

# Family Jewels

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## DEDICATION

To our newest players to be named later:

We're all waiting to meet you!

No pressure. Really.

Love, Mama, Mimi, Alex,

Maggie, & Corona



## CHAPTER ONE

The year everything changed seemed to start out happily enough. I rang in the new year with Dez, my best friend since Women's Studies 101 freshman year at University of Michigan, and Maddie, my girlfriend of two and a half years who I was thinking of asking to move in with me on Valentine's Day. We stood together on the deck at another friend's party in downtown Ann Arbor, my arms looped around each of their necks, humming along to "Auld Lang Syne" and shivering as we watched fireworks light up the clear, unusually snow-free sky. None of us knew the words to the penultimate New Year's Eve tune, but that didn't matter. Sure, I was another year closer to thirty without having accomplished much that other people—my family, specifically—would consider significant. But I had a pair of jobs that I liked, my best buddy at my side, and a future planned with the woman I loved. What more did I need to be happy?

Later, after Dez showed up on my doorstep with melted snowflakes clinging to her short hair, her eyes damp with weather and what she could no longer bear to keep from me, I would remember that night on the deck, the three of us lit up by rainbow-hued skyrockets and exploding chrysanthemums, the pyrotechnic cracks and whistles a

sibilant accompaniment to our traditional invocation of the end of one year and the beginning of another, and I would wonder if their hands had been clasped together behind my back. There I was, clueless, the two people I thought I loved most flanking me for what would be the last time, and I didn't even know, would never know, what had been in their heads or hearts as the sky exploded around us.

I don't remember Valentine's Day, which arrived shortly after Dez's confession. I do remember weeks of waking up at the same time each morning, my digital clock broadcasting 4:03 as if I had set the alarm. Anxiety, it seemed, was just as capable of jarring me from sleep as the morning news report on NPR.

Every morning, as I lay in the dark picturing Dez and Maddie in bed across town, naked and entwined about each other, I would kick at my sheets and gnaw my chapped lips until the radio turned itself on at seven. My stomach hurt constantly, a tight, visceral pain that made me worry I would die of a bleeding ulcer. Any thought of food made my stomach contract unhappily, while the sight and scent of it actually made me retch a few times during those first early, post-apocalyptic weeks. Not exactly convenient given that one of my jobs was serving food in a café.

"What's wrong with you?" Dr. Margaret "Fitzy" Fitzgerald, my boss and mentor at U of M's Matthaei Botanical Gardens, my other job, finally demanded one drizzly morning when I arrived fifteen minutes late for my shift.

"Nothing," I muttered, ducking my head beneath her legendary gaze. Fitzy, it was said, could pick out differing species of Goldenrod from twenty paces or more.

"Bull honkey. Lately if you turn sideways I can't even see you."

It took me a minute to realize she was saying I was too skinny. I

didn't bother arguing. After a couple of weeks of wallowing in the mire of my sorrow, I was thinner than I could probably afford to be.

Fitzy put her hands flat on her desk and pushed herself up to face me. "Tell me you're not doing any of that heroin, Junior. Tell me you're smarter than that."

I looked up, startled. "No, ma'am."

A committed beer drinker and weed smoker, I had never dabbled in anything harder. I preferred my highs to come from barley-based beverages or good old-fashioned ganja.

She nodded, the gesture brief and compact. "Are you sick?"

"No."

"Well, something must be wrong. Are you going to tell me about it, or are you going to make me keep guessing?"

I sighed. "It's Maddie," I admitted. "And Dez. They... The two of them..."

When I trailed off, swallowing hard, Fitzy made a sound of impatient sympathy in her throat as she came around the desk. Then she was at my side, her arm engulfing my shoulders, her touch surprisingly gentle.

"I'm sorry, my girl," she said, patting me the way she used to pat her dog, Curly, a cheerful, rust-colored mutt who had succumbed to cancer the previous fall.

This uncharacteristic display of empathy from Fitzy, along with the thought of Curly, whom I had loved nearly as much as Fitzy had, made my throat tighten. I closed my eyes and rested my head on her shoulder, crying silently as she held onto me and made comforting noises I had never heard from her before.

I wasn't surprised, exactly, to be consoled by Fitzy. Known for her mannish boots and the cigars she sneaked when she wasn't taking

oxygen for her increasingly debilitating emphysema, Fitzzy usually seemed happier interacting with plants than with human beings. But for some reason, she had taken a shine to me, as she had stated gruffly more than once, usually with a shrug that implied doubt as to her own powers of judgment. When I was still in college, she would drill me on the Latin names of plants during my shifts in the conservatory or out on the grounds. Long before I'd left the ranks of the U of M student intelligentsia, she'd let me know there would be a position on her staff waiting for me, if I wanted it. Five years later, I still did.

"There, there, my girl," she murmured. "They didn't deserve you, that's all. You'll be better off without them. Just wait. You'll see, my dear child."

A knock sounded at the open office door, and Chris Jenkins, a student intern, stopped short as he caught sight of Fitzzy embracing me.

"Well?" she demanded. "You have eyes, don't you? Come back later, boy."

Stuttering an apology, Chris backed out into the hallway.

I pulled away and rubbed my face. "You didn't have to scare him."

"Of course I did. It's part of my job, particularly for the ego-challenged—as you will no doubt recall."

I laughed a little, the first time in what felt like decades, remembering how I had come into Fitzzy's entry-level Botany course convinced I knew more than anyone else, including, perhaps, her. Quickly and deftly she'd whittled my ego down to a more manageable size, causing me at first to despise her and then, gradually, to respect her. Eventually my love of all things green had led to an internship at the Botanical Gardens under Fitzzy's tutelage, which had in turn led to spots of generously paid manual labor at her house not far from campus. By the end of my sophomore year, I had evolved from respect

to affection for Fitzy, whose crotchiness, I'd learned, masked a brilliant, genuinely caring and truly contradictory persona.

Eight years in, our relationship was still based on the mentor/mentee model. Fitzy regularly gifted me with greens and vegetables from her home garden, the only payment I would accept for helping around the house these days, and gave me books that were “no longer needed.” Sometimes after fundraising or other events, she and I would linger at the Arboretum and talk for hours about the state of the world, American politics, the movement to return native plants to local landscapes—a passion I had picked up from her over the years. Fitzy, a widow who I had caught on more than one occasion talking to the framed photos of her deceased husband and daughter she kept around her home and office, had known I was gay since day one—I was a bit, shall we say, *vehement* about my sexuality when I was younger. But she, my one-time professor and eventual boss, had never seemed to give a whit.

