.*

*Steven slowly shifted so that Josie could put her leg over his thighs. She*

*snuggled in closer to him.*

*That was the first moment he realized that he could love her.*

Steven pulled himself out of the memory. He knew the truth. Macy was never going to be it for him. No one was. He was so madly in love with Josie back then, and until he went to help her out, he thought she would never look at him that way.

Putting the car in drive, Steven made his way to her house. He was willing to take whatever she would dole out at him as long as she heard how he remembered their sixteenth summer. He wanted her to know there was no reason to worry about him taking off. He was there for her no matter what happened.

He thought about telling her about the incident with Macy, and then he remembered he needed to ask her what Macy meant by what she said about some warning in high school. He knew there was some hostility between the two; he just never knew a warning was given. The ride seemed to only ramp up his anxiety.

He got back out in front of her place and waited for a little while. He did not want her to think he was out there since he had left early that morning.

When he finally got out of the car and made it to the door, he knocked swiftly twice. The door opened wide. He felt immediate anxiety as he stared at the pair.

Josie was obviously ready to leave the house for an adventure, and Steven decided that was the moment to make a horrible joke, "Trying to run away and keep him all to yourself?"

Josie's mouth dropped open, and she snapped it shut, trying not to take the bait. "Actually, I am just taking Lucas for a zoo day. Is there something I can help you with?"

"A zoo day huh?" Steven grabs the diaper bag off her shoulder and carries it to her SUV.

"What are you doing?" Josie eyes him warily as she loads up Lucas.

"I'm coming with you. This feels like it should be a family day event." Steven left her standing there, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, while he climbed into the passenger seat.

"You're what? This is a what type of thing?" Josie's voice went up an octave, and Steven smiled at her from between the seats.

"Let's go! The zoo waits for no one!"

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Josephine

Josephine was completely caught off guard by Steven's attitude again. "Trying to run away and keep him all to yourself?" She wanted to slap him for that. She would never run away with their child and not tell him. At least not once he found out.

She had to check herself before she said anything that would set off another argument in front of their son, "Actually, I am just taking Lucas for a zoo day. Is there something I can help you with?" She felt proud of herself for making it through that. She tried to push forward to the car.

"A zoo day, huh?" Steven took the diaper bag off her shoulder, and she felt a little out of sorts because he was touching things and moving around her.

"What are you doing?" Josephine was frustrated that he was just moving around as if there wasn't anything going on with them.

"I'm coming with you. This feels like it should be a family day thing." Steven left her standing there with her mouth opening and closing while she tried to think of something to say back to him.



After about thirty seconds, she found her voice, "You're what? This is a what type of thing?" Josephine felt her voice jump up an octave. She wanted to scream at him but also to keep a smile on in front of Lucas.

"Let's go! The zoo waits for no one!" Steven did an annoying drumroll on the dash, and Josephine shut the car door. She rolled her eyes and looked up to the sky, cursing whoever sent him back to her on the same day they got into a screaming match in the middle of the subdivision.

Josephine opened the door and slid in, "Actually, the zoo could wait for you if you did not want to come with us. I mean, it will always be there for you to join us on a different day when I don't want to strangle you." She said it in a higher and peppier voice, trying not to let Lucas in on her irritation. She turned her key in the ignition and backed the car out of the driveway.

"So, what is his favorite area at the zoo?" Steven kept looking between her and Lucas in the car. Josephine was trying to ignore him, but she also did not want him to not know his son.

She adjusted in her seat, "His favorite section is the Critter Connection, but he seemed to enjoy the Mission Everglades." She turned the air conditioning up in the car and then, for some reason, kept going, "I personally enjoy the Africa area and the Amazon and Beyond area."

"Still love elephants and the big cats?" Steven tilted his head and smiled at her.

"Absolutely!" Josephine was about to go on a rant about how amazing the elephants are, but she remembered that she had gone on that rant many times before when they were younger. "What are your favorite areas?"

Steven did what he does best, charmed, "I am sure I will love every area that you both love. You do pick winners." His smile went right at her. It was bright and beautiful. He was beautiful.

"Stop with the flirty comments, Steven. Today is about you spending time with your son." Josephine tried to put distance between them to fake it until they made it. "Just," She let out a breath and gripped the wheel a little harder, "focus on him right now. Not me."

"Got it. I need to win one over at a time. I got this." He spun around and faced Lucas. "Should we get all of the treats today?" Lucas let out steady giggles. "You are with Dada today, so let's get some treats."

"Not all of them, thank you. I want him to be able to sleep soundly tonight." Josephine heard herself say it but did not want to admit that she sounded like her mom. Steven chuckled, probably thinking exactly what she was thinking. "Last time Lana had him so jacked up on ice cream... it was not a good time."

"So, extra ice cream?" His sarcastic tone almost made her want to scream.

"If you make today a nightmare for me, Steven, I will make the next week a nightmare for you." Josephine saw him twitch a bit, and his smile dropped slightly. She knew she had scared him from pushing too much further.

"Fine. No extra ice cream." For the rest of the drive, Steven hummed to the radio and tried to do whatever he could to lay eyes on Lucas. He was trying too hard to avoid looking in her direction. She wanted to laugh at him but worried that it would spur him on.

It was a quiet walk into the zoo until Lucas started getting excited about all the different animals. Steven kept saying he was Dada to him, trying to ensure that Lucas would not forget who he was. Josephine thought it was adorable that he constantly picked him up to show him things. When Steven pointed out something and mentioned any random facts he knew, Lucas bounced a bit more.

Lucas eventually fell asleep in the stroller. When he was sleeping soundly,

the pair kept walking around to see the animals he was missing. Josephine did not want to wake him up and ruin a good nap. He would have been so cranky. They walked in circles when Lucas woke up, ready to be changed and have a bottle. Josephine finished it and grabbed some food when Steven told her to leave the stroller with him. At first, she was weary of leaving him with Steven, but then just seeing them together as Lucas clutched onto his cheeks and giggled at him sent her heart fluttering through a lot of what could be thoughts.

They left the zoo, still barely talking about surface things, when they loaded Lucas in the car. Steven took the initiative to spend time getting to know all the things his son loved. He tried to understand what made him smile or made him upset. Josephine did not want to cave to him; it would eventually happen, but she could feel the ice around her heart melting. Steven helped her carry everything into the house and got quick directions on where to put everything away. He had not been further than the kitchen and living room area at this point. The open floor concept made him smile. She caught the slight grin and threw a towel at him.

"I would ask you to stay for dinner, but we are a bit past that." Lucas was on the floor, and Steven slid down next to his son. The doorbell rang, and Josephine rushed to get it, "Um... did you order dinner?"

"Yes, I did. You did not eat much while we were out, and I was not sure you had even touched the muffins I brought this morning." He looked away from Lucas, and she watched their son start to get upset.

"Dada." He said it angrily, but Lucas said it.

Josephine almost dropped the pizza on the floor. "What did my son just say?" She went to set the pizza on the counter and walked up behind them.

"I believe he just said, 'Dada.'" Steven was wearing a gigantic and obnoxious

grin.

"Nope." Josephine walked back to the counter and flipped the pizza box lid open. She shoved a slice into her mouth and bit off some of it aggressively. "There is no way he got that so much faster than Mama." She was ready to cry, both happy and frustrated. One day, with Steven, Lucas was completely in love with his father.

"Sorry, love. I think that he did." Steven turned back to look at her. He stopped smiling when he saw her eyes full of tears. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry." He got up slowly to avoid jostling Lucas. He walked over to her and gave her a quick squeeze. She pushed him off of her and took another bite of pizza.

"It's fine. One day, and BOOM, super dad to the rescue." Josephine heard the anger in her voice.

"You know, it's not even like that. He heard me say it a million times today." Steven grabbed a slice and started eating. Josephine got Lucas into his highchair and fed him before giving him a bottle and putting him to bed. She walked out of Lucas's room quietly. She was ready to talk with him a bit, but she was unsure how to approach the subject with kid gloves. "Steven, we both have not handled this how we probably could have, but we can't go back and change things."

"I know. I wish we could, though. I would have brought you with me when I left." Steven said it so effortlessly that Josephine was taken back a bit.

"Steven, you knew I was not going to leave my life behind, and I was not going to ask you to leave yours." Josephine never thought they would be having the larger conversation right away. "Neither of us would have been happy uprooting ourselves."

"Maybe you're right. However, we will never know how it would have turned out if we did make a choice in that moment." Steven spoke the words she had

wondered for years. He had wondered just like she did.

"Can we just hang on to that conversation for a bit longer?" Josephine took a bite of the cheese-filled crust and set the crust down in the box. "Right now, we just need to focus on how to be good parents for Lucas." Josephine hopped up on the counter and spun to face him, crossing her legs.

"Agreed." Steven took another piece of pizza and bit into it.

"Okay. So, how often will you be back here to spend time with Lucas?" Josephine narrowed her eyes a bit.

"I actually live here now." Steven stood tall, and she stared him dead in the eye.

"Since when?" Josephine could not believe what he was saying to her.

"For the past six months. I am opening a sister club here. The original one is still open, but I planned to be here anyway. This is just an incentive to finish the official move faster." Steven was not even taking a second to think about any of it.

"I am glad that you will be close by for him." Josephine was trying to figure out how she missed his club opening a secondary location. Lucas started fussing, pulling her attention from Steven. He settled himself quickly, and Josephine shifted her focus from the monitor back to the man in front of her.

"Today was a good day, Josie." Steven smiled and looked down so he would not have to look her in the eye.

"Today was a good day." Josephine accepted the fact that it was a good day. She would even go so far as to categorize it as excellent, even given how it started out with the two of them. She started moving around to clean up the house when she noticed Steven beginning to help her. She chuckled a bit while he was fumbling around with all the toys.

"What?" He dropped the pile back to the ground and tripped clumsily over

one of them.

"I never thought I would see you doing something so domestic." Josephine started laughing.

"Well, this is the new normal, right?" Steven picked everything up again and put it back. "Can we devise a schedule for me to come over and do things with Lucas?"

Josephine stopped moving and stared at him for a minute, "I guess we can discuss it at some point, but can we just count today as a win and move forward from here? Slowly?"

"Sure, we can do that." Steven's words were like a weight off of Josephine's shoulders. She had gone through enough emotional rollercoaster-type things for one day and was not emotionally prepared to make a schedule to share Lucas with him.

# Chapter Twenty

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## Steven

Steven was happy to take part in Lucas and Josie's life. She agreed to let him come over two nights a week for dinner with their son and one family day activity on the weekend. It was something that he looked forward to constantly. He started the next countdown the second he left their apartment. They had gone to the aquarium twice in the last three months, celebrated Lucas's first birthday together, went to the zoo more times than he could count, and even started having a sleepover on Fridays so he could be there for the entire day on Saturdays.

Steven was not sure when family life got a firm grip on him, but at some point, all he wanted was to run the clubs from the background and focus on his family. Then came the day of the park. They had spent the morning in their usual routine. Steven showed up with breakfast for them all so they could get moving as fast as they could into the day's adventure. Josephine watched him with a look he had not seen in a long time. He looked over at their son, and then he looked back. He did not see it on her face anymore.

Steven gathered all the stroller necessities and packed them up to go. When he walked back in, Josephine was frantically looking through drawers and cabinets.

"What are you looking for?" His voice made her jump, and he could not help but chuckle.

She started opening the pantry and digging through things, "I set my phone down somewhere." She slammed the pantry door, "I can't find it."

Steven grabbed her phone from the little key tray on the entry table and held it up, waiting for her to turn around. She kept going with her back to him, "Hey. You set it in the tray."

She whipped around and sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "I swear I am losing my mind right now." She walked over to grab it from Steven, and he held the phone up further than she could reach. She held her hand out to him, and he set it gently in her hand while leaning in for a sneak kiss on the cheek. "Take a breath. I'll go get the tornado into his stroller." Steven left her in the house when he walked out to the garage with Lucas.

He heard footsteps followed by Lana's voice, "And where are you going for today's adventure?"

"The plan is the park this morning and that new kiddie pizza place that opened up. We think he will like it." Lana tapped her sunglasses on her chin and nodded in approval.

