Love’s Discovery

by Grayson_179

Summary

Stef and Lena have an instant attraction when they meet at Anchor Beach, but it's not all smooth sailing from then until Stef's declaration of love in the school parking lot. Fills in the gaps between flashbacks in 1x09 and extends beyond.
Chapter 1

Love's Discovery

Though it's storming out

I feel safe within the arms

of love's discovery

Indigo Girls - "Love's Recovery"

Stef Foster didn't believe in angels. She rejected any remaining faith she had when her father sent her to be shamed by Pastor Dan when he caught her and Tess snuggling on the couch in high school. But the woman walking towards her with an outstretched hand made her temporarily reconsider.

She fumbled her way through their introductions, stumbling over an excuse for her estranged husband's absence. With just a smile and a lingering handshake, Lena Adams made her forget she even had a husband at all.

Lena noticed the hesitation and wondered what it meant. She was a student of human behavior, and something was off about Stef's explanation. Oh well. Not her business. Though something in her wanted to know, to make sure everything was okay with this cute, flustered woman. She hoped the husband was a good guy and that nothing untoward was going on.

"Well, let's get started," Lena led Stef towards the front door. "Here's where the elementary school kids enter. Any guests have to sign in."

"Oh, that's good." The cop in Stef appreciated that not just anyone could wander the halls. "What about the bigger kids? I appreciate kids going to the same school all the way to graduation, but I worry about my little guy getting trampled."

Lena smiled. "I totally understand. As much as I'd love to tell you everyone here is a model student, we have our issues. So we keep the elementary, middle, and high school kids pretty separate. The younger kids eat in their own cafeteria and have their own playground, and their classrooms are in a different building than the older kids."

"That's good too." Stef apparently had no other adjectives in her vocabulary that morning. What was wrong with her? Ms. Adams was going to think she was an idiot and Brandon's application would get rejected by association.

After walking through the school and peeping in on one of the kindergarten classrooms - Stef was pleased to see the teacher playing on the floor with the kids, rather than everyone sitting rigidly in desks - they went out to the beach. The idea of an oceanfront school was astounding to Stef, but she welcomed the thought of Brandon being able to enjoy the beach on a regular basis. Even when they were together, she and Mike rarely found the time to take their son for beach excursions.

A part of her wanted to ask some sort of parent-y question about how they kept the kids safe, but she was so tongue-tied around Ms. Adams that she couldn't manage it. She found herself looking silently at the beautiful woman, who was staring out at the waves.

Lena sighed.
"Is everything okay?" Stef asked. A woman like this shouldn't be sad, but that's how she seemed. "Am I taking you away from your work? I don't mean to stress you out or anything."

Lean looked over at her. "No, I just got distracted thinking about - well, something non-work-related."

Stef briefly put her hand on Lena's arm. "I understand." She took a deep breath. For some reason she felt like she could talk to this woman. Nervous as Lena made Stef, she radiated kindness. "Earlier, when I said my husband couldn't make it, that wasn't entirely the truth. I mean, he should still be here for his son, but he and I aren't living together right now, and I've kind of been the primary caregiver so I arranged this on my own, and - I'm just going to stop talking now. I just meant I understand being distracted by non-work things."

Lena smiled, albeit sympathetically. Stef wanted to make her smile again, but about something less depressing.

Lena considered the most professional way to say, 'I was thinking about the last time I was at the beach with a beautiful woman, who turned out to be a lying cheater.' She wished she weren't still so hurt by what happened with Gretchen.

"I'm sorry, Stef - that sounds difficult. I can't imagine what you're going through. Though, I will admit my thoughts were on a similar track. I recently got cheated on, and I suppose I'm not as over it as I'd like to be. I apologize for letting it creep into my work."

Stef was quick to reassure Lena. "It's totally fine. I mean, it's not fine you got cheated on - your ex is clearly an idiot - but it's fine that it's on your mind. It's not like we can just turn off our personal lives when we're at work. Although I'm probably a hypocrite for saying that - in my line of work it can get me killed if I'm not paying complete attention."