The one time we'd talked about it, my junior year after a couple of gay boys had been attacked outside a GLBT event at the union, Fitzy had scowled and said, “I've never been able to see what the fuss is about, frankly. Homosexual behavior has been documented in most species. Surely even the Christian crazies wouldn't dare to find fault with their creator given that fact, would they?”

“I'm not sure they've thought of that angle,” I'd replied.

Over the years, Fitzy and I had freely shared our less than charitable views toward Michigan's increasingly vocal cadre of right-wing Christians. Academia and religious fundamentalism rarely mixed well, which was one of the reasons I was only too glad to be employed by my alma mater.

My other employer also leaned to the left. Toby Anderson owned

Boadicea, a crunchy café near the University of Michigan's main campus. I'd started out at Boa as a lowly dishwasher my first year of college, but had since worked my way up to assistant manager. Like Fitzzy, Toby took it easy on me in the weeks after Dez and Maddie's collective defection, letting me show up late and not giving me too hard a time at first when, in early March, I demonstrated potentially bad judgment by entering into not one but two rebound hook-ups. In my defense, my self-confidence was at an all-time low. When two equally hot Boa regulars asked me out within days of each other, I couldn't find a compelling reason to refuse either.

Boadicea was a well-known boon for the social life of any lesbian lucky enough to work there. Like the barely spring night that set the change in my life to rolling in earnest—from the main counter, looking out across the booths and tables that filled the café almost to overflowing, I counted a handful of potentials, at least one of whom had been giving me noticeably un-subtle looks over the top of her paperback. As I watched, she closed her book, unfolded deliciously long legs clad in skinny jeans, and approached the counter.

A couple of weeks of rebound sex with two enthusiastic partners had improved my overall outlook on life in the month since my busted Valentine's Day. My stomach no longer hurt as much, and I had begun to remember what life had been like Before Maddie. *BM*—that seemed to sum up the ending of my relationship with Miss Madeline Stanton perfectly.

Thinking about bodily functions had distracted me from the cute college student standing before me, so I offered her the rakish smile that lifted the right side of my mouth in symmetrical opposition to my silver nose stud and asked, "Was that hummus with avocado or roasted red pepper?"

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“Avocado,” she said, her smile almost as suggestive as mine.

I rang up the order and watched my customer saunter away. Maybe a little later I would go out to bus tables and strike up a conversation. Life was too short to overlook a smile—not to mention an ass—like hers.

“Eyes back in your head, Junior,” Toby said, elbowing me as she passed.

“Like you need any more girls,” Elissa, one of the sandwich makers, added.

They were always ganging up on me, which I had learned to expect from my three older sisters but not from my supposed friends.

“There can technically never be ‘too many’ girls,” I said. “Besides, I’m single.”

“Not what I hear.” Elissa wiped her knife on a rag.

Steph and Caitlyn, the attractive co-eds I was “hanging out” with, knew about each other, and each had professed to accept that I wasn’t ready for a committed relationship. So far, both women seemed fine with the casual nature of our situation(s).

“Whatever. I’m taking a break.” I untied my apron and threw it at Toby, who laughed as I withdrew to the alley behind the building for a smoke.

Outside, the patch of gray sky visible from the back steps was crisscrossed by jet tracks. I leaned back on the wooden steps that led into the café’s kitchen, shivering in my shirtsleeves, and wafted a couple of smoke rings up between the buildings.

“Is this a solitary sulk, or can I join you?” Toby asked from the doorway.

“Only if you promise not to lecture me on the evils of tobacco.”

“Deal,” she said, and sat down beside me on the steps. “Dinner with

the family tonight?”

I nodded. Every other Sunday, my parents held court at the old Victorian house on the hill, which meant that twice a month, my three sisters, their respective partners and children, and I dropped whatever we were doing and high-tailed it out to the edge of town. We didn't dare miss an official dinner at our childhood home. But then, I was likely the only member of the Starreveld clan who wanted to.

“You could always come home with me instead,” Toby offered. “Sheila’s whipping up a Tofurky with mashed potatoes and stuffing.”

Early spring Thanksgiving dinner at Toby and her wife Sheila’s house, a cozy bungalow not far from Boa, sounded wonderful. “I wish.”

We sat quietly, me staring at the glowing tip of my Marlboro Light and thinking about how I needed to reduce my dependence on cigarettes now that I was no longer in the throes of romantic despair, Toby smoothing splinters from the bottom step with her boot and probably thinking about her motorcycle. She’d just brought her Harley out of winter storage and insisted on riding it everywhere now that much of the snow had melted. More of the white stuff was probably on the horizon, seeing as it was only mid-March, but no one seemed to want to mention this fact to Toby.

“How’s the ride?” I asked.

“Excellent,” she said, and waxed lovingly about her bike as I smoked my cigarette and nodded occasionally. Sometimes I thought she adored her bike almost as much as she did Sheila, her partner of nineteen years. But that was Toby. She never did anything halfway, which was how she’d built Boadicea into a mainstay of Ann Arbor’s alternative scene.

After a few minutes, she seemed to realize she was gushing and cleared her throat. With a square jaw and a fondness for leather, Toby

liked to believe that other people saw her as a tough, manly dyke.

“Anyway, enough about me,” she said. “Did you have a good time last night?”

“I think so.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m not exactly. Alex and I had a couple of beers and sang some Karaoke, and then we saw Maddie and Dez and I had a few more beers.”

“Tell me you didn’t sing Katy Perry again.”

“Sorry, they didn’t have any Neil Diamond.”

“Too bad—he’s a musical genius.” She paused. I knew what she was going to say even before it came out of her mouth: “Did you talk to Dez?”

“No,” I said, not looking at her.

Toby had never been a fan of Maddie’s—*ice queen control freak*, she’d pronounced after the fact—and hated to see me chuck a decade of friendship over such a *useless excuse for a lesbian*. I didn’t tell her I wasn’t the one who had chucked the friendship, exactly. Dez hadn’t tried to get in touch with me even once since the night she’d appeared on my doorstep looking to unload the mother of all secrets. I wasn’t sure how I would have responded if she had.

I crushed my cigarette under the heel of my Doc Marten boots. “I better get inside. My boss can be a real tyrant.”

“Nice.”

I felt her eyes on me as I headed back in. She meant well, I knew, but I hadn’t yet managed to quell my nausea from the previous night’s outing to Lucky’s, Ann Arbor’s women’s club. Like a scene from one of my nightmares, Maddie and Dez had been wrapped around each other on the dance floor, radiating mutual adoration for all the world to see.

At one thoroughly tipsy point, I had accidentally drifted near them, but they hadn't appeared to notice. Probably it would have taken some kind of calamity to make them take note of the outside world. Or, at least, of me.