"I have been trying to call her, but it kept going to voicemail. I got worried." Lana leaned over Steven to give Lucas little smooches on the cheek. "Just so you know, I am always open for babysitting if you need a date night. I'm sorry if an adult night was needed." She smiled at Steven, and he nodded at her with a smirk on his face.

Lana disappeared inside, and Steven leaned over to Lucas, "I think Auntie



Lana is trying to play matchmaker for Mama and Daddy." Lucas smiled up at Steven and clapped his hands.

Steven was sitting with his son, talking to him about the toys he was playing with, when the door to the house opened, and the two women came out. "Lana, are you joining us today?"

"Oh. No. I don't do the whole park thing unless it is a strictly Auntie day or a special celebration." Lana flipped her hair over her shoulder and waved as she walked out.

Josie laughed and grabbed the stroller. "Let's go get this family day started!" She had an extra bit of pep in her step as they headed down the road to the park. Steven was walking behind them, appreciating the view, when he started smiling to himself. Josie had changed into his favorite pair of shorts.

"Steven, if you don't stop staring at my butt and pick up pace to walk with your family, I am going to make you push this stroller." She looked over her shoulder at him, smirking.

Steven picked up the pace to catch up, "You would not have to make me do anything. I will gladly push this stroller all day, every single day." Steven caught up and bumped her with his hip so that he could take over.

They reached the park and entered the small gated section for toddlers. Josie pulled Lucas out of the stroller and immediately took him to the swings. She pushed him, and Steven stood back, taking pictures. His son was so enamored with the swings that they might have been there for two hours if we had let him.

Steven wanted to take him on the slide, and Lucas found his new favorite thing. He would toddle around on his little feet as he got used to the tiny stairs. He smiled at Steven and giggled as he stepped off the small drop-

down. Josie snapped pictures behind them and had them smile for the camera as Lucas discovered new things.

"I think I found a new favorite day." Josie walked up to them to pick up Lucas. Their son was anything except excited to leave the park. He was having so much fun playing in the sand, hitting the little musical instruments, and going down the slide repeatedly. When Josie finally caught him, Lucas tried squirming out of her arms, but Josie held firm.

Steven approached them and blew raspberries on the boy's cheek, which made the boy giggle and cling to Josie tighter. "I am loving this day, too. Let's go get lunch."

The walk to the pizza place was a good thirty-minute walk, so Lucas took a short nap before they got there. Josie and Steven took that opportunity to talk, which he had not expected.

"Thank you for giving me this time with Lucas," Steven spoke quietly so they did not rouse Lucas before they got there.

Josie looked at him and smiled. "Well, I wasn't going to cut you out without giving you the chance to show us what kind of dad you can be for him." She took a few more steps and continued, "I was worried you would turn us away again after how you reacted." She looked so worried, saying the words out loud.

"I messed up. I know I did, but this is my kid. This is your kid. Even if he wasn't mine, we both know I never would have been able to turn him or you away. No one who is a part of you will ever not be loved by me." Steven looked down at the stroller and then back at her.

Josie let out a low sigh. "I think a part of me always knew that, but I was still worried about it." She bit her lip and slowed her pace a little bit.

"I get it." Steven wanted to avoid pushing further into that conversation. He

knew how sensitive the topic of him handling her announcement was for her. He said and did many things he wished he could take back, but he was lucky she had started bending for him on how much alone time he could have as a family and a dad. He just wanted to enjoy the day with her and Lucas. More importantly, he wanted them to enjoy their time with him.

The last few minutes of the walk were quiet and serene. He enjoyed her presence thoroughly. The fact that he got to be close to her is everything. He felt sparks, but he did not know if she felt them, too.

Buddy's Pizza Palace was full of families. The lights were bright, and the red accents brightened the place even more. Kids were everywhere, running around and singing with the large animatronic singing animals. The older kids seemed to know the dance moves, too. There was a gated-off playground for the younger children to play in, and Josie immediately approved of that.

Lucas woke up almost as soon as they got in the building. At first, he was a little fussy until he noticed the animals singing and dancing. He immediately changed to bouncing around and clapping with them. The giggle fits he had sent Josie made her smile even bigger. He was squirming, trying to get out of the stroller to dance with all the kids.

Josie shook her head at him and spoke lovingly and gently to him, "No, baby. We need to eat first, then you can go sing and dance." Lucas gave her an angry face, and Steven could not hold back his booming laugh. Just seeing his son interact with Josie and how he adapted to the change in environment was something he enjoyed watching. Lucas is already a free spirit who goes from zero to hyper, just like he did as a child.

His child was just like him, and he felt luckier than ever. He did not know if he would ever get over it, though. The happy-go-lucky kid was so smart and

definitely full of sass, and he knew he could charm anyone into doing anything for him.

The trio sat at the table and ordered their pizza. While they waited, Lucas snacked on puffy cereal snacks. He shoved an extra one in, and Josie leaned forward quickly, "Woah, not too many, okay?"

Lucas smiled at her and put it in his mouth anyway, just to be silly and sassy. Josie looked at me with a raised brow and said, "This kid is all you."

"I'm okay with that." Steven sat back and watched them color on the little menu together until the food arrived. In contrast to the noisy surroundings, they ate in calm silence, and Steven enjoyed just being in their presence.

Josie took Lucas out of the stroller and brought him to the toddler play zone, where he could run and dance freely. No one could tell that he had napped much. He was running around playing with the other kids and stopping to dance when a new song started.

"We might have made the cutest child in the world." Josie tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips, assessing the other kids compared to Lucas.

Steven looked around and put his arm behind her chair, watching him closely. "I think that is a pretty safe assumption." He started playing with the tendrils of hair hanging loose from her low, messy bun. Josie leaned into his side with her feet touching the gate.

Lucas sat down and slowed down on playing. He let out a big yawn and looked around slowly, clearly tired. Josie elbowed Steven, and he looked at their son. She made the decision for all of them, "I think it is time to take the walk home." Josie moved slowly away from Steven's touch back into the reality of everyone else around them.

Steven got up and grabbed Lucas out of the play area. He fussed a bit and stopped the second he saw his bottle sitting in the stroller, waiting for him.

Steven buckled him in, dropped him back down, and gave him his blanket and bottle. "Let's head out." Josie was grabbing her stuff when Steven handed her cell phone back to her.

"Thank you. I keep losing it." She rolled her eyes and shoved it in her back pocket. Steven stared at her roundness in the back of her shorts, appreciating her just as much as when they had spent that night together after the gala.

Steven smirked and put his sunglasses on. He started pushing the stroller through everyone when their waitress looked down at Lucas and cooed goodbye at him before sending a flirty look Steven's way.

"I am literally standing right here." Josie's voice cut through the waitress's attempt to create a mood, and while the waitress was good-looking, Steven only had eyes for Josie. The waitress rolled her eyes and walked away from the pair.

Steven got the stroller outside, and they started their walk back when he started chuckling. Josie whipped her head to his, "What's so funny?"

"You were jealous." Steven watched her eyes widen, and then he started laughing hysterically as she shook her head in denial.

"I was not jealous; I was annoyed. Who flirts with the father while the woman he was clearly with was right there?" Her face got red, and she folded her arms over her chest.

Steven smiled and shrugged, "Our waitress, apparently." They walked in silence for a while, and then Josie bumped Steven out of the way so she could push Lucas the rest of the way to her place. She was clearly aggravated that he had suggested she was jealous.

"Listen, I was joking about the jealous thing. Seeing you so... protective of Lucas and me was just cute." Steven watched her pull Lucas out carefully to get him inside for bed. He followed her and stood at the door watching her

with their son. He loved watching how easily things flowed with both of them.

Josie started singing a lullaby when he started fussing a bit. Her voice soothed him so quickly it was amazing to watch. Lucas stopped moving, and Josie walked up to him and stared at him. He stopped breathing, scared to move and have her walk away from him. She stepped into his space and slowly got up on her toes. He pulled her to him gently, and he put his hand lightly on the back of her neck. He let her pull him down the rest of the way with her hand on the back of the neck.

When their lips touched, Steven's heart could have exploded with happiness. He had wanted to kiss her for months. He also did not want to scare her away from the possibility of them being the family that Lucas needed. He took a chance and deepened the kiss. She let him in for a moment and then pulled away.

He was happy to accept it would not have gone further, but instead of walking away, she grabbed his hand and pulled him down the hall. He slowed down at the guest room he stayed in, but she pulled him further to her bedroom door.

"Are you sure?" Steven heard the gravel in his voice when he asked, but he knew what he hoped she was leading him to. She nodded at him, and he took her by the hips and guided her backward into her room.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Josephine

"Listen, I was joking about the jealous thing. It was just cute to see you so... protective of Lucas and I." Josephine pulled Lucas out of the stroller and ignored his protective statement. She wanted to focus on putting Lucas down for bedtime. She could feel him follow her to the nursery, standing at the door watching her with their son. She enjoyed his presence in their lives, and he was not hovering; he was watching them and enjoying the family life.

Lucas started fussing, and Josephine decided to start singing a lullaby. Lucas was soothed so quickly once she began to sing, and it was her favorite thing to watch. Lucas stopped moving, and Josie placed him in the crib gently. She walked up to Steven after she noticed him still watching and stared at him. Steven looked like a deer in headlights when I finally approached him. She stepped into his space, lightly touching his abdomen, and slowly rose up on her toes. Steven pulled her to him gently, and he put his hand lightly on the back of her neck. She felt a spark deep inside her pulling her to him like a

magnet. He stopped moving to let her take control and pull him down the rest of the way with her hand on the back of his neck, touching the end of his hair. When their lips touched, Josephine felt her heart ready to combust. For the last week or so, she had been waiting for him to take the leap of faith and kiss her, but he seemed hesitant. She was worried he would not want to kiss her back because of everything. He deepened the kiss, and Josephine knew they needed to move out of their son's bedroom door and down the hall.

Josephine grabbed his hand and pulled him down the hall. He slowed down at the guest room he stayed in, which caused her to be slightly confused, but she pulled him a little more right up to her bedroom door.

"Are you sure?" Steven's voice was low and gravelly, sending butterflies through her stomach, and wetness pooled in her panties. He watched her carefully, letting her take the lead until the moment she nodded at him, and he grabbed her by the hips and guided her backward into her room.

Josephine took her shirt at the hem and pulled it up over her head. Steven walked up to her and ran his hands up her sides and over her bra. He took her face in his hands and pulled her to him, kissing her passionately. Her legs almost gave out from underneath her, and the moan that escaped her mouth tipped him right over the edge. His hands were down around her thighs and lifting her off the ground before she could even register what he was doing. His left hand held her in place against him while her hips clung on tight. His right hand slid up her back and unclasped her bra.

She leaned back and let him remove the straps one by one. Before either of them could move, Josephine said the words that had been stuck to the tip of her tongue, "My heart is yours. You've shown me how much you want this, and I want you to know how much I want you."

He pulled her lips back to his. She moaned and opened her mouth for him as



his tongue licked at her lips. Their tongues started to dance together slowly. He laid her down on her bed and stood straight to pull his shirt off. She moved to unbutton and slide her shorts down, but he stopped her with his hands.

"Let me take care of you." Josephine felt her heart flutter and lifted her hands above her head as he dropped to his knees between hers, hanging off the bed. He unbuttoned her shorts and kissed her stomach. He unzipped and kissed where the top of her thong was. Josephine was getting antsy to feel his mouth on her.

Steven ran his hands underneath her, and his fingers moved inside her shorts at the waistband from behind. He pulled the shorts and thong down in one slow pull. He kisses down her right leg while she wiggles underneath him. He kissed his way back up her left leg and nipped at her thigh. He moved his hands slowly up and down, building the tension within her.

Josephine whispered out, "Steven, I need you now."

He chuckles and takes his tongue on a long slow lick up her slit to her clit. "I want to take my time with this. I have been waiting for almost two years for this." Before Josephine could say anything else, he sucked at her sensitive nub, and her back immediately arched off of the bed. He licked and nipped until Josephine's head was practically thrashing back and forth. He teased her entrance with a finger and then slid it in slowly. Once he got the finger fully in, her legs bent, and her feet were pushing down on the edge of the bed. She gripped the comforter in her hands above her head.