Lena was intrigued. "What do you do, exactly?"

"I'm a cop."

Lena was stunned. Stef was this petite woman, who seemed a bit tongue-tied and nervous, and she chased down criminals on a daily basis? Lena admittedly had a few negative stereotypes about police officers, and it threw her for a loop that this adorable parent of a potential student was one.

Well, Gretchen seemed like a nice, caring person and she broke Lena's heart, so perhaps people weren't always what they seemed.

Lena tried to hide her surprise as she responded. "That's great. Scary, I imagine, but great. It's such an important job."

"So is teaching. Important, and also scary."

Stef smiled at her own joke, and Lena smiled back, fully this time.

"Well, I suppose we should adjourn this meeting of the mutual admiration society and finish your tour. I still haven't shown you the auditorium. We have various plays and concerts there, even for the little kids. Most of them rather enjoy getting up on stage and being the center of attention, but we certainly don't force them. What's Brandon like? Is he a ham or more on the shy side?"

Right, Brandon. That's what Stef was here for. "He got one of those xylophones for Christmas, and he loves banging on it and singing songs he makes up. Mostly, they're about his trucks. I'm not sure how he'd feel about getting up in front of other people, but he sure loves to perform at home."
When Lena had shown Stef every corner of the school, they finally and reluctantly had to part ways.

"Thanks again for the tour. And all the information. It was really great." Stef had gotten more comfortable with Lena throughout their time together, but suddenly she felt tongue-tied again.

"You're welcome. Thanks for coming in. I hope you choose Anchor Beach for Brandon. I mean, you should make the best choice for you and your family. But I think Anchor Beach is the best."

"You sound like a cheerleader." Stef's mind flashed to Lena in a short skirt and pom poms. She shook her head. "In a good way. If you're the person they send to talk to prospective parents I can't see anyone saying no."

"Let me know if you need any help with the paperwork. Not that it's terribly confusing. Or if you have any questions. Here's my card. Feel free to call me."

Stef took the proffered card and put it in her purse. "Thanks. I'll, uh, talk to my husband and make a decision."

Right, the husband. Lena put back on her professional face. Really, where had her boundaries gone? Telling a prospective parent about the woes of her love life and offering personal assistance? It was inappropriate.

Lena reached out her hand, determined to keep this handshake shorter than the first one. But Stef held on, and her eye contact was electric.

"It was very nice to meet you, Lena. I hope to see you again soon."

"Me too," was all Lena could manage. Maybe Stef's husband would veto the whole thing and she'd never have to see the gorgeous cop ever again. Then she could avoid potentially humiliating herself, since she clearly had no self-control.

The summer passed, and Lena tried to forget about the fact that Brandon Foster's paperwork crossed her desk just in time for him to be registered for the next school year. She wondered if the husband was opposed and Stef had to fight for Brandon to attend. Or if Stef was just flaky. Or maybe busy keeping the streets safe. Or hurt. What if she had been hurt in the line of duty? Lena told herself it was concern for public safety that made her notice every siren she heard, but she couldn't deny her imagination filled in what Stef might look like in her uniform. She wondered if she'd ever find out.

Stef was neither flaky nor hurt. And Mike was fine with whatever school she picked out for Brandon. She just spent those weeks vacillating between calling Lena with some essentially bogus question just to hear her voice again, and shoving those thoughts down as far as they'd go. She wasn't stupid. She knew what the increased heart rate and sweaty palms when she thought about Lena meant. She hadn't felt this way since Tess. And, okay, there was that EMT she kept running into early in her career, who fortunately moved away before things got awkward. She had tried so hard for so long to be normal, to make her father proud, but separating from Mike had cracked open the door to imagining a different life. One in which she felt free and happy, not stifled and uncomfortable.