Which didn't matter, I told myself now, swallowing against the telltale burn of acid in my esophagus. I was fine. Better than fine, even—after dinner tonight, Caitlyn, a former gymnast and current U of M cheerleader, was planning to come over to my place for a pre-arranged booty call. I pictured her spread-eagled on my bed, her eyes closed in anticipation as I lowered myself between her legs. That was more like it.

A line from an Ani DiFranco song drifted into my mind, about how her ex was never that good of a lay or even much of a friend. It always reminded me of Maddie. Unfortunately, the next line confirmed that in spite of those failings, Ani still adored the unnamed “you” of the song.

As I passed through the kitchen, I paused beside my backpack to pop a couple of Tums, just for good measure. Back at the main counter, I checked the booths. Sure enough—the cute girl from earlier had finished her sandwich and appeared to be engrossed in a Jane Austen novel. Upon my word, there was nothing I loved so much as nineteenth century British women's fiction. I tied my apron strings, rolled up my shirtsleeves, and set out to clear some tables.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Elizabeth, dear, please set the table,” my mother directed.

Elizabeth was my given name. Only my friends called me Junior. The nickname had been bestowed upon me by certain older members of the Ann Arbor GLBT community when, at sixteen, I started hanging around Boa and the local queer bookstore.

In the formal dining room, the long oak table was already covered in a lace tablecloth. I set out cloth napkins, silver, and china from the antique armoire, trying to tune out the high-pitched buzz of my mother and sisters’ voices from the kitchen. My niece and nephews were in the den off the kitchen, no doubt enthralled by one of the many children’s DVDs my mom kept on hand. Meanwhile, my father and brothers-in-law were out on the deck guzzling light beer and grilling red meat. The fact that it was only the second week of March made no difference to my relatives. True Michiganders, they barbecued year-round.

I counted the place settings again: parents at either end, me and my three sisters scattered along the sides, two husbands, three small children, one infant. Wait, where was the high chair? I found the ancient wooden infant seat in the pantry and set it up at my father’s

end. Jane, the eldest, traditionally sat beside him facing Mike, her husband. But since Mary had to be able to reach the high chair, she'd taken over the Seat of Honor, as Cat and I referred to it. Cat was three years older than me, Mary a year and a half older than her, and Jane another two years older again. My parents had been busy there for a while, especially if you counted the baby boy my mother had lost between Cat and me. After I came along, the doctors had warned my parents against further pregnancies, so they'd given up on producing a male heir.

Having me was almost like having a son, I frequently said to Toby. But I'd never cracked this particular joke anywhere near my family.

Setting the table had long been my responsibility. I could barely make breakfast for myself, let alone dinner for a dozen people. Early on, when my mother was teaching my sisters the ins and outs of the kitchen and they were taking swimmingly to it, as they appeared to do with all traditionally feminine tasks, I had refused to sit still and listen. I would run from the kitchen, hands over my ears, chanting, "I can't hear you," and escape the block and a half to my friend Jody's house. His mother didn't try to make me learn to cook; I couldn't understand why mine did.

A boy with a girl's name, Jody was being raised in a "gender-neutral environment," I had once overheard my mother confide to my father. What that meant exactly, I wasn't sure at the time. I did know, though, that Jody was the only boy in the neighborhood who thought it was cool I could outrace him on foot or by bike, or that I could throw a football as far as he could. His parents, too, were the only adults I'd encountered who didn't seem to have a problem with my aversion toward dresses and dolls.

I loved hanging out at their house, even though they tended to leave

the bathroom door open no matter what they might be doing in there, a habit that had resulted in more than one horrified moment for me. But when we were in ninth grade, Jody's father got a job out-of-state, a twist of fate I'd always bemoaned. Not only had Jody's family appeared to accept me unconditionally, but their house had provided a safe haven from my sisters' frequent attempts to inflict make-up or girly clothing on me.

My sisters, models of traditional femininity, had loved playing dress-up with me, their life-sized doll. When I was little, I would try to sit still while they brushed powder over my nose, wove my shoulder-length hair into wispy French braids, slipped shoes they had outgrown onto my feet. I admired my older sisters. They were fascinating creatures who participated in strange personal hygiene rituals and always smelled good. I would watch them in the mirror while they styled my hair after their own, listening to their conversations about boys they liked and trying to figure out what it was that made them like them and me, me.

Because no matter how skilled their designs, I always looked like a boy in drag. I alone had inherited our father's broad shoulders and narrow hips. A one-time star U of M running back, Dad had always looked more like a longshoreman called Sven than a jeweler named Eugene, except for his metrosexual wardrobe. By the time I hit high school, I was already taller than any of my sisters, even Jane, the oldest. Secretly, I was relieved that their hand-me-downs no longer fit. I preferred shorts and beat-up sneakers, faded jeans and T-shirts adorned with athletic logos. On those long-past dress-up afternoons, I would rather have been roaming the woods with Jack and Will, nearly feral twins who lived one street over, or rehearsing original musical scores with Jody in the unfinished room above his garage. Or later, after Jody

moved away, mucking about the garden.

As a teenager, I'd spent what felt like entire summers shadowing Felix, our gardener, and his crew as they tended the plants, bushes, and ornamental trees scattered throughout my family's estate, which contained a pond with a working fountain and an English garden complete with a maze. I loved to transplant annuals into the rich earth near the house, shovel damp mulch from the back of Felix's truck, wield sharp shears against a truculent hedge. Working outside, I didn't have to worry about fitting in. Felix and the guys on his crew didn't appear to think I should be at the mall hoping to catch a glimpse of a cute boy. They seemed to accept my interest in plants as a given, and patiently shared what they had learned about tending gardens. My sisters, on the other hand, couldn't understand why I spent so much time outdoors. But even as they tried to wrap their pretty blonde heads around my floral sentiments, I knew it wasn't only my fascination with photosynthesis that set me apart from them.

Even now that we were all grown up and out of college, my sisters remained this trio of Stepfordesque girls, feminine and sociable like our mother. At least now that we were adults I finally had something major in common with them: I, too, had refused to take up our father's career gauntlet—management of Starreveld & Sons, the jewelry shop that had been in our family for more than a hundred years. By now, my elder sisters had opted for careers in orthodontics, housewifery, and law. And while I had yet to formally choose a career—Toby claimed I'd been auditioning for the role of professional lesbian for some time now—I knew that I didn't want to take over the shop. Nor did I think my father wanted me to. Since I'd dropped the lesbian bombshell on my family the summer after I graduated from high school, my father hadn't seemed to want to have much to do with me, store or no store.

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“Is the table ready, Lizzie?” my sister Jane called from the kitchen for easily the nine hundred and forty-seventh time in our lives together.