"More." Josephine rolled her hips up into his face as he added a second finger, stroking her on the inside. He sucks hard on her clit, and she sees fireworks. Her toes curl, and her knuckles turn white from how hard she

gripped the comforter. She started bucking into his hand. She rode his fingers through the orgasm.

He stood up and unzipped his pants, pulling her euphoria-filled attention to him as he dropped the pants and his boxer briefs and let his dick spring free. She felt her eyes go wide as she looked at him. She forgot how big he was. He stroked himself while he watched her move a hand down her front and to the apex of her thighs. She started circling her clit, and he let out a rumble from his chest as he moved to grab the back of her thighs and he slid her up onto the bed.

Her knees were to her chest, and her hand was trapped playing with her clit while he watched. He got onto his knees and rubbed his fully erect against her entrance, but he refused to give her what she was craving yet. He pushed her legs wide open and watched her start trying to push down on him. She felt him watching her closely. She looked up in his eyes, and the lust there had her feeling brave. She managed to get her arm down just a bit to slide two of her own fingers inside herself and rubbed them against the head of his cock as she did so.

He groaned while he watched her. He backed up and dropped his head down to lick up her juices as they started dripping out around her fingers. He nipped at her fingers and nudged them out of her. He moved forward and slammed into her so hard she screamed in pleasure. He pulled back and slowly dropped back in. With each thrust, he was clearly watching her face. She refused to take her eyes off of his while he thrust in and out slowly. She felt herself building up to another orgasm, and he pulled all the way out, leaving her frustrated and ready to yell at him.

Steven flipped her onto her stomach and her knees. She pulled her legs underneath her, and she waited as he lined himself up, smacked her on the ass

one good time, and then fully sheathed himself inside of her.

Josephine gripped the bedding and pushed back into him, meeting thrust for thrust. The orgasm he edged her to and away from was building back up. Her walls tightened around him, and she tipped right over the edge. His pace ramped up faster, and his thrusts were almost bruising. His fingers were gripping her hips, and she was moaning and practically collapsing underneath him as she felt him release inside of her.

She kept her eyes closed as he put his chest flat against her back and rolled her onto her side. He nipped Josephine's shoulder, causing her to let out a low giggle. Josephine thought that one round would be it for the night, but instantly, she felt his hand was back between her thighs. He was pushing his fingers back inside of her and rubbing on her sensitive walls.

"Again?" Josephine said in a raspy voice.

Steven nipped her shoulder and started rolling his thumb over her clit. "Again, and again, and again." He removed his fingers and pulled her right leg up and back over his hip. She feels their combined wetness on his fingers as he takes them and slides them back inside of her.

Josephine turned her head against his arm that was under her head so that she was able to bite down on him to keep from screaming. He picked up the pace, and she felt him already hard again, grinding between her cheeks behind her. He pulled back from her and then slid directly up into her. She loved feeling him from this angle. She tried to turn her head to look at him, but he held her in place by wrapping his fingers up in her hair and pulling her head back so he could kiss her forehead. This angle had her back arched out as far as she could go.

He pinched and rolled her clit, setting her off again. She tried to move away from him, but he was not letting her go anywhere. He hooked her knee up

over the crook in his arm and started driving into her again. She listened to the rumble in his chest as he got closer and closer. She was ready to cum again just from having him like that for her. He was almost feral for her.

He pulled out of her and flipped her on her back. She had let him have total control of her body, and she loved it. He slid himself back inside of her, causing her to moan and arch up into him. He picked up his pace and spilled himself inside of her again.

He dropped to his elbows over her, and she kissed him gently. "If you keep doing that, we will end up with another kid."

He chuckled and pulled himself out of her. His fingers were at her entrance, pushing anything that had a second to leak out of her and push it back inside of her. "Good. Lucas could use a few siblings." Josephine was not shocked by his reaction, but she also was unable to think properly.

She closed her eyes and felt him move off of her. The bed shifted, and she lifted her head to watch him enter her bathroom. The bath started running, and she knew what he was doing. He would do more than just take care of her in bed. He walked back into her side of the bed and picked her up. She was laughing when he sat her on the ledge of the tub.

He put his hand under the water and then placed his hands around her face. He made her look up at him while he stood over her, "Is the water warm enough?" His hand slowly drifted down her chest to her stomach as he leaned down to kiss her on the lips.

"It's perfect." She lowered herself into the tub, and he grabbed a washcloth from the clean towel basket next to it and handed it to her. She felt his hand push her back gently forward so she could slide into the tub before him.

"What are you doing?" Josephine laughed as she leaned back against his chest.

Steven took the towel from her hand and ran it down to her core, "I am cleaning up my mess." She groaned in approval. "That is the rule in this house, right?"

Josephine nodded in response. She was so focused on how he ran the towel over her chest, stomach, core, and legs that she felt so relaxed that she never wanted to leave the tub.

Steven lowered himself a little further behind her and lifted her onto his lap, "Seriously, Steven?" He was hard again underneath her.

"I don't know what you think you do to me, but if you ever did wonder," he turned her head and nipped her cheek to whisper in her ear, "this is it." He put her legs on either side of his thighs and pushed her back forward a little bit. He lifted her hips and sheathed himself in her for round three. "I'll go slow for you this time, baby."

Josephine got her knees down underneath her, and she gripped the tub, "You can go slow, but this time, we are going my pace." She started moving up and down on him. His hands left her body and gripped her hands on the side of the tub.

Josephine started sliding up and down on his cock, and Steven groaned out his pleasure, "Baby, if you keep moving like that, I won't last long." Josephine looked over her shoulder at him and enjoyed the look of ecstasy building on his face.

"That's the point." She lifted herself almost all the way off and rolled her hips as she dropped back down. She did this a few more times before Steven grabbed her hips and drove up into her thrust for thrust.

"Oh! Yeah!" Josephine could hear her voice echo through the bathroom, but she could not feel the soreness that was building. She was riding him closer and closer to ecstasy. He slammed her down on him, and she felt him swell

inside of her on the last pump. Josephine leaned forward, holding onto the other end of the tub in exhaustion.

Steven lifted her and turned her so that she could lay on top of his chest. Josephine chuckled and looked up at him, "I don't think this bath actually cleaned up your mess as much as it just made an entirely new one."

He chuckled underneath her, "That sounds like it will be a problem for later." He started rubbing her back slowly. He used his foot to start the water again to heat it back up in the tub. He turned it off, and they lay there just like that until they decided it was time to actually shower.

She opened the drain and turned the water on so it sprayed from the shower head. They stood under the water, helping each other wash off and clean up. He kissed her on the shoulder and the lips a few more times before they finally got out.

The clock showed them they still had a few hours until Lucas woke up in the morning. They intended to spend that time wrapped up in each other's arms.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### Steven

Steven was completely spent. He held her in his arms, unsure of how he got so lucky and unwilling to let her go. They had just spent time putting their first night together to shame. He never thought that they would be doing that again. He was chuckling to himself when she looked up at him. Her leg was draped over his hip, and he rubbed her back lightly, watching her shiver under his touch. "No regrets?" he asked her carefully.

Josie leaned up on her elbow and looked him in the eyes gently. "I never had regrets in the first place, other than not telling you about Lucas to begin with. I knew it would change things, which scared me more than anything else ever had, but I never had regrets." She looked sad, and Steven never wanted to see her with that look on her face.

He moved a small wisp of hair out of her face gently. He kissed her on the lips and then her forehead softly. "Good." He felt himself take a deep breath he had been holding in. He felt like he had been holding his breath since he walked out of her old apartment and away from her that first time.

Josie stared at his face as he closed his eyes and pulled her back down against him. "Steven, maybe we should talk about some things."

Steven opened one eye and looked down at her, "Like you and Lucas moving in with me?"

Josie popped up and took her leg off of him. "Why would we move in with you? You could move in here."

Steven looked around the room and then back at her confused face. "Josie, my house is bigger. There is a huge yard for Lucas to play in, it is in a good school district, and there is a large office that we could both use; since we work at separate times of the day, it is, sadly, closer to Lana, it is close enough to everything he could want to do, and it is close enough to everything we need." Steven looks at her thoughtfully, then runs a finger across her abdomen, "There is also enough room for us to grow as a family."

Josie thinks about it seriously for a moment and then shakes her head, "We can't, Steven. It's too soon." She stands from the bed and goes to the dresser to grab a pair of shorts and a tank top.

Steven sat up and held his hand out for her, "Will you please hear me out?"

Josie moved over and took his hand in hers. She still seemed hesitant about having that conversation, but his insistence seemed to push her further into willingness.

"Fine. What could you possibly say that would convince me?" Josie sat beside him with the sheet draped down, barely covering him up. She noticed how his muscles cut, almost pointing her directly to his generous member. She went to tug at the sheet while she bit her lip, and he gave her hand a little tap, and she pulled it back.

Steven picked her hand up and kissed it, "We have time for that later." He pulled her into his lap and ran a finger along the edge of her shorts. "I intend



to provide everything you need. You and Lucas. You both deserve the world, and I want to give you that. I know I work a lot, but this would allow me to be there for him even more than I am now." He let his fingers slide up underneath the edge of them, causing her to let out a small sigh of approval.

"What does providing for Lucas and me include?" Josie was trying to hide her decision from him, but he could see it in her eyes. She was clearly creating a checklist for him to check off in her own mind.

"Safety, security, love, and commitment," Steven said each word slowly as he teased the area on her thigh. "I want to give you both everything. I never want you to want for anything. I want you to be happy and never worry about our son." Josie shivered underneath his touch. He squeezed her thigh and then started running his fingers over the area again.

"You really want to do all of this for us?" Josie put her head against his muscular shoulder. He leaned back so she lay back down on the bed with him in her arms again.

Steven kissed her gently again. He wanted to reassure her with gentle kisses and touches. He wanted to show her it was more than just the sex that kept them physically in tune with one another. "More than want to. I promise to. I love you both, Josie." Josie looked into his eyes with tears in her eyes. He was worried he had said the wrong thing at first, but then he wanted to tell her the exact moment, "I am pretty sure I have loved you since the moment you came down your mom's stairs in your gorgeous prom dress."

Josie started laughing at him because she clearly did not believe him. "That dress was absolutely hideous. No one could have loved me in that thing." Steven pictured the dress on her and started smirking.

"I did." Steven's absolute certainty came out without hesitation.

Josie stared at him wide-eyed. She was clearly debating what to say next and

opted for the safer conversation between the two. "It is a lot of change for Lucas at such a young age, though."

"If we wait any longer, he might fight us every step of the way." Steven started running a hand slowly up and down her arm. "I want him to grow up in the house. I want him to make friends, play, party, do homework, fall in love, and experience his first breakup in a house with both of us. He deserves to have all of those things."

Josie looked up at him and said what he did not think he would hear from her, "I love you, too."

Steven smiled at her and raised a brow. "Is that a yes?"

Josie took a deep breath and rolled her eyes at him, "That's a yes." She shook her head slowly as Steven rolled his body on top of hers and kissed her deeply. This kiss was much different than all the other ones they had shared. It was filled with all of the promises he intended to uphold.

"We start to move tomorrow morning. Right away." Steven was excited, and Josie tried not to crush his dreams. He was ready to start their future and wanted no more waiting or hesitation. He wanted them to be the family they knew they could be.

Josie gently kissed his lips and shook her head, dashing his hopes more than she could have known. "My lease goes through the month." The small window of time might not have been the immediate answer he wanted, but he knew he would not be waiting for another year.

Steven rolled his body back off of the front of hers and tried to look sad about having to wait. He was trying not to seem too eager now that he was in the bargaining phase of this situation. "So, I have to wait a week and a half to have you both in our house?" He tilted his head to look at her with fake puppy dog eyes.

"We can start slowly moving things over and spending the night a few nights next week, " Josie said, laying her arms on his chest and her head on top of them where they were crossed. "That way, he can adjust. Plus, if I bring more over to your house every time we come, we won't have as big of a move when my lease is up."

Steven looked down at her face, memorizing every small, beautiful detail gracing her features, and smiled lazily at her. "So, why don't we start tomorrow?"