“Yes, ma’am,” I hollered back. Scary—the older she got, the more she sounded like our mother.

Jane poked her head out of the kitchen. “I heard that, brat.” She crossed her eyes at me and ducked back into the kitchen.

Okay, so she wasn’t exactly like Mom yet. But there was still time.

Dinner that night was the usual melee, with competing conversations, children’s high-pitched tones, low adult exclamations and seemingly contagious laughter rattling the panes of the dining room windows that overlooked the wide lawn where I used to accompany Felix on his rounds. Now, hovering between winter and spring, Michigan was in thaw mode, trees and grass gray and brown, shrubs and raised beds almost expectantly empty.

I’ve always loved the smell of fresh dirt and melting snow on the first warm day when the sun returns. In the dead of a Michigan winter, when nearly every living thing is buried under several feet of monochrome snow beneath a leaden sky, it’s hard to believe that green grass has ever waved languidly in a late summer’s breeze, or that in a few short months multi-colored roses will once again creep over the backyard trellis, brandishing blooms and spikes aplenty. But on the first real day of spring when sunlight penetrates the hard ground, you can almost smell the color green on the breeze.

That night, the sun was still too weak to assert itself, and I was trapped in the familiar dining room yet again wishing I could be outside the fray, peering in through steam-blurred windows. Unlike the weather, my family was reliably predictable. My parents admired Jane and fawned over Mary and nine-month-old Brittany, who to me was

still hairless and formless enough to be genderless. With a name like Brittany and the frilly, pink outfits Mary favored, however, I imagined she would end up just as feminine and tractable as her mother.

Everyone adored Mary—children, adults, babies, animals. She'd never seemed to realize, though. As lovable as Mary was, we all knew she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Her husband, Joe, who was neither as sweet nor as lovable as Mary, nonetheless worshiped her just as much as everyone else did, and seemed to take genuine pleasure in working long hours as a contractor so that she could stay home full-time with the baby and their older son, Joey.

Jane, on the other hand, the oldest of the Starreveld sisters, was sharper than the rest of us combined. Although how someone who'd scored in the top one percent on both the SATs and, later, the MCATs, ended up in a profession that required her to spend the majority of her days peering into the mouths of children and pre-teens was not obvious to those who loved her. But being an orthodontist suited Jane just fine, and that was all that really mattered, she'd reminded us often enough. Her kids took after both her and Mike, her software programmer husband—barely able to tie their own shoes and already obsessed with books and computers. Meredith, the oldest grandchild at six, would probably be designing cutting edge apps before I even owned a smartphone or tablet.

Meanwhile Cat, my other sister, was the proverbial middle child, even though she and Mary technically shared middle honors. Unlike Mary the domestic goddess, Cat was prone to vocal outbursts any time she thought she was being ignored. Fitting, we all concurred behind her back, that she'd decided to become an attorney—the law offered its practitioners nearly unceasing monologue opportunities, as well as plentiful money to pay for the designer lifestyle Cat had always coveted.

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What my sisters said behind my back was not something I liked to ponder. At family dinners, I mostly hid out in the corner furthest from my father and brothers-in-law, who, while decent enough guys, occasionally still appeared uncertain what to make of me, an unabashed lesbian sporting body art and a faux hawk. My mother and I would engage in small talk, or Cat and I would spar, or Meredith or one of my nephews would fill me in on life in their world. Talking to the kids was my favorite dinner pastime even if they did occasionally mistake my gender. Unlike the rest of the people seated around the table, they weren't old enough yet to understand that they didn't have anything in common with me.

As the dinner conversation at the other end of the table skipped from mortgage rates (the lowest in years) to building demand (also, unfortunately, markedly low) to orthodontia and diamonds as common markers of discretionary wealth, I talked to Meredith about her first soccer game of the year, which we'd all attended in the pouring rain the previous morning; helped the two four year-olds (hyperactive Joey and dreamy Owen, Jane's youngest) cut their food into bite-sized pieces; and chatted with my mother about gardening. Every once in a while I noticed my father glance furtively in my direction, but mostly he seemed to pay attention to nearly everyone except me.

When I was younger, my dad and I had never seemed to run out of things to talk about. He taught me how to throw a baseball, catch a pop fly, and shoot a free throw. In summer, we would spend hours together in the driveway after he came home from work, shooting baskets as the sun set and the mosquitoes buzzed about our heads. Sometimes he didn't even change out of his suit, just rolled up his sleeves and kicked off his wingtips. But by the time I reached high school, a slightly puzzled look had replaced his easy smile when he

looked at me. He still attended my sports matches and appeared proud of my academic achievements. But while he teased and fussed over my sisters, he treated me politely and a little distantly, as if he weren't sure anymore quite how to talk to me.

My father's uncertainty had caused me to doubt myself long before I fell in love with my best friend on the softball team. Even now, looking back on my early teen years is difficult; that's something I have in common with most people, probably. But just recognizing the commonality of a particular experience doesn't necessarily lessen the accompanying ache. In my case, middle school signaled a transition from being comfortable in my own skin, confident of my worth and of my parents' unconditional love, to a period of painful insecurity. As a child, I never doubted my father's love, never suspected either of my parents would look upon me with anything other than pride, affection, love. This security was their gift to me, the emotional platform they had built, consciously or not, for each of their children. Did my faith in their devotion make it harder later when their affection for me seemed to waver, to flicker in the face of the public condemnation of the type of person I was becoming? Their friends, other business owners and housewife moms, looked askance at my blossoming from a tomboy in pigtails and overalls to a baby dyke with boy-band hair and clip-on ties. Our church, Dutch Reformed, was neither open nor affirming when it came to gays, lesbians, or genderqueer teenagers. Which meant that neither, particularly, were my parents.

But that early boost of self-esteem they had given me was exactly what made me able to soldier on beneath the critical stares of neighbors and family friends, fellow congregants and school officials. The faith and encouragement my parents provided early on made me not only accept my own differences later but proclaim them, loud and proud, to

anyone who would listen. Sometimes I thought my father wished I had stayed silent, that I had allowed him and my mother and everyone else to continue along as they were, ignoring my deviations from their version of normalcy. But I'd been raised to be honest, to honor those I cared about with the truth. And anyway, coming out the summer after high school graduation had merely been a confirmation of the message I'd been broadcasting underground for years.

The sense of self I'd learned from my parents and older sisters was also what allowed me now to continue to come home every other Sunday, to sit through dinner pretending that it didn't hurt when my father's gaze skittered away from me, his disappointment palpable after all these years. Sometimes I sat at the table daydreaming about leaving Ann Arbor, setting off for distant locales where I wouldn't have to bear constant witness to what I'd lost. Friends from college had invited me to move with them to London, New York, Chicago, and, the most attractive option of all, Seattle. But if and when I left my hometown, it would be to head toward something compelling in its own right, a new experience I couldn't wait to begin—not simply because I couldn't stand another day among people I knew had once loved me but wasn't so sure still did.