Josie was clearly thinking about some type of excuse or an actual one. "I have plans with Lana all day and a video meeting after dinner." Josie was tapping her fingers on his chest, and he was feeling the pattern repeatedly; it almost seemed to lull him into the peaceful silence with her. "How about we plan for Tuesday night? We will come over for dinner. I can bring a few bags of things, and then we will stay the night."

Steven thought it over, then asked, "I don't have a crib yet, but we can get one tomorrow before Lana arrives."

Josie shook her head. "She will be here right away. We have a breakfast date." She yawned and closed her eyes while she was lying on his chest. "I can bring his collapsible with me, and then we can go and get a new one together."

"That sounds perfect." Steven ran his hand through Josie's hair. "You are falling asleep."

"No, I am not." Josie yawned again, stretching out her legs a little bit. "You are."

Steven nudged her until she moved up his chest a little, where he could tuck her under his arm. "I'm tired, but I am not the one passing out in the middle of a conversation, " he said, starting to hum.

Josie opened her eyes and stared up at him, "Are you trying to keep me awake right now?" She looked amused and irritated at the same time.

Steven smiled, "How about this? We wake up and pack three large bags for each of you, and I will take them to the house for you tomorrow while you go do your day with Lana?"

Josie seemed to mull it over, "What would I pack in these bags?"

"For Lucas, one with essentials, one with clothes, and one with toys." Josie nodded at the list he created for her. "For you, clothes, essentials, and toys for us?"

Josie lightly slapped him on the chest, "You know nothing of my toys! How about some of the bins from storage."

"I knew you had toys! Where are they?" Steven playfully tried to move her off his chest so he could go searching when she yanked him back down to the position she was clearly comfortable in.

"They will not make an appearance for a long time to come, sir." Josie looked innocent yet mildly offended at his assumption that she had such things hidden with her son in the other room.

Steven groaned and ran a hand over his face. "You know what that word does to me?"

Josie shifted her position on him and nipped his chest. "Oh, I know." She kissed where she nipped. "You need to work for those, though."

Steven fisted her hair and pulled her head back so she could look into his eyes, "I will work as long as it takes for whatever you are willing to give me."

Josie narrowed her eyes, "Are you seriously thinking about going again? I am exhausted, and nothing below my waist works right now."

Steven laughed heartily at her, rolling to his side to snuggle against her. "I can wait a few more hours for things to be back in working order." Josie

rolled over, checking Lucas's video monitor, and saw him sleeping soundly. Steven scooted up behind her and kissed her shoulder.

"Do you think we are doing the right thing for him?" Josie's eyes were closing while he watched her watching the monitor.

Steven took a few deep breaths and proceeded cautiously, "I think that giving him a family life where we can coexist without shuffling him back and forth all the time will be the best thing for him. I also think him seeing both of us being happy with each other and with him will be worth it."

"You know nothing is perfect all the time, right?" Josie whispered out.

Steven chuckled, "You and I have always been able to bicker and then figure things out. I don't see anything that would make us stop being a family."

"Things are harder with a child, Steven." Her voice got quieter as if he was almost quieting her mind and her doubts.

Steven wanted to be careful with how he said the next part, "Things are harder, but some things are easier. I know how you and Lucas function. I watch you every single day that I'm here with him. Things will not always be easy. He will end up in sports and activities, we will both have to work our jobs around his schedules, he will be sick, and one of us will have to shift things around to prioritize him, but we will figure it all out as it comes."

"Expensive." Josie was down to one-word answers. Steven knew he did not have much longer until she was down for the count.

"If you think that money will ever be an issue, then you don't notice how closely I pay attention. The club brings in a large amount of money. You started your own agency and model with our son, and he has a great savings started on his own. We are a fortunate family. We will never want for anything, and if you just want to cut back on one thing, you can. I will always

support you in whatever path you take." Steven couldn't tell if she was still awake listening to him.

"Work."

Steven laughed at her even shorter one-word answer, "I can do most things in the office at home, and I have an amazing assistant, Stacey, who handles most things now anyway." Josie opens an eye and looks over her shoulder at him. "She saw you that day when I was an ass, and she was the one who basically pushed me to fix things because I was... well, an ass."

"Sounds smart." Josie was smiling to herself as she faced the monitor again. Steven nuzzled into her neck and smelled her vanilla honey shampoo.

"Sounds like I will have to keep you apart so I don't get ganged up on." Josie pulled his hand up to her mouth and kissed it. "She is going to love you. I mean, everyone does."

"It is pretty easy to love someone as awesome as me." Her tired voice sure forced that sentence out.

Steven felt sleep taking him over, but he still tried to focus on Josie falling asleep in his arms. He took his hand out of hers and started running his fingers up and down her body. He watched the goosebumps grow and disappear as his hands moved elsewhere. He listened to her hum of approval and had to talk himself out of starting another round.

"Goodnight, Steven," Josie whispered out.

Steven kissed her shoulder, neck, and upper back. "Goodnight, Josie." He lay there listening to her breathing slow and even. Her muscles completely relaxed, and Steven finally let his eyes close. He felt as if he had won the lottery. He was getting the woman of his dreams, his son, and the life he planned for himself before he even walked out of her apartment the first time they slept together.

Steven felt the peace roll down his body, and he let his mind wander to all of the good days to come in his life. He had plans he had not shared with her yet. He knew she would get scared and back out of the living arrangement. He had plans to make, and Lana was going to be the one to help him bring them to fruition.

Lana may not have liked him much after everything that happened, but he was slowly gaining her trust. Steven peeked at the monitor and saw Lucas moving around. Steven debated getting up to get him, but if Josie heard him on the monitor, she would wake up, too. Lucas did not move after a few minutes, letting Steven abandon all ideas of leaving Josie alone in bed.

His eyes drifted closed, and the sound of her breathing lulled him to the best sleep he had in years.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## Josephine

The following day, when Lana walked in and found Steven half-naked walking around the house packing bags, she was frustrated beyond belief. She thought he was trying to get rid of things without Josephine's permission. Steven and Lana were in a heated conversation when Josephine brought Lucas out of his room, "And here is Auntie Lana, yelling at Daddy." Lana snapped her eyes over to her nephew and instantly smiled. "Hello Sweet Love!" Lana threw a look over her shoulder at Steven, then smiled back at their son.

"Why were you yelling at Steven?" Josephine asked, putting a hand on her hip and raising her eyebrows at Lana.

"He is out here packing up all your things." She stares at Josephine for a while before fully noticing the smirk on Josephine's face. "Oh, no. Really?" Lana lets out an exasperated groan.

"Yes, really. He asked us, and I think it is time." Josephine looked over at Steven and gave a tiny little nod.



Lana plopped down on the couch with Lucas in her lap. She frowned, and he put his hands on her face and made her smile. "So, no more girls breakfasts, days, or outings?"

Steven laughed behind her, "You are welcome in our home just as you are welcome here. I won't give you a key just in case we are involved in something, but you will always be welcome."

Josephine approved of his answer. Lana seemed to be mulling it over, and Josephine mouthed, "I will get you a copy," to her and winked. Steven came over and picked up his son from Lana's lap.

"You have fun with Mama and Auntie today. I will see you tomorrow." He gave Lucas a ton of kisses, making him giggle, and kissed Josephine on the head. "Love you."

"Love you, too. I will call you later." Josephine nodded at him and turned to Lana. "He is going to grab the first load, and we are going to eat."

Lana stood up and stuck her tongue out in Steven's direction before heading out the door. The car ride to the diner was quiet, but Josephine knew Lana had some things to get off her chest. Josephine cleared her throat and glanced out of the corner of her eye at her. "Well, say it."

Lana groaned and let it out. "After everything, you are sure this will be the right move for you both? Living with him?"

Josephine chuckled and shrugged, "It feels like the exact thing my son needs, which makes it what I need. I love him. He loves me. We were always going to wind up together one way or another. I figure, why fight it?" Josephine felt at ease with the statement.

"That's the best you got? It would happen, so why not just jump on in?" Lana was laughing weirdly now.

"You know that's not what I mean." Josephine knew Lana would eventually

come on board, but she did not expect her to be so bitter about it right away. When Josephine and Lucas got home that evening, she was slightly stunned at how much had been done. The guest room had been moved without her planning on doing it for a few days, most of Lucas's nursery had been moved, minus some necessities, and almost all of the storage bins were out of the garage and storage space.

Josephine looked around and decided to call Steven to get some answers. The phone rang twice, and when he answered, loud music flooded through the phone.

"Babe?" Steven asked. "Hold on. Let me get in the office."

Josephine waited for a minute until she heard the other side of the line grow quiet. "Hi."

"Hey there." He sounded too happy for her liking.

"I see you were extra busy today?" Josephine waited for him to say something, but when he didn't, she pushed more, "I thought that we were just going to do six bags today."

"You were going to do six bags, I was going to do the storage bins, and I made a last-minute decision to move the spare room furniture into my empty spare room. I figured I wouldn't use it anymore, so why not just get it done while I have time." Steven said the words slowly so as not to step on any toes.

"And..." Josephine waited for him to talk about Lucas's nursery.

Steven chuckled on the other end, "Yes?"

"Why did you start the nursery without me?" Josephine was definitely irritated.

Steven groaned. "I just took all the things that he does not absolutely need; I figured you would be staying with me most of the next nine days anyway. I

almost took the crib instead of the portable bed."

"That would have been a line not to cross." Josephine moved to the kitchen and pulled a bottle of wine out. "I am going to enjoy my wine. I will talk to you tomorrow." They said their goodbyes, and both went about one of their last separate nights left.

Two days later, Steven showed up with some movers to pull out most of the oversized furniture. Steven directed them around the things that would not interfere with her staying there the last few nights. Josephine just told him to take all of the furniture. She would blow up an air mattress and camp out in the living room with Lucas for some memorable times before they went. His little gate would stay so he could not wander the empty place.

"Are you sure, Babe?" Steven walked up to her once the movers were out of earshot.

"Yeah, I'm sure." She looked around, taking in all the memories from the moment she moved in, from Lucas's birth, and all the sleepovers with Lana, and she turned to look at Steven. "Actually, tell them to grab the crib and the television. If we are camping out anywhere, it will be at home with you."

Steven smiled and kissed her quickly before rushing off to tell the guys to grab it all. Josephine let Lana know she was taking the plunge, and Lana gave her an enormous amount of grief. Josephine let her rant and set the phone down, muted. Steven walked in and looked at the phone. Josephine shook her head and shooed him away.

Steven had made this move so extremely easy on her. She was able to keep her focus on their son. Everything was done for her, well, almost everything. Steven let her help out a bit when it came to organizing and boxing up the clothes. She sat on the floor and folded and separated for what felt like an hour or two in each room. She wanted to make sure that the important outfits

were where they needed them in Josephine's and Steven's vehicles so that they didn't have to search for things when their photoshoot came up that Friday.

It was not much, but she felt she contributed and was able to focus solely on their son and his happiness in the transition. Steven only took Lucas from her when it was time to lock up and say goodbye to Lucas's first home.

Josephine walked through the kitchen, touching the counters slowly. She remembered all the nights baking, the stress of cleaning, and the first foods that Lucas tried. It was also the place where Steven, Josephine, and Lucas had their first meal. She smiled at the beautiful memories.

When Josephine walked down the hall and in and out of the nursery, she teared up a bit. She had spent almost every night in here with Lucas. He would not sleep well at first, so she brought the old air mattress in and slept next to the crib when he woke up for her. She knew sleeping on the old thing took a toll on her, but she did not care.

When she got to her room, her cheeks tinted red. The first thing she thought of was her gripping the comforter while Steven was between her legs. She walked to where the bed used to be, and she hummed in approval at the memory of him taking her while she lay on her side. The feel of him inside her seemed to cause her knees to go momentarily weak.

Steven came up behind her, and Josephine panicked that Lucas was in the car alone; Steven smiled at her and walked up to her. "Lana is outside with him. She looked like she wanted to let me have it, but she bit her tongue and asked me to come find you." Steven spun Josephine around, pulling her back to his front, "Were you reminiscing?"

Josephine hummed and guided his hand down the front of her yoga pants. "I was, uh, also wondering if we have time to get one more go in."

Steven started circling her clit with his finger before moving it further down and slipping it inside of her. "We don't have time for one more go, but we do have time for me to do this for you." He pulled his finger out and then stuck two back in her. She was grinding on his palm as he dipped his fingers deeper and deeper. Her legs started giving out, so Steven moved her until she was pinned between him and the wall. Steven was grinding into her from behind; his fingers worked faster and faster, his palm ground down into her just right, and he kept hitting that perfect spot. Josephine felt his legs keep hers apart just enough, and he decided to try three fingers. She hissed in pain, and then he felt her cum all over his hand.

Steven carefully pulled his hand out of her pants and held up two fingers to her mouth for her to clean off. He took his ring finger and cleaned that one off himself. "So sweet, baby girl."

"That was..." Josephine was out of breath and leaning back on him, "Intense." She was not able to stand on her own for a minute or two. Steven stood holding her while waiting for her breath to even out.

Steven laughed and then headed to the bathroom to wash his hands. He returned with watered-down hands and no towel or paper towel to dry them. "Well, I didn't think that through."

Josephine laughed at him, "I should have left some cleaning supplies so that I could come back and clean."

"No need. I have the cleaning crew I use for the club coming in tomorrow morning to clean everything up." He looked down at his hand. "I may need a baby wipe or something from the diaper bag."

Josephine laughed and disappeared out of the house. She found Lana cooing over Lucas by the car. "Successful goodbye, then? " Lana smirked at Josephine. Josephine replayed all of the dirty goodness in her mind.

"Very." Josephine turned to find Steven walking out and smiling like the cat that ate the canary. "Are you going to come to the new house with us? We can order in some food." Steven nodded to her, and Lana shrugged.

"Are you sure you want me there on your first night?" Lana looked at Steven this time.

Steven laughed at her, "Lana, you are welcome to join us for dinner, but I would like to have Josephine to myself for bedtime."

"We shall see about that." Lana smiled and then walked to her car.

"We will follow you home." Steven smiled at her use of the word home. "Just remember that Lana is also following me, so you can't drive like you did in high school."

"I was a perfect driver in high school." Steven walked away and took the lead.

Once at the house, Josephine was caught off guard by a beautiful woman directing everyone on where to go. Steven walked up to her and hugged her tightly. Josephine felt a lot of jealousy at the moment of intimacy. When Josephine exited the car, Steven and the woman walked up to her, "Josephine, this is Stacey. She is my number one in all things business, but she also wanted to take the lead on this for us. She thought it would help make the transition easier if she were here to direct them on where to go."

Josephine felt immediate relief at knowing who the woman was. "Stacey? So nice to meet you." Stacey did not take her hand. She hit it away and went in for the hug.

"I am a hugger. I also told him that he needed to work on this much quicker than he did. He was a big ball of nerves over the whole thing." Stacey smiles at him, and Josephine laughs.

"Stace, I was just fine." Stacey smacks his chest.

"Sure ya were big guy." Lana walks up and raises a brow at the woman standing next to Steven.

Josephine caught the look of intrigue and rolled her eyes, "Lana, Stacey. Stacey, the overprotective friend, Lana."

Stacey shocked Lana and hugged her, too. Lana pulled back with a weird look on her face. "Nice to meet you. I think."

Steven went around us to get Lucas out of the car. Stacey gushed over him for a few minutes and then directed everyone inside. She showed everyone around where everything was set up to make the first night more homey.

"Stacey, you are welcome to stay for dinner." Josephine did not know where the invite came from, but she immediately liked Stacey.

The first night at the new house became a family dinner. Josephine realized that with Steven came an army of people to help her, watch out for her son, and care for them both. Stacey seemed to be the number one person who wanted everyone's happiness to be a priority. Lana also took to her quickly, and she does not like new people. She tended to push them all away out of a need to protect them.

Steven made it clear after dinner that the ladies needed to leave, and while they grumbled, they never stopped making plans for Lucas. They had a bunch of ideas and decided to discuss them over drinks. Josephine considered joining them for a girl's night out, but Steven stopped her quickly. He said quick goodbyes and practically shoved them out the door.

"Well, that was rude. We should be getting Lucas to bed, though. So, maybe it was for the best." Josephine did not want to admit to him that he was right, but she did not want to leave Lucas on their first night in their new home.

"That was not the only reason I wanted them to head out." Steven picked up Lucas and took his bottle into the new nursery. Josephine ran to the master

bedroom and stripped down as soon as she could, ready to celebrate their first night in their house together.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### Steven

Steven realized quickly that he was happy. He was happier than he had ever been in his entire life. He found his new routine to be the best thing he had ever experienced, outside of nights in bed alone with Josie, of course. He would work out of the club four days a week, and the other two he spent working were sitting across from Josie in their joint office. He got to watch her work and learned all of her little quirks.

He learned that she chewed on a pen if she was nervous about a deal, he learned that she was excited when she tapped her foot, and he learned to steer clear of conversation when he tapped her nails on the desk in a specific pattern. Every phone call, she was angry; something else would catch his eye. Her chest would rise and fall rapidly compared to her normal breaths. He would sit there and watch her between his calls and emails, waiting for her to stare at him and point to the computer.

He enjoyed the days when he worked at home because he could spend his lunches with his son. He enjoyed cooking for more than just himself. He was so used to being alone that meals became repetitive. Now, he has the two

most important people in the world waiting for him to finish up some new cuisine every night. There were nights when Lucas won and got the standard macaroni and cheese with chicken nuggets. Steven tried to sneak some broccoli or green beans on the plate, but macaroni and chicken nights were meant for something other than veggies.

He loved dinnertime with them. Josie loved everything he cooked, but what he loved more than watching her enjoy her dinner was the time they all spent in the living room together. It was gated off so that Lucas could run back and forth freely. He would push his little cars around the carpet while a movie he loved played in the background. Steven did not care if it was the millionth time he had to watch something; if his son was happy, he was delighted.

This was his world right here- this woman and their son- everything he ever could have hoped for and more. He was sure he was about to pull Lana, Stacey, and his seldom-heard-from sister into it. He would keep her so busy and distracted over the next few days that she would not know there was a plot to propose. He wanted to make his family whole in every way possible.

Steven made up an excuse to Josephine about running to the store when really he was running to his sister's house. He knocked on the door, and she opened it, surprised he was on the other side of it.

"It's not a holiday. What are you doing here?" Steven rolled his eyes at his sister, Jules.

"Nice to see you too. I have a few surprises for you." Jules raised a brow and directed him inside. He took in the homey décor and the simplicity of her home compared to his.

She cleared her throat and directed him to the couch. "What are these surprises?"

Steven pulled his phone out and showed her a picture of Lucas and

Josephine. "I have a kid. With Josie."

"Josie. As in my once best friend who broke your heart after prom, you landed with Mace, Josie." Jules looked downright pissed.

"I thought she did not want me after prom; it turns out she saw me with Mace, and Mace said some things that led her to believe I did not want to be with her." Steven was looking at his feet, so he almost missed the look of confusion on his sister's face had he not looked up at the last second.

"So, Mace struck again, huh? Typical. Always trying to ruin someone's life. Normally yours." She pointed right at Steven and then sat back in her chair. "So, what do you need from me?"

Steven hesitated for a moment and almost said nothing. He debated on letting Lana take Lucas, but he wanted his sister to have time with him, too. "I am going to propose to Josie soon, and I was hoping you would want to take your nephew and spend some time with him."

Jules looked shocked at the prospect, but she was a bit wary, "He has not met me before. I don't think it will go well."

"I am not doing this for two weeks. I figure you can come to the house and see them. You can meet your nephew and try to remove some of the distance with Josie." Steven was trying not to push, but he knew his sister was curious to get a peek at their family life.

Jules stood up and stared at him, "Fine, I don't know how Josie will feel about this, but I want to meet my nephew."

Steven stayed and talked with his sister for another five minutes before heading to his next stop, the club. Stacey was running around yelling at staff when he caught her attention and motioned towards the stairs to the office. He was pacing when she walked in.

"You good, Boss?" Steven practically jumped out of his skin when she

started talking, and Stacey laughed hysterically. "Clearly not. What's up?" Steven grumbled and directed her to sit down, realizing he mirrored Jules with that movement. Stacey raised a brow and sat down, crossing her legs at the ankle. "I need some help."

"I mean, I wasn't going to say anything." Stacey joked, and Steven stared at her with a serious look on his face.

"I am going to do it." Stacey's eyes got wide. "I am going to propose to her." Stacey shot out of the chair and ran over to hug him. She pulled back and straightened herself out. "What do you need for me to do?"

Steven knew she was not a fan of Jules, but she would deal with her being a part of the plan. "I have someone to watch Lucas, but I need you to make a reservation for me at Wine and Glass. I also need to get in touch with your jewelry guy. I want to get Lana in here so that she can give me an idea about what Josie would want for a ring."

Stacey got quiet and stared him down. "Who is watching Lucas, Steven?" Stacey had become quite attached to his family since the move. She had spent loads of time with Josie, Lucas, and Lana. It was nice for Steven to feel as if his family kept growing in all different ways.

"Jules," Steven said it loud enough that when Stacey asked him to repeat himself, he just stared at her.

"Why would she help out with Lucas? Has she even met him?" Stacey was pissed she was not the first thought for Lucas duty.

Steven sighed and ran a hand over his face. "I invited her over for dinner tomorrow." Steven shifted uncomfortably, "I just haven't told Jules yet."

"Oh, that will go over well," Stacey laughs. "Fine. I will make your reservation. I will ensure they serve all the good stuff, and you get a more private area for everything. Josie deserves the best, and you better give it to

her." Stacey was dead serious. She cared just as much as Steven about how well the proposal went.

"Thank you, Stace." Steven stood up and started pacing again. "I think I might actually be nervous about something."

Stacey smirked at him and leaned back on the couch. She put her arm up on the chair's arm and rested her head on two fingers while staring at him. "You think?" Steven shot her a look of irritation.

"Ha. Ha." Steven looked at his watch and realized that time was running short. "I have to meet up with Lana real quick, but let me know all the details when I get in tomorrow."

Stacey nodded and watched him walk out the office door.

Steven was nervous about Lana showing up to meet him alone. He had never asked her to do this before. He hoped she would have listened and stayed quiet about it if Josie had asked. He told her it was a surprise, but he was unsure if she bought it.

He was checking his phone when he spotted Lana approaching him at the market. "So, why am I meeting you here?"

"Josie has some things I need to pick up, and I need to meet with you without her hearing what I want to ask for your help with." Steven started walking into the market with Lana hot on his heels.

Lana caught up to him and followed his movements around the store. "What do you need my help with?"

"I need you to get Josie's ring size and help me pick out a ring." Steven was still walking but realized the click of Lana's heels had stopped. "Stacey is setting up a meeting for us with her favorite jeweler. My sister will help out with Lucas, and I need you to help with the rings and anything you think

Stacey might need help or advice on. You are a big part of making this work, Lana."

Lana liked being seen as important. She liked the ego stroke, and Steven knew it. "When are you planning on doing this?"

"In the next two weeks. Stacey will nail everything we need down; I need your help perfecting it." Steven grabbed the things from Josie's list and picked up the pace. "I kind of need an answer here. I have limited time and need to get home to Josie and Lucas without her realizing that I was gone for so long. She will have been busy with bath time, but I am always home to say goodnight."

Lana followed him around, throwing random things in the cart. When she looked at him, she shrugged, "You didn't have enough in here to constitute being gone so long." She moved ahead, and Steven rolled his eyes, following her. "I will help you out. I just wanted to hear you tell me how much you need me for this some more." She smiled, and Steven got irritated.

"What is half of this crap in the cart?" Steven looked down at all the junk food.

Lana smirked at him, "These are all of her favorite things. I always brought them over to stock up on. Just tell her that you noticed them and wanted to surprise her with them today."

Steven smiled at her. "You are brilliantly devious. You know that?"

"Thank you." Lana took a little bow and kept walking around with him. "I need you to make me a promise, Steven,"

Steven looked at her, "Okay. What is this promise?"