Not that the idea of fleeing wasn't tempting.

Dinner that evening seemed to be following the usual script—me passing the time with the younger generation, my father ignoring me—until dessert, when a new plot line abruptly developed. Taking advantage of a lull in conversation as everyone chowed down on blueberry pie, my dad clinked his glass with a fork and announced, “I have a proposition. For you, Elizabeth, actually.”

Movement around the table ceased as all eyes shifted from the head of the table to me tucked into the corner seat at my mom's right elbow.

When I'd first graduated from college—like my sisters before me, I, too, had said yes to the University of Michigan—my dad had used family dinners as a chance to enquire regularly after my career aspirations. I would try not to squirm in the high-backed wooden chairs hand-crafted long before I was born and explain once again that I, a graduate of the U of M Honors program, was still working part-time at Boa and the Arboretum. Eventually he'd stopped asking.

Now I cleared my throat. "What kind of proposition?"

"More of a favor, really. I'm going to the annual IAJ convention next month. Keith was supposed to come along, but since Becky is on bed-rest until the twins are born, he isn't available. Everything is already paid for. I was hoping you might take his spot."

Keith was the store manager, and the International Association of Jewelers was one of numerous professional organizations to which they both belonged. I pictured the convention—the Hilton in Cincinnati or the Marriott in St. Louis packed with mostly male jewelry designers, manufacturers, and sales people, clean-cut and conservative like my father, and then pictured myself with my David Beckham hair, tattoos, and preference for ripped jeans trying to blend into such a crowd.

"I don't know, Dad," I hedged.

All eyes in the room swiveled to me again. Except the baby's, of course. She was too busy jamming uncooked blueberries into her mouth with both adorably plump little hands.

"IAJ is in Antwerp this year," my father clarified. "I also have business in Amsterdam. We'd be in the Netherlands for the tulips."

Tulips? In the real Holland, as opposed to the small West Michigan town?

"You know, I could probably make it," I said. "I just have to check with work."

“Good. We can talk more as I get the details ironed out. Now, Jane, did I hear you say that John DeSalle’s daughter came into the office last week?”

The conversation moved on. Across the table, Cat’s perfectly plucked eyebrows settled into an ominous *v*. She’d asked for a trip to Europe for her law school graduation the previous year, but my parents had reminded her that travel was a luxury, and luxuries did not constitute suitable gifts. Except jewelry, of course. But jewelry was a necessity, my father claimed, not an extravagance.

Like his father before him, he often said that he loved three things in life: family, diamonds, and tulips. In our world, family and diamonds were indelibly intertwined. Before my Y chromosome-free generation appeared on the scene, Starreveld & Sons Fine Jewelry had passed from four generations of fathers to their sons. My father was nearing retirement age, but his attempts to buy each of my sisters and their husbands into the store with tuition aid, partnership offers, and guilt had all failed. Though hardly the prodigal son, I was generally believed to be my father’s last hope at keeping the jewelry shop in the immediate family. The invitation he’d extended had to mean he was more desperate than I’d thought—this trip must be a last-ditch attempt to woo me into coming back into the family fold.

I squared my shoulders. I had no intention of breaking under the pressure. More than likely, my father would be busy at the convention and with his other business, leaving me free to tour Belgium and the Netherlands at the height of the spring flower season. The Netherlands. As in, Europe. Awesome.

The best thing about a trip to Europe, besides springtime and the free plane ticket? I would be thousands of miles from Maddie and Dez in a place I had never visited with either of them, with zero possibility

of an unexpected run-in. Surely such a vacation was worth a little family strife. It might even be worth a lot.

I smiled sweetly across the table at a still-scowling Cat and shoveled pie, homemade by Mary, happy housewife and mother to two children under the age of four, into my mouth. Wait until Toby heard.

## CHAPTER THREE

“He’s trying to buy you off,” Toby announced, tossing her apron on the counter.

“Duh.” I lifted the Specials chalkboard from its hook above the register. “Doesn’t change the fact that I’ll be in Amsterdam next month.”

“Now, that’s a city with real coffee shops. Smuggle me along in your suitcase, will ya?”

Toby was five foot five and stocky. Stowing her in my rucksack might prove difficult.

“Can’t,” I said. “Someone’s gotta cover my shifts.” Which was why she was here this late tonight—one of the baristas had called in sick last minute. The joys of business ownership.

“Ingrate,” she said. “I’m off to count the till. I expect you to have this place ship-shape by the time I’m done.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

I cranked up Lady Gaga on the CD player and set about cleaning up. I didn’t mind the end-of-shift routine. Other workers bitched and moaned about closing, but I liked running the dishwasher hot and soapy and tackling exposed surfaces. At the end of the night, when everyone

else had gone home or headed off to Lucky's to kick off their weekend (or weeknight) partying, I would blast the stereo and whirl about the café, a furious cleaning dervish singing loudly off-key. As I scrubbed and rinsed, I liked to imagine attractive women walking past and peering in through the steam-frosted windows to see me guzzling decaf coffee among the murals of Celtic women warriors. Every lesbian in Ann Arbor knew Boa; working here automatically made you part of the scene, and I loved it. Even if Toby could get bossy sometimes.

I thought of what she'd said, that my father was trying to lure me into working for him. My sisters and I, one-time junior gemologists-in-training, had all worked at Starreveld & Sons throughout high school, just as our father had done and his father before him. We'd each started out as janitorial assistants and worked our way up to the floor. Well, my sisters had made it onto the floor, anyway. Somehow my father hadn't ever seen fit to approve me as a customer service representative, even before my interest in piercings had emerged.

As I moved around the café, I mentally compared the two establishments: Boadicea, with its bright murals, colorful booths, and wide windows at the edge of the student ghetto, where our dreadlocked and tattooed customers lived en masse in run-down Victorians and brick apartment buildings, versus Starreveld & Sons in historic Kerrytown, where high-end shops stocked imported wine, gourmet cooking supplies, and upscale home furnishings. In its earlier incarnation, the store had been located on State Street not far from main campus. But when the lease had come up for renewal in the late '60s, my grandfather had decided to move the premises to Kerrytown, where business owners were just beginning to attract a more genteel crowd. In moving the shop into a building that had formerly housed a bank, he hadn't changed the interior much—teller windows edged in

marble still lined the central display area now dominated by a bevy of glass showcases, while the back wall of the main room contained a heavy circular door that opened into a classic bank vault where the store's most valuable pieces were secured each night.