"Promise me it won't end like the last engagement you two had. I don't want to be picking her up off the floor again when you disappear and go slinking off to the trampy ex," She held up her hand before Steven could interrupt, "I

know it was not intentional, nor did you slink, but she was absolutely heartbroken and devastated."

Steven spins Lana to look him in the eyes, "I promise. This is nothing like last time, Lana. I didn't ever want to hurt her then, and I do not intend to hurt her now."

Lana took that as everything she needed to hear and nodded at him. "Okay, I will contact Stacey. You better hurry. I bet she will text you with more things if you aren't out of here before she gets the chance."

Steven laughed and took her advice with a cartful of things for Josie, Lucas, and himself. When he got home, he was unloading bag after bag. Josie's eyes went wide. "What is all this?"

Steven remembered what Lana told him to say, "I kept seeing these things all pop up when we were at your old place; I figured you would like a little surprise. I may have had to text Lana when I couldn't remember some of the things."

Josie was digging through the bags and pulling things out. Her smile was so big it just about stopped Steven's heart. "This is so sweet! Thank you so much!" She pulled out a little bag of cookies and hopped up on the counter.

"I am still going to make you dinner, so don't fill up on those." Steven pointed at the bag, and Josie waved him off.

Josie watched him walk towards the monitor to see Lucas rolling around in the crib. "I think he was waiting for you. Do you want to bring him his bottle of milk? I never got to it because I got stopped by cookies."

Steven grabbed the bottle of milk and walked into his son's room.

"Dada!" Lucas popped up for goodnight hugs and kisses.

Steven picked him up and gave him his bottle. He gave him three big kisses and laid him down. "I love you more than you will ever know, Lucas."

"Love yeeew." Lucas had said it a few times before but had yet to repeat it to Steven. His heart was bursting with happiness all day. He walked out of the room and back to the kitchen.

Josie jumped off the counter and approached him. "I hope those cookies will keep you happy with me, " she said.

Josie stepped back and took another bite of the cookie. "And why would you need the cookies to keep me happy?"

Steven cleared his throat and moved around the island to put away groceries out of Josie's reach. "I talked to Jules today," Josie dropped the cookie back into the bag before it could even reach her mouth, "I invited her over for dinner tomorrow night to meet Lucas."

"You did what, now?" Josie was furious, but she was trying not to yell. She looked over at the monitor.

Steven sighed and looked her in the eye, "My sister is still a part of my family, and I really want her to know my son. Our son. I told her that what happened in high school was a huge misunderstanding. She was really pissed at Mace, but then again, I think we all are."

Josie leaned with both hands on the counter, "I don't want any arguments or BS from her, Steven. If she even gets loud once around our son and tries to start a problem, I want her gone." Josie took a deep breath, "We are starting a life together, Steven and she can either be a part of it or she can stay out of it."

Steven moved around the counter to hug her, and he was glad she did not shoot it down entirely.



# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## Josephine

**I**t had been two weeks of visits with Jules, and Josephine was pleasantly surprised at how much she had changed. She was more accepting now that the truth was out there. She never meant to hurt Steven, and Macy was playing games that never should have been played. Lucas seemed to take a shine to her, but then again, her son loved everyone.

Josephine woke up feeling refreshed and ready to start her day. She wanted to make breakfast for her and Lucas since it was a club day for Steven, and she wanted to get some work done. She jumped out of bed and changed into something comfortable yet easy to adapt if necessary for outings.

Lucas was singing to himself in his crib when she grabbed him out. She got him changed and ready to eat. She turned on a movie for him to watch from his highchair and cut up some strawberries. He was going to town on them while she scrambled eggs. She made some sausage to cut up for him as well. He was working on using his utensils, and Josephine thought it was the most adorable thing.

"Mommy has work to do today, Bub. We both have ads ready for a launch next week, and Mama wants to ensure they are perfect." Lucas was not paying attention to her as much as his movie with the singing fish, but Josephine pretended he agreed with her.

"Mama, all done." Lucas was getting so much better with his words the closer he got to two. Everything was moving so fast. It has been a year since Steven found out, ten months since we started truly moving forward with a routine, and a few months since we decided to move in together. They were a perfect little family.

At least to her.

Josephine pulled Lucas out of the high chair and brought him to his play area. She moved around to clean up the kitchen and walked to the office to grab her laptop. She wanted to work all day, which meant working in the kitchen where she could still keep an eye on Lucas.

When she opened her emails, she saw some of the shots of Lucas for the clothing ad. He looked so adorable, smiling and playing with the other kids. That was the first time Steven had made it to a shoot with them, and he watched so intently. Josephine smiled at remembering how proud he was of her and their son.

There was one shot that Josephine was determined to have made it to market, and that was the one where Lucas was running to Steven. His smile was much bigger than in all the other photos.

Josephine moved onto her photos and squirmed a little at some of them. She felt much better about herself since she had toned back up, but she still did not like some of the angles. She sent out emails stating which ones were absolutely not making the ad for her fitness deal and another saying that they

were the ones. She was much happier with her shots the further she got into them.

It took her a while to get back to her comfort zone after pregnancy, but she was able to focus on her fitness with a lot more ease since moving in with Steven. He wanted to ensure she took the time for what was important to her, including her health.

She was moving on to other offer emails when the doorbell rang. "Are you expecting company, Lucas?" She smiled at her son as she walked past and opened the door.

There was a messenger on the other side waiting for her. The messenger held out a bouquet of flowers and a letter from Steven.

Josie,

I have a special day set up for you. Get dressed up in your favorite dress, drop Lucas off with Jules; she is waiting at her place, and let the driver bring you to me. The driver is waiting for you whenever you are ready.

Love you,

Steven

Josephine smiled at the letter and then looked at their son. "Well, it looks like we have a big night ahead of us! You get to go see Auntie Jules!" Lucas stood up and started clapping in excitement before his movie pulled his attention back to it.

Josephine decided it was the perfect time to put him down for a nap so that she could get ready. She got him a bottle of milk and went through his nap routine. "Get some good sleep. After, we will get to go on an adventure."

Lucas started singing their goodnight song until Josephine joined him.

Josephine walked upstairs and jumped in the shower. She was enjoying the hot shower when her phone dinged; pausing her music, she opened the

shower door and reached to look at her phone. Lana texted asking about plans. Josephine returned to the shower and started thinking about why he could take her out, but he had been doing many things like that lately. He was showing he loved her in ways big and small. He loved cooking for them, he was big on helping clean, and he loved spoiling them.

Josephine got out of the shower and dried off. She was blow-drying her hair when she realized she was not sure what dress she was going to wear. She finished and then started going through her entire closet. She pulled out six different dresses, trying them on one by one. She did not like any of them, and then she saw it. The dress from the gala. The tight one that Steven loved right away. She had it modified not long after to a slightly shorter version. She got more use out of it that way, and she slid it on and was happy that she had been working out when she got it zipped up all the way.

Then she moved onto her hair. She decided a loose, low bun with tendrils hanging out was the way to go. She took the time to get it pinned and adjusted just right. When she was satisfied, she stared at herself, remembering how it felt the first time he took it off of her. She was looking forward to him doing it again.

She went onto her makeup, trying to get it close to the gala look but not overwhelming. She wanted a more relaxed version that still maintained a natural look. She was a little shaky and had to fix her eyeliner once before she felt it looked right. "Okay, this will do."

She went to get Lucas up and ready for his fun sleepover with Auntie Jules. When she opened the door, the driver stood there waiting for her. "Oh! Have you been standing here the whole time?"

The older gentleman smiled, "No, Ma'am. The Boss texted to let me know you were getting Lucas ready, and I came up to the door to wait and help you

carry anything you need to the car."

"How did he..." Josephine smiled to herself, "the monitors." The driver nodded and winked at her.

"Let me grab this for you." He took the diaper bag and directed us to the car, which was fully equipped with a car seat. "Boss wanted one in each car just in case you ever need a ride anywhere."

"That's sweet of him." Josephine looked at the car seat and was impressed with Steven's choice.

"Let's get you to Auntie's house." She leaned in, kissed him on the cheek, and buckled him in.

The ride to Jules' house was mainly quiet, but Josephine did try to get to know their driver, Carl, a bit. He said he would happily be their driver whenever they needed him. He cracked a joke about her being better company than Steven when he was cranky, and Josephine decided right then and there that she liked Carl. He was a charming guy.

When the car pulled up to Jules' house, Josephine felt slightly uncomfortable. She still had a lot of reservations about Jules, but she knew that Steven had set this up. He never would have had Lucas brought here if he did not trust her to keep an eye on him. She got Lucas out, and Carl walked them to the door.

Josephine took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Jules swung it open and stepped back right away, "Wow! That is some dress!" Josephine nodded at her with a small smile. They stood awkwardly for a moment before Jules said, "Oh, sorry, come in!"

Josephine stepped inside, "You have a lovely home."

Jules stopped moving and looked at her, "Thank you. It isn't like your home with Steven, but it is just enough for me."

Josephine nodded and pushed forward in the conversation, "I have everything you will need in here. His bottle is all set to go whenever he is ready for bed, and I forgot the portable bed."

"Steven dropped one off here earlier. I was having a bit of trouble setting it up at first." Jules smiled at her, "Listen, Josie, we are family now. We can't afford to be bickering and awkward all the time. Steven would be thoroughly annoyed if we kept on going."

Josephine cleared her throat and decided that putting Steven first was the right thing to do, "Okay."

Jules sighed deeply and said, "I am sorry for everything I said at graduation. I didn't know what had actually happened, and neither did Steven. Had he known, he would never have been involved with Mace. I pushed for them to be together, leaving you on the outside. I shouldn't have done that."

Josephine sighed heavily. She had been holding onto her anger with Jules for a long time. She wanted to believe the sincerity behind Jules' apology, but she was still wary. She would give it a shot for Lucas and Steven. "Let's leave everything in the past, and we can try to move forward from here."

Jules knew that Josephine was hesitant, but she clearly took the win. "I will send you updates throughout the night while you enjoy date night. He will be okay here. I promise."

Josephine kissed Lucas goodbye and walked out the door, following Carl to the car. "Thank you for driving us, Carl."

Carl winked and opened her door, "Anytime you need. Let's go find the Boss, shall we?"

Josephine smiled and slid into the car. The city seemed to peel down into a quiet area just outside of town. When Carl finally slowed down, Josephine saw the sign. Grape and Wine. It was somewhere that Josephine had been

asking to go for a while. She wanted to enjoy the beauty of being outdoors, surrounded by beautifully lit-up trees, watching the sunset, holding hands, and stealing kisses from the man she loves.

She stepped out of the car and straightened out her dress. She started picking at her hair and using the side mirror to quickly fix her makeup when Steven stepped up beside her and placed his hand on the small of her back.

"You look absolutely breathtaking." Steven kissed her cheek, and she felt the heat creep up into her face. "I am definitely the luckiest man alive."

"Don't you ever forget it?" Josephine winked at him and took his hand in hers. She let him lead her to the entrance. She was so happy to just be in that moment.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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### Steven

Steven had been a nervous wreck all day. He had been planning this for the last two weeks without fail. He was careful not to get caught, especially since a large part of the plan counted on his sister taking Lucas. She had been on her best behavior for a while, and Lucas took to her quickly. That gave him a lot of wiggle room when he sent the messenger to deliver the flowers to Josie.

Steven and Josephine had been together officially for a few months, but he had always known they were meant to be together. They always found a way back to each other. Now, their son is almost two years old, and all he wants is to make their family completely whole.

Just thinking about Lucas had Steven smiling. He loved his son more than he thought he was capable of loving anything or any one person. His love for Josie and their son was the most significant reason he kept moving forward with his planned proposal.

Stacey was dashing around, making everything look perfect, and she was waiting for Lana to show up with the ring. Steven and Stacey were both



anxious that she would not make it there before Josie arrived. Steven was pacing, Stacey was barking orders, and Lana came strolling in while taking everything in.

"Wow! She is going to be absolutely blown away!" Lana did not strike Steven, ever, as the person to be to put together a surprise. She walked around, and when Stacey spotted her, Lana rolled her eyes.

Stacey walked over with her hand on her hip. "I told you what time to be here, and you are half an hour late! I am trying to keep things moving perfectly, and I have to wonder if you are trying to ruin this proposal."

Lana rolled her eyes again and held out the box for Stacey to take, "Harold was late, which is why I was late. I refused to show up without the ring. Plus, had she beaten me here, you would have stopped me at the door and found a way to get it to her."

"Always so on top of things, are you?" Stacey asked, then held her hand up for us to stay quiet.

"What's going on?" Steven was shifting nervously on his feet.

Lana chuckled at him, "You are nervous!"

Steven straightened his tie. "I am not." He looked Lana in the eye. "Okay, a little bit."

"Your sister and Lucas are here, her friends from work are here, and I need to shoo everyone out of sight so she doesn't see them when she walks in."

Stacey pushed Lana ahead of her.

Lana stopped and turned, "You will do great, and I know for a fact that she will say yes. Just don't make us wait too long. I am hungry." Stacey pushed her away and sent one of the guys to relocate everyone.

Twenty minutes later, Stacey came rushing back to Steven. Opening the ring box, she smiled and said, "I wish I had one of these."

Steven smiled, "One day, Stace. It'll happen."

"She is here." She directed him to the door. "Bring her back to the far corner; the sun will go down in about ten minutes. Ask her before that. I want the photographer to get the perfect pictures."

Steven nodded, straightened out his tux, and walked to meet his girl.

When he got out front, he noticed her in the gala dress, only it was shorter. It hugged her body in all the right places, and he was trying not to let his thoughts stray from the task at hand. She started picking at her hair and was using the side mirror to mess with her makeup when Steven finally stepped up beside her.

He placed his hand on the small of her back. "You look absolutely breathtaking." Steven kissed her cheek, and he saw her start to blush furiously. "I am definitely the luckiest man alive."

Josie smiled at him and whispered out closely, "Don't you ever forget it." Josie winked at him and took his hand in hers. Steven leads her to the entrance. This was the moment he had waited years for. He was going to propose to the woman he loved.

Steven guided her through the restaurant, and she stopped when she saw how empty it was. "Why is it so empty?"

Steven raised a hand, guiding her past the tables to where they could watch the sunset. "I felt like we needed the night to ourselves, so I decided to rent the place out."

Josie smiled quietly to herself, "This is beautiful. Thank you for doing this for us." She leaned into him and was caught off guard when he stepped back from her. She turned to face him and watched him drop down onto one knee. Steven cleared his throat and began, "Josephine, I have loved you for almost our entire lives. We have been through more than any one couple should have

to face. We have gone for far too long without one another, too many times to count. I have missed every single moment of your presence when you were gone. When I was gone." Steven was watching a silent tear roll down her face, "I promised you love, safety, passion, commitment, honesty, and many other things, like some good memories in our new... home. I will deliver on all the things I promised and more from now until the end of our lives." Josie let out a choked sob with a smile, "I promise to take care of you and Lucas, to give you everything you could ever want and need, and then some. I promise to never walk away from you, even when things get hard. I promise to hold onto your heart and protect it more fiercely than anything I have ever protected before. You deserve all of that and so much more." She stared at him, and he was starting to shake. "I am grateful for every moment of being in your presence. I am in awe of your beauty, your kindness, your compassion, and I am never surprised at how caring you are as a person but mostly as a mother to our son." Steven reached into his jacket pocket, "Josie, will you make me the happiest man in the entire world? Will you marry me?" Steven watched her head bob in a swift nod. She let him slide the ring onto her shaky hand. Once it was on, he picked her up, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "So, that nod was a yes?"

"Yes! It was a yes!" He kissed her deeply and watched her jump as everyone popped out from where they were hidden, clapping and cheering them on. It took Josie a minute to fully understand who was cheering them on. She spotted almost everyone important to her, including their son, in the most adorable mini tux she had ever seen.

"Mama! Wing!" Lucas was pointing at the ring, and Josie turned to look at Steven with a raised brow.

Jules looked at Josie. "I told him that Dad was giving Mama a significant

ring, so he had to be quiet for the surprise."

Steven laughed, "I am surprised that worked! He usually can't help himself when Josie is near. He takes off at a run."

Jules ran her fingers through Lucas' hair. "Trust me, he tried. We had to go to the hall and wait for them all to start clapping."

Josie took Lucas in her arms and began accepting hugs from everyone. She went to sit down and found Lana waiting at the table for her. Steven smiled and winked at Lana.

"Wait!" Josie looked between the two. "You knew?"

Lana laughed and stood up in her tall heels. "Of course, I knew. I helped pick that baby out for you and ensured it arrived on time." She pointed straight at Steven, "You should have seen how nervous this guy was. He was shaking like a leaf."

Steven wrapped his arms around Josie and kissed Lucas on the cheek, "I was not that nervous. Don't listen to her."

Lucas was squirming to get to Auntie Lana, so Josie set him down so he could reach her. "Hey there, handsome! Are you my date tonight?"

"Uh-huh!" Lucas gave Lana tons of little smooches, and Lana squeezed him tighter. Josie leaned back into Steven, and he felt the truth of how happy they were at that very moment.

Dinner was filled with laughter, smiles, stories from high school that never should have been told, and fun stories about Lucas. Steven and Josie were sitting so close she could put her head on his shoulder and watch everyone. He tilted his head towards the crown of hers and gave her a gentle kiss.

"What was that for?" Josie asked quietly.

Steven smiled down at her, "I just love you." She leaned back and stared at him. "I want a short engagement. Let's not wait anymore. I have waited for

you for most of my life, and I think it is safe to say we are not letting go."

Josie bit her lip and seemed to think about it, "I think we should wait until after he is two. He deserves his own celebration, and then we can go for it. That gives us about two to three months. Do you think a wedding will be doable in that amount of time?"

Steven spotted Stacey walking past the table and just barely caught her arm. "So, what can you whip up for a birthday party in two months and a wedding in three?"

Stacey looked like she was ready to panic. "Both events? On top of the club events?"

Steven smiled, "And a pay raise?"

Stacey smiled at him and pulled up her tablet as if she was really having to think it over. "I can make that all work, " she said. She looked at Lucas and gave him a tiny wave. "We," she pointed at Josie, "will meet in a few days to discuss details. For now, I must stop your friends from streaking around the place." She scoffed, "In a fancy establishment of all places!"

Josie laughed, "Models don't know how to keep clothes on, Stacey; it is part of the charm!"

Steven rubbed her neck, "It is definitely part of your charm. Should we call it a night?"

Josie looked around and shook her head, "Not yet; I am really just enjoying this." She looked sad for a moment, "She didn't come." Josie and her mom had their issues, but even I thought she would have shown up for her daughter's proposal.

"I'm sorry, babe. I did invite her."

Josie shook her head and wiped at a tear. "It's okay. We both know how she is about things. If it isn't about her, then it isn't worth it."

Steven kissed her gently on the lips, "She is missing out because this," he gestured to their loved ones and then pointed to her, "is worth more than anything else in the world." He stood up and pulled her with him. "Dance with me."

Josie nodded, and they moved to dance while others watched them focus only on one another. It was the perfect night.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## Josephine

"Good morning, sleeping beauty!" Lana was standing in front of her bed, holding out a cup of coffee. "We have dress shopping to do today since someone decided we only have a couple of months."

Josephine groaned and covered her eyes with the pillow. "Five more minutes."

High heels clacked on the floor, and Stacey's voice was muffled from underneath the pillow. "Let's go, Sunshine! We have a list of things to do today!" Stacey clapped at her, "Up, up, up!"

Josephine threw the covers back and rolled slowly out of bed. "I am hungover from the proposal party last night. Could you give me a minute?"

Lana threw a pair of yoga pants and a crop top at her, "Nope. We are on a limited time where we can go do this." She went to walk out the door, and then she turned around with a smirk on her face, "They have champagne where we are going... I will make sure there is orange juice so that when we call it a mimosa, you will feel better about it." She shrugged and disappeared around the corner while Stacey laughed and followed Lana out.

Josephine put her hair up and walked past Steven with an adoring smile on her face. He winked at her, and Stacey pulled her out of the house.

Dress shopping was easy. She tried on four wedding dresses; three of the dresses were ridiculous. She put the fourth dress on and could see her getting married to Steven in it. She felt it in her bones. It was a lace overlay on top of the nude fabric. The fit and flare style fit her personality perfectly. She smiled and tipped back her glass of champagne to celebrate.

"I will have Georgie hem it up for you fast so it is ready on time. Not too much to adjust here at all." Lana was walking in circles, assessing everything. Josephine smiled and felt a tear running down her face, "This is really happening. I am marrying Steven Calhoun." She looked over her shoulder at Stacey and Lana, smiling bigger now that she felt it was happening.

"Hell yeah, you are!" Lana was pumped.

Stacey let out a quick "Woo!"

They spent the rest of the morning having brunch, drinking champagne, and picking up some basic things. Josephine was happy Stacey took over as her wedding planner but was also excited to talk to Steven about the important items.

Steven was sitting in the living room doing things on his laptop when the three women walked in, giggling and talking about different events they had gone to where they got to witness some embarrassing stuff. He sat forward and put his laptop on the coffee table. "I see you all had a great morning."

Josephine winked at him awkwardly and tossed her purse on the loveseat, "I picked a dress, and we picked up a few other things. I want to shop for wedding stuff with you, though." She pouted at him and dropped in his lap.

"Well, what are we picking?" Steven kissed her cheek and pulled her tighter to him.



Josephine looked over at Stacey for the list they made, and Stacey rattled it off, "Well, we decided on rose gold, white, and peach for the color palette. We were thinking Roses in peach and white, but if you want lilies, Boss, we can do that."

"No, peach and white would be perfect, but I want red roses on the wedding party table." Steven was pretty sure.

"What if we do that and have one red rose tucked in the centerpieces." Steven nodded at her. "All of the shiny things will be in rose gold. We were thinking either the club rooftop so the beach is in the background for the ceremony and inside for the reception?"

Steven nodded, "I want to see if we can find something else before we settle on the club."

Josephine bopped his nose, and he looked over at her with a raised eyebrow.

"I love you, " he said.

Steven shook his head and tried to continue. "What else?"

"Wedding party," Stacey said.

Josephine looked at the two women, "I want Lana as my maid of honor and Stacey as a bridesmaid."

Steven looked over at the two, giggling. "I guess I can ask Dev."

"High school, Dev?" Josephine asked.

"Yes, but no. He is my head of security now. I think I want Lucas to be the best man. Dev can do all of the speeches and stuff, but I think it is important for him to be a part of the ceremony." Steven was pretty set on this one.

Josephine nodded and let him have his way.

Stacey was tapping away on her tablet. "I know most of the top staff will want to help or be a part of it. Don't worry about getting things done." She snapped her fingers at the group. "I just booked you for cake tasting

tomorrow afternoon. I cross-checked both of your schedules, and you don't have anything else going on."

"I can take Lucas." Lana threw out to the room.

"Perfect," Stacey responds in a lower tone while tapping away. "They will let me know what you decide. I also have a meeting set up with the caterer for the day after. Oh, and obviously, we will be supplying our own booze from the bar."

"Yay!" Josephine was definitely drunk. Steven shooed the others out and took Josephine to bed.

The next day was filled with every flavor of cake that Josephine could dream of. They tried all types of cake, including red velvet, chocolate, vanilla, orange crème cake, lemon cake, devil's food, and many more, and they tried different frosting combinations. All of the cakes were delicious, which made a decision very difficult. They decided on the vanilla cake with lemon buttercream frosting. Steven was more partial to the devil's food cake with French vanilla frosting. So, she decided she would get him a devil's food cake with French vanilla frosting for a surprise groom cake.

Josephine was letting Stacey know that they liked more than one flavor, and Stacey offered up cupcakes with edible rose gold J and S on top of them. They would have beads dropped to decorate. The couple was happy about the final decision.

They brought home as many samples as possible and decided to have cake for dinner by themselves while Lucas had a special day with Auntie Lana. They liked a few more combinations and told Stacey to incorporate those into the cupcake options. It was a fun day, but she was worried about the meeting with the caterer.