By this time of night, Starreveld & Sons would have been dark and silent for hours already, the only lights coming from the security beams along the floor and the red neon exit sign over the front door. I could picture the interior easily, as if it hadn't been years since I'd set foot inside. I could almost smell the faint scent of sandalwood that lingered about the store, thanks to my father's habit of burning a stick of incense each morning and evening. The incense cleared his mind and helped him stay alert, he said, the way coffee did for other people.

"You done out there, or what?" Toby called from the back.

I blinked, and Starreveld & Sons faded. Counters and espresso machine clean, I shut off the music and carried the last of the day's trash outside, where the air was cool but no longer freezing. Spring was close, I could feel it. By the time it hit southern Michigan, I would be in Europe, wandering the spring flower festivals. True, my travel companion would be my father, a man who openly disapproved of my "lifestyle choice" and seemed to have little to say to me these days, but the fact that he'd invited me surely indicated that he hadn't completely written me off as his daughter.

Didn't it?

Toby had responded well to my travel news, but I still had to inform Fitzy of my impending absence. Or, rather, request the time off—I was scheduled to work at the Arboretum on four of the eight days of my planned European adventure. Spring was the busiest season at the Botanical Gardens, so it was hardly a desirable time for anyone

on staff to up and leave on vacation. Fitzzy, I knew, would not be happy at the prospect of me gallivanting about the world while everyone else toiled to make the spring opening of the Arboretum its usual success.

Normally everyone worked extra hours throughout April, with unpaid volunteers helping out every day of the week. It was worth it—we all enjoyed what we did, and Fitzzy, the center’s long-time director, was an accomplished leader, despite her preference for the company of green, leafy matter. Hers was a big job. The Arboretum complex included the largest conservatory owned and operated by an American university (as those of us who worked there liked to brag), along with more than a dozen cultivated display gardens, several managed trails, a library and visitor’s resource center, and a handful of other buildings at two separate Ann Arbor locations.

Throughout winter and early spring, I worked in the greenhouses and conservatory, helping with pruning, planting, and anything else that needed doing. In late spring, as the Michigan soil slowly warmed up, I transferred outdoors, where I remained through the fall. By the time I returned from Europe in mid-April, some of our early perennials should be well on their way. Assuming Fitzzy let me go.

A couple of days after my father emailed me the final itinerary for the trip, I knocked on Fitzzy’s open door at the back of the visitor’s center. Seated at her desk, she was peering at her computer screen and pecking at the keyboard. At my knock, she glanced at me over the top of her bifocals, her frown an expression that I recognized as one of her more inviting looks.

“Hello, my girl. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I was about to check on the rhody cuttings,” I said, “but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Excellent. I could use a distraction—working on the weekly

accounts, don't you know."

She waved me toward a chair, the lone paper-free surface in the small room with its old-fashioned radiator and a window that looked out over the recently raked but still bare perennial gardens bordering the visitor's center. Fitzy's desk was piled precariously with folders, receipts, plastic pots, and several plants, from a jar of bamboo to a Christmas cactus that, since I'd been on the scene, had bloomed in just about every month except December. The bookshelves and counter space were similarly adorned, while the walls bore native art from Africa, South America, and Asia, all places Fitzy had traveled during her long academic career.

I took a breath and dove in. "I have good news and bad news." When she folded her arms across her chest, an eyebrow raised, I continued. "My father wants to take me to Europe in a few weeks, which is good news for me—"

"And bad for us." She leaned back in her seat and eyed me curiously. "Where would you be going?"

"To Antwerp for a jeweler's convention, and then to Amsterdam. We'd be in the Netherlands in time—"

"—for the tulips. But this is surprising. I thought you and your father weren't on the best terms?"

It was my turn to eye her. As far as I knew, I hadn't ever spoken to her in detail about my relationship with my father.

She waved a hand. "It was what you didn't say. If you go with him on this trip, does that mean you're thinking of going to work for him, too?"

"No," I said quickly. "Though honestly, he's probably only bringing me so he can try one last time to talk me into it."

"Somehow I doubt that," she said. "You know, Junior, I believe a

trip would do you some good, put some color back in your cheeks. You could use a break from our fair city, couldn't you?"

I shouldn't have been surprised that she was putting my emotional health before the always frenzied spring season here at work. And yet, I *was* surprised. Fitzzy's whole life seemed to revolve around work, and here she was encouraging me to abandon my duties at a critical time. It didn't add up. I peered at her, noting the dark circles under her eyes, the pallor of her skin strange even for someone suffering from seasonal sun-deprivation. Had she lost weight, too? I had been so caught up in my own drama recently that I hadn't taken much notice of what might be going on around me.

Nodding slowly, I said, "I could probably use the break."

"Then it's settled. But in the meantime, we'd better try to get your hours filled." She pulled her laminated schedule for April out from under an intermediate botany text. "Couldn't be a worse time, could it. Then again, you'll be in the Netherlands in spring, so your timing couldn't be any better, either. Now, which week will you be gone?"

I pulled my chair closer, and we went over the calendar together, her alternately lamenting the scheduling changes and offering suggestions on tourist activities in the Netherlands—her favorite travel destination, she had often told me, in the entire world.

"Tell you what," she said finally, leaning back in her rickety wooden office chair. "I'll let you go, but only on one condition."

"What's that?" I asked, even though I was pretty sure I could guess.

"That you go to Keukenhof with your father and take a mountain of photos. It's only an hour outside of Amsterdam."

How had I known this would be Fitzzy's demand? Because on the wall beside the window hung a calendar featuring the Keukenhof Gardens, the fabled Spring Gardens of Europe. For all the years I'd

known her, she'd had this same calendar on her wall here and in her kitchen at home, swapping out the old edition for the new promptly on the first of January each year.

"Deal. Or at least I'll try," I amended.

"You'll do more than just try if you know what's good for you," she said, staring at me over the top of her bifocals. Then, all at once, she gripped the edge of the desk, her eyes sliding out of focus behind the lenses. Her breath started to come in short gasps, and I thought I could see her lips turning blue as she reached for the oxygen tank tucked behind her desk. She turned away and held the mask over her face, turning the handle with a shaky hand.

I reached out, my hand hovering uselessly over her shoulder. She'd been having more and more of these episodes lately. It couldn't be good.

After a few long minutes, she removed the mask and cranked down the handle on the tank.

"Are you okay?" I asked, even though I knew she wasn't.

"Fine. Damned cigars. Anyway," she added, her voice unsteady as she reached for her keyboard, "why don't you go check on those rhodies?"