They wanted everything to be elegant but simple. That was not who they

were. They wanted the wedding preparation to be easy to do, and they did not want to have the staff working the event; they wanted them to enjoy it. They decided that pasta would be an excellent way to go. Everyone who would be there would be drinking all night. The pasta would set a good base. They could have various sauces, noodles, tortellini, and meats. It seemed easy enough for the caterers to have it ready to go in seven weeks.

Again, they let Stacey know, and there was no pushback. They were trying to do everything as simply as possible. They even wanted the decorations to be beautifully simple.

After a few weeks, some slight adjustments were made. The final countdown is on. There was a week left, and Josephine woke up freaking out. She went to talk to Steven, but it was at the club day. She heard Lucas babbling away in his crib and pulled him out. She went through their morning routine and could still feel the anxiety there coursing through her. She wanted nothing more than to marry Steven, but sometimes, she just felt like he would bail on her.

She started her panic cleaning. She started in their room. She stripped the bedding, dusted, vacuumed, cleaned the carpet, and then moved on to their bathroom. Next, she went through Lucas' room. She started purging toys and clothes that he was too big for when she got to the playroom, where Lucas was hanging out.

He looked in and smiled at her, "Play Mama." Josephine smiled at her son and let herself in through the gate. She sat on the floor and watched her son run around and dance to his favorite songs. He brought her stuffed animals and cars. Eventually, he sat on her lap and hugged her tight. All of her worries melted away. Her son could calm all of the bad things that were trying to creep into her mind.

"Love yeeew." Lucas used his sing-song voice to let her know, and Josephine chuckled at him.

"I love you, too, my big boy! You turn two tomorrow! Are you ready for your birthday party?" Josephine could hardly believe he was two.

"Yay! Parry!" He giggled, and Josephine tickled him.

Steven tapped on the door. "I am glad you are excited, bud! Aunt Stacey has been working really hard to make this super fun for you. There will be a bounce house, a blow-up water slide, presents, and lots and lots of cake."

Lucas got super excited at the prospect of cake. He loved his sweets, just like his mom. He ran over to the gate, and Steven picked him up. He looked at Josie and tilted his head to the side. "Are you okay, babe?"

Josephine nodded and felt a tear escape her eye. "Yeah, I'm good. I'm just going through the emotions of him turning two. We did a small birthday party last year, and I think he will actually get to do something fun without us having to do it for him."

"He is definitely getting too big, too fast, for my liking." He gives Lucas a big kiss, "Can you just stay little forever for me, buddy?"

"No."

Lucas said it so fast that Josephine busted out laughing. "It seems as if we don't have a say in the matter. He is ready for a celebration of him."

Josephine held her arms out, and Lucas leaned for her. "This little man was taking care of Mama today, so I think he earned all of the cake."

"It's good to know that someone will take care of you when I'm out of the house." Steven kissed her forehead and opened the gate so the pair could follow him out. They entered the living room and saw Stacey directing people around the backyard. She was pointing in all directions, trying to make it perfect for Lucas's big day.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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### Steven

Steven was more nervous than he was on the day of the proposal. He was ready to run down the hall and into the makeshift bridal sweet at the house to see if she was still prepared to do this. He opened the door, and Stacey was waiting outside of it to shoo him down the hall. She walked him to the front door and pointed to Dev, "Take him straight to the bar. Do not let him come back here." She whirled around to Steven, "Dev is hanging onto the rings for me; Lucas is ready to go; you just need to grab him from the playroom. You have two minutes to get out of the house before I drag you out myself."

Steven was annoyed with her, but he understood why. He just wanted to get the day over with. He wanted her to be his wife, and he wanted her to call him her husband. He wanted the family to be official. The weather was perfect. Stacey won the argument, and the ceremony would be on the club's rooftop. Everything was decorated to Stacey's perfection.

Everything that Josie wanted was there. He even made sure that there were a few surprises for her. He had Lana throw together a photo board with Jules so

that there was a bit of everything in there, from their childhoods to their wedding day. He wanted her to see that this was nowhere near rushed. They had been meant to be for as long as they had known one another.

Steven did a walk-through of the entire club from top to bottom, making minor adjustments to little things. His anxiety was in high gear, but he had to shove it down. Guests started arriving, and Lucas was being watched over by Jules. His giggles were wafting through the building, reminding Steven to stay calm and just wait. It would not be much longer until everything started. Stacey made the executive decision that Lucas would be the ring bearer and miniature best man. It made sense for both Steven and Josie to get what they wanted. Lucas told Jules and Dev a story to the best of his abilities, and they both pretended to be highly invested. Steven swore he saw a little spark of something between Jules and Dev, but he would bring that up later. He wanted Dev to know that it was okay for him to ask Jules out. He wanted to in high school, but Steven shut him down, saying it was wrong.

Steven was greeting people half-heartedly when Josie's mom walked in. She looked very out of place and uncomfortable. Steven approached her carefully so that she would not scurry back out the door. "I did not think you would be making it today."

She looked like she was about to jump out of her skin. "It is my daughter's wedding day, Steven. Where else would I be?"

Steven looked at her with a flat expression. "You couldn't be bothered to attend the engagement party, so it was logical that Josie and I had doubts about whether you would attend the wedding." Thank you for being here for Josie.

Josie's mom walked past him and out of sight somewhere in the club. Steven leaned over to one of his security members and said, "Keep an eye on her.

The only place she goes alone is the bathroom." His security nodded at him and followed behind her closely.

Stacey appeared about two hours after he had left the house. She was walking straight up to him with a serious look on her face. "You look great, Stace."

She quickly spun to show off her body, "You got a good look; now I need help getting everyone upstairs so we can get this party started."

Steven looked at her, "Josie's mom showed up. I have someone keeping an eye on her. I don't want anything going wrong today." Stacey nodded, then looked around to try to spot her.

"I will keep an eye out. Just in case." She wanted Steven to be reassured that she had it covered. "Now, you need to be heading upstairs to get married."

Steven smiled and nodded. He hugged her tightly and then walked away. He could hear her yelling instructions to everyone on the main floor to head up the stairs. Steven walked into the darker VIP area, which was lit up for the day, and Dev, Carl, and Lucas were waiting for him.

"You ready to do this?" Carl smiled and flashed his wedding ring to Steven.

"It is a big moment, but just remember, once you get through the vows and the ceremonial things, it is all about the fun." Carl was more than just an employee; he was the closest thing to an actual father figure Steven had ever had.

Steven took a deep breath and nodded at his two number-one guys. "Let's do this, " he said. Steven picked up Lucas and walked up the stairs. "Okay, buddy. I want you to stay with Uncle Dev. When he tells you to, you will get to walk down the aisle with Carlee. She will throw flowers in the air, and you will carry this down for Mama and Dada."

Lucas looks at the rings in his father's hand and smiles. "Ring!"

Steven felt pure fear at the fact that he was handing two very expensive rings

to his son, but he also knew that Lucas would take his job seriously. He loved doing things for them. Dev took Lucas from Steven and nodded with a big smile.

Steven adjusted his tux about six times before he took a deep breath and headed out to walk down the aisle where everyone was sitting. He looked upon the faces of everyone they loved and cared for and felt blessed. He waited for a few minutes before the music started up. It was simple and light music that was just enough to pull attention. Lucas and Carlee came, booking it down the aisle on their little legs almost immediately. He could not help but laugh at his son. He was so silly, and all his.

Next came Lana, walking by herself. Steven hated to admit that she looked good. They had built a weird type of friendship. When she got to Steven, she winked and blew a kiss at Lucas, who booked it over to be held up in her arms. She leaned over and whispered to Steven, "Take care of her." Steven nodded, letting her know she had nothing to worry about.

Dev walked down slowly with Stacey. She whispered something in his ear that made him chuckle as they continued down towards Steven. He leaned out and whispered, "Behave," as the two of them separated. Dev took the pillow from Lucas and high-fived him.

Steven looked at Lucas and smiled, "Good job, Buddy." He was so proud. His son was so happy and smart. He was beaming, and Steven knew the look on Lucas' face mirrored his own.

The music started, and out of the door walked Josie. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his entire life. Her dress was perfect; she was perfect. Steven felt his heart flutter with happiness. Everyone else around them faded away more and more with each step. She had made it halfway down the aisle when he felt a warm tear drop down his cheek. Steven was



never a crier. He was always stoic and ready to stay emotionless, but this moment with Josie was everything. He let himself feel everything. He wiped at it and smiled at her.

He felt grateful beyond belief that she was really there. He was no longer feeling anxiety or fear. He was feeling pure joy and happiness. This was more than he had ever felt and, more importantly, allowed himself to feel.

He was about to marry the love of his life, and their son was about to watch his parents make their family complete. The ceremony would link them together in the only way they were not connected yet, and it meant everything.

Josie made it up to him slowly. She was angelic as she walked, smiling at him in every movement. Then she turned and kissed Lucas quickly. When she turned to look at Steven, she let out a small, "Hey. I think I am supposed to be meeting someone here?" She smiled at him.

He could not help himself; he had to respond to her, "It's about time you made it."

The End.

## Josephina

**A**s I stand looking at our family, I start reminiscing. I remembered our wedding day and how beautiful the ceremony was. It was nice having family and friends attend. "Oh boy, can Stacey and Lana throw a party? After the ceremony, we danced, drank, and had a good time. Steven whisked me away before the party was over so we could start our honeymoon.

We returned to our house, and he surprised me with tickets to Italy. We left the day after our wedding. We had an amazing time, even though it was hard not to have Lucas with us. Lucas and I haven't ever been apart for very long.

We put a love lock on the Rialto bridge in Venice. Someday, the plan is to bring the whole family to show them our love lock. Our trip to Italy also included visits to Rome, Tuscany, Florence, Portofino, Ravello, and Positano. We enjoyed the old-world architecture, cobblestone roads, piazzas, vineyards, and the food was to die for.

We brought something back from Italy for Lucas, but he didn't get his surprise for a while. We ended up finding out we were expecting. The pregnancy was very different from when I was pregnant with Lucas.

My doctor had me do an early ultrasound because he was concerned. I thought Steven was going to pass out in the doctor's office when the doctor told us we were having twins.

I had wanted to have a Doula, but since the pregnancy was high-risk, I opted to deliver at the hospital. The twins came about two months early. They weighed less than 8 lbs. altogether. Leland weighed in at 4.6 lbs. and Lily weighed 3.4 lbs. Even though they were born early, they were healthy. Lucas proudly wore his "Big Brother" t-shirt. He loved the twins and was very helpful. It was beautiful to be able to share the pregnancy with Steven.

Watching Steven with our children reminds me of a child doing something for the very first time. Seeing Steven with all our babies melts my heart, and I love him even more. He is, without a doubt, my soul mate.

Today, we are getting family portraits. We are taking some shots with the five of us, some of just our children, some with just Steven and me, and we didn't forget to take one with all of the Aunts and Uncles —real or bonus ones.

"Hey, Babe, get in the picture with us all. Now, our family is complete."

As the photographer prepares to take the picture, Everyone hollers, "Bee's knees."

## Friends to Lovers Secret Baby Romance

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### **Sneak Peak to my next book...**

**Stuck in a bridal suite with Mr. Dominant, the billionaire—not where I want to be.**

Alpha male, not my type, yet he secretly captivated my soul.

Chiseled bodybuilder, tanned, and blonde, he's Ryan Gosling's doppelgänger.

One look at him fills my mind with naughty thoughts.

We couldn't get enough of our seductive late-night playtime.

Like a beast, he pinned me to the bedpost and left me purring like a kitten.

Intoxicated by his dominance, as each encounter unfolds, I'm left breathless and craving more.

He has the nerve to think I'm his new play toy.

Our relationship thrives on mutual irritation—he's demanding, I'm chatty, and we both hate it.

Steven considered me his wingwoman at work until he fired me over one mistake.

I have no clue how he will react when my secret is revealed.

My past made me decide not to have children, but now I'm knocked up.

**But Wait...**

**Check out "Bad Boy Baby Daddy"**

**Bad Boy Baby Daddy: A Best Friend's Brother Enemies to Lovers Romance**

**Error in Judgement...hooking up with my best friend's brother**

A Shattered Bad Boy, Brenden, came to me for assistance.

He didn't remember me, but I remembered him.

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