And with that, I was dismissed. I hesitated only a moment before heading out into the conservatory, for once glad to escape the confines of her office. Fitzzy was sick, and she wouldn't be getting any better. She knew it, and everyone who knew her knew it. But as she liked to say, we were all dying, every single living being among us. It was just a matter of spending the time you had left in a meaningful way.

As I joined Chuck, a retired auto executive and longtime volunteer, at the plant table at the back of one of the greenhouses, I tried not to think too hard about the meaningful nature of casual sex, manual labor,

and coffee.

In a typical week, I worked six out of seven days, even though I averaged thirty hours or less of actual on-the-job time. Tuesday through Friday, I spent my mornings at the Arboretum, adding regular shifts at Boadicea on Friday, Sunday, and Monday, along with any other time Toby asked me to cover a shift. That had made Saturday practically the only time Maddie and I had had to be together for more than a handful of hours.

A PhD student at the U in French Language and Literature, Maddie had dealt with our mutual limited availability by tightly scheduling when and where we would see each other, and for what activities. Despite the fact I had my own apartment while she lived in a shared house with three other grad students, all just as continually amped up on caffeine and stress as she was, Maddie insisted we stay at least as often at her place as mine. Most Fridays, our designated date night, we grabbed dinner and a movie, spent the night together, and went to brunch the next morning with Dez and a cadre of other friends. After spending Saturday together, our weekends were usually capped off by separate Sundays. She settled in at the library while I worked out or hung out with friends before my afternoon shift at Boa. I rarely saw Maddie on weeknights, either. “I have to study,” had been her constant refrain, but now I wondered if she’d really meant, “I have to fuck your best friend.”

Maddie’s careful regimentation of our encounters was fine with me, I’d told myself for the two-plus years we were together. After all, my work schedule wasn’t exactly ideal, and she was a grad student from New Hampshire. She couldn’t help being uptight, could she? I had met her mother, a frosty former Bostonian, and could attest that the stick

up Maddie's ass had been genetically implanted. In hindsight, though, I was beginning to view her aloofness for the red flag it clearly had been. God, I'd been unforgivably blind. And not just about my best friend shagging my girlfriend. While most of the lesbians we knew were shacking up after only knowing each other a few months, Maddie had taken most of our relationship just to work up to giving me a key to her apartment. Never mind she'd had a key to mine for over a year already; my studio was closer to the University than her house, and sometimes she liked to study at my place when I wasn't home, so that *just made sense*.

On our two-year anniversary, after making me an elaborate French dinner à la Julia Child, Maddie had presented me with a tiny jewelry box that bore the logo of my father's store. When I'd opened it to find not a ring but a single key lying inside, I'd thought for a brief moment she was suggesting I move in with her. But then I remembered her roommates, and I stared into the jewelry box while short-lived images of commitment rings and shared furniture faded away.

At last I'd looked up at her. "Seriously?" I said. "The key to your house? That's what you got me?"

Maddie's face closed up before I even finished, her lips pursing in the snotty French girl impression she had perfected during her junior year abroad at the Sorbonne, a look she usually reserved for her French 101 students.

"I mean," I'd added quickly, "it's fine. It's great."

But it was too late. I had crossed the invisible boundary Maddie had drawn between us at some point when I wasn't looking, the one that didn't allow me to express displeasure with anything she said or did. Didn't I understand how *busy* she was? Didn't I understand how little *room* she had in her life for drama? She was trying so hard to balance

our relationship with her studies, and sometimes it was just *so difficult* for her.

She kicked me out a little while later, and I walked the mile home alone, the ring box tucked into a pocket of my cargo shorts. Later, I'd called Dez and met her at Lucky's, pouring out my bruised heart to my supposed best friend, not finding it unusual in the least that her eyes remained fixed on the crowd of eerily illuminated women on the dance floor, never suspecting that she and Maddie had started hooking up only a few days before.

Looking back from the vantage point I occupied now, I could sigh a breath of relief at my close call with Maddie. And feel sorry for Dez, too. As soon as the honeymoon ended, she would probably find herself just as rigidly controlled as I had. Or maybe not. Maybe Maddie would treat her differently. I'd always thought they had more in common—Dez was an East Coaster too, originally from Massachusetts, and was currently working on her Master's in Geography at the U. It was possible that Maddie would respect my former friend more than she had me, a lowly barista slash glorified weed puller. Possible that Dez wouldn't put up with the crap I had taken to be with the woman I'd decided I wanted to be with forever without actually getting to know first.

After the break-up, I floundered a bit at ordering my days and nights without Maddie's penchant for schedules to fall back on. But once I'd gotten over the initial nausea-inducing loneliness, I'd begun to discover a new sense of freedom. My Friday nights were my own again, along with my Saturday days and nights. I could stay up past midnight if I wanted! I could stay in bed reading past nine a.m. on a Sunday, should the urge strike! I would never, ever have to sleep on her hard, lumpy futon again, or lie awake in her tiny, dark bedroom mentally

reciting the names of plants native to Michigan while she snored softly beside me. I hadn't been allowed to read because it would keep her up, and she needed her sleep, which meant that I had lain beside her countless nights practically holding my breath—Maddie was a light sleeper, dontcha know—and trying not to think about what fun my friends might be getting up to without me.

Not being in a relationship definitely had its advantages. Now I could smoke up whenever I liked—Maddie didn't like the way pot made her feel or the way it made me act—and get tipsy enough to dance and sing if I felt like it. No more girlfriend to frown at my *exuberance* or get up and wash the taste and smell of me off her as soon as we had both come. No more girlfriend, just a pair of sexy, interchangeable college students whose names I sometimes mixed up in my head, who claimed not to want more from me than I was prepared to give.

But as the trip drew closer, Caitlyn, the cheerleader, began to call more frequently. She wanted to stay overnight, too, and to go for breakfast together on the weekends and hang out afterward. At first, I didn't mind. It was nice to be sought after by someone cute and smart and attractive to others. But then my friend Alex, a college buddy who had picked me in the divorce, told me that Caitlyn had confronted Steph at Boadicea one morning while I was at the Arboretum.

It was a Thursday night in early April, ten days before my dad and I were scheduled to leave, and Alex and I were checking out Karaoke night at Ives, a gay bar that offered Women's Night once a month. This was our night, and the only gay boys in the house were dyke-friendly, which wasn't always the case. In the old days, Dez and Alex and I would get our drag on and crash Ives, much to the dismay of the boys who flirted with us. But tonight, Alex and I were in lesbo gear—

tight-fitting tees and cargo pants—instead of chest wraps, fake soul patches, and collared shirts. Alex’s hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore her ever-present visor, which Dez and I had been after her for years to lose along with the ponytail. We’d all played rugby at Michigan, a club sport, and had been like the Three Musketeers since sophomore year—until Dez’d had to go and mess everything up.

“And then Caitlyn practically tackled her,” Alex said as a gay guy up on stage sang yet another song from *Glee*.

“She did not.” I groaned into my bottle of beer, wondering why it was always the petite lesbians who were so feisty.

“Actually, she did. Did you not see this coming, even a little?”

To be honest, I may have noticed that Caitlyn had recently developed a tendency to pout if a call or text from Steph came up in her presence. But I had ignored it, choosing to wait for it to pass rather than deal with the unpleasantness of a formal discussion. If Caitlyn was having a problem with our agreed-upon rules of engagement, she was fully capable of raising her concerns. She was an adult. Legally, at least.

“Come on, Alex,” I said. “You know I hate dyke drama.”

“Which is probably why you’re always mired in it. That which you ignore only grows stronger. Unless we’re talking house plants or pets. They pretty much just die.”

I rolled my eyes. “I am not worthy of your wisdom, oh captain my captain.”

Alex had been chosen player-coach of the rugby team our senior year, and Dez and I had never let her forget it. Mostly because we were jealous, Alex always maintained. Maybe. Okay, probably.

As we sat at a table in the corner of the room, far enough from the Karaoke set-up to hear each other speak, Alex filled me in on the apparent scene between my two non-girlfriends at Boadicea. Steph had

been there with her best friend, an artsy, hipster type like her who was “more into men than women.” Steph was one of those not uncommon girls at the U who didn’t believe in labels. I had made sure at the outset that she was disease-free and not currently diddling with a dude, and that was about as far as my expectations went. Other than a liking for each other’s bodies, it had been evident from the start that Steph and I didn’t have that much in common.

Caitlyn, on the other hand, apparently believed we were soul mates because we were both Dutch Michiganders whose families ran small businesses. Oh, and her father had basically disowned her, too, when a teacher caught her making out with another girl in a bathroom at her high school. Clearly we were meant to be together.

“So Caitlyn gets all up in Steph’s face,” Alex reported, “and says, ‘If you don’t really care about Junior, then why don’t you stop throwing yourself at her?’ And Steph says, all calm-like, ‘Who said I didn’t care about her? Besides, *I’m* not the one throwing myself at Junior.’”

At that moment, I dearly wished I had thought to smuggle in a joint—a couple of hits would have made what Alex was telling me seem hilarious instead of borderline catastrophic. Why couldn’t they have scheduled their little run-in someplace where I didn’t work, or better yet, in another state or even country? Canada wasn’t that far away. Really, was a little discretion too much to ask?

“You can see the rest for yourself,” Alex said, holding up her phone. “I caught it on video.”

Suddenly there they were, my two most recent bedmates acting out in hazy color the scene Alex had described, with an even blurrier crowd of a dozen or so looking on. Fascinated despite myself, I watched as Steph told Caitlyn not to play with the grown-ups if she couldn’t handle it, patted her on the head, and turned away, laughing to her

friend. Oh, no, she didn't. Even before movie-version Caitlyn pulled her arm back, I knew what was coming: The juice she'd been clutching, her favorite tropical Boa blend by the looks of it, made a lovely orange splatter all over Steph's wool cardigan.

Managing to overcome my rubbernecking proclivities, I reached out and hit the pause button, leaving the video frozen on Steph's shocked face.

"It didn't come to blows, did it?" I asked.

"No. I think Caitlyn realized Steph has a good six inches on her because she pretty much sprinted for the door. That, or she saw me and half the crowd with our phones pointed at her."

"Perfect," I muttered, leaning my forehead onto my folded hands. "It's all over Twitter and Facebook already, isn't it?"

"Um, yeah. I'm surprised you haven't been tagged yet. There's even a hashtag—#StephlynshowdownA2."

She started to pull up her Twitter feed, but I put my hand on her wrist.

"Don't. I mean it, Alex. This is exactly why I don't have a smartphone."

"I thought it was because you couldn't afford a data plan."

"Why can't you just let me hold on to my illusions?"

"I did once, remember? And look how that turned out."

Just like that, the Stephlyn face-off didn't seem quite so bad. Like Toby, Alex had confessed in the wake of my defunct relationship that she had never liked the way Maddie treated me. That was why she'd rarely hung out with us as a couple, accepting invitations only when Dez or another friend was guaranteed to be present. I'd been so busy trying to fit myself into Maddie's life that I hadn't noticed my friends pulling away. Or maybe I'd just pretended not to notice, even to myself.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Alex said, her fingers creasing the worn edge of her visor. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” I said, even though we both knew she did.

Dez and I used to tease Alex about her Asperger’s, but sometimes I wasn’t entirely convinced she didn’t suffer from a form of high-functioning autism. Her, and half the researchers who worked in her lab at the University Medical Center.

The conversation moved on to my upcoming European adventure and Alex’s imminent trip home to Chicago for her mother’s wedding. Her parents had been divorced since she was six, but had lived on different floors in the same Chi-Town skyscraper ever since splitting up, determined to maintain a semblance of family unity for her and her little brother, Trevor. The custody agreement dictated that they would be free to live elsewhere once both kids were out of college. Trevor had graduated from Carleton the previous spring, so their mother was finally marrying her longtime “partner,” one of Alex’s father’s golf buddies.

Alex always said she hadn’t realized her version of normal wasn’t typical or even average until she got to college and saw how other divorced families behaved. She knew she was lucky, and not just because her mom and dad had stayed on such good terms. Her parents had accepted her pronouncement that she was gay without even blinking, and her mother was still always asking if she had met anyone, when she was going to settle down, when there would be grandkids. And in fact, Alex had been in love with the same girl for years: Ariel, an assistant in a neighboring lab. But she had never so much as asked Ariel out for a drink, claiming that she didn’t want reality to ruin the fantasy. Dez had called her chicken, but I sort of knew what she meant. Sometimes the idea of what something could be was so much better

than what it actually turned out to be. Although she was kind of a chicken.

But a good friend, nonetheless—she asked me about my travel plans, and didn't bring up the Stephlyn debacle again that night or reference Maddie and Dez in any way, shape, or form. She just bought me beer and sang Pink songs with me, even though she was more of a Dixie Chicks girl herself—Ariel looked a bit like their lead singer, though Alex claimed to like the band for the music, not the eye candy.

That night, back at my quiet apartment, I smoked a fat joint, watched a *Friends* episode, and managed to go to bed without even being tempted to check email or Facebook—almost. Then I lay alone in the dark, wide awake and dreaming about Amsterdam, where the spring buds were already beginning to open and where it was all but guaranteed that no one knew my name.