So she put off the paperwork until the last minute, finally filling them out when she realized she couldn't make Brandon pay the price for her confusion. Anchor Beach was a great opportunity for him, and she wasn't going to have him miss it because she couldn't control her hormones. She just didn't know what she'd do if him attending meant she'd have to interact with Lena on a regular basis.
Stef was anxious on Brandon's first day, and not just because her baby was starting kindergarten. She tried to stay focused on him, but she couldn't deny she was keeping an eye out for a certain assistant vice principal. But in the half hour she was there, settling Brandon in and meeting his teacher, their paths never crossed.

Perhaps it was for the best. If running into Lena wasn't going to be a regular thing, Stef could just put aside the spark she felt when they first met and try to forget all about it. No need to tie herself in knots about it.

Lena spent the morning as far away from the kindergarten classroom as possible. She couldn't risk getting distracted again. Seeing Stef again was inevitable, what with her son likely spending the next thirteen years at Anchor Beach, but Lena didn't have to seek her out. It would happen when it happened, and Lena was determined to be cool about it.

When it happened, Lena was anything but cool about it. She was sitting there, minding her own business waiting for the first PTA meeting of the year to start, when an incredibly sexy voice said, "Is this seat taken?"

She looked up to see Stef, looking as adorable as she remembered, this time in a short-sleeved blue v-neck sweater that drew her eyes to an unprofessional place on Stef's body.

"No, of course not," Lena replied, when she finally tore her eyes off of Stef's chest. "It's the parent teacher association meeting. You're a parent, I'm a teacher - why shouldn't we associate?"

It sounded clever in her head, but out loud it just seemed like a bad pick-up line.

Stef looked amused. Lena being flustered put her at ease, and she sat down.

Ten minutes into the meeting, Stef was bored. She wanted to be the picture-perfect parent, perhaps more so now that she was separated. She needed to prove she could do it all, so here she was, trying to be involved at school. That she assumed Lena would be there had nothing to do with it. But, wow, this was tedious.

"Are you kidding me?" she muttered. "It's a bake sale, not the Treaty of Versailles. Just pick a date and stop negotiating."

Lena laughed despite herself. As a young administrator she felt obligated to attend the meetings and interact both with the parents and her colleagues. But Stef was right - this group could take ages to make even the smallest decision. The parents were over-eager, and the faculty wanted to seem inclusive. It was painful.

"This is nothing," she whispered back. "You should have seen them last year when they had to decide on the theme for the annual fundraising gala. It took them months. And then they landed on 'Anchor Beach - your anchor to the community.' What does that even mean?"

"Seriously. They should have done something with pirates. Arr."

Lena laughed as quietly as she could. "That would have been great. At least it probably would have been more entertaining."

"Not a fun event?" Stef couldn't think of much more boring that a stuffy gala with a lame theme.

"Well, it didn't help that Gretchen - that's my cheating ex - spent the evening flirting with the volleyball coach. I guess I should have suspected then."
And there it was. Lena wasn't one to live in the closet, but she hadn't planned on coming out to Stef quite like that. Most people she encountered were fine with it, but she couldn't stand the thought of Stef thinking differently of her now that she knew.

Stef was desperate not to react overtly, but inside her mind was racing. *Lena dates women?* She found that fact way more interesting than she wanted to.

"I stand by my original statement that she's an idiot." There, that seemed appropriately cool but supportive.

Lena relaxed and smiled. "Thank you for that. Here's hoping this year's gala has a better theme and I have a better date."

Stef's mouth went dry as she smiled back and imagined herself by the taller woman's side, laughing and chatting, Lena wearing a gorgeous dress as she pulled her out onto the dance floor.

"Right. Well, I'll do my part to push for a pirate party when the debate occurs this year." Stef tried - and failed - not to let herself finish that thought, even in her own head: *And to be a better date.* There was no way that was happening.

It was 6:03 on a Friday a few weeks later. Lena had seen Stef in passing a couple of times as she dropped off or picked up Brandon, but they hadn't had a chance to talk again. Brandon participated in the before- and after-care programs due to the long hours his parents worked, but there had never been an issue. Until now. The program technically closed three minutes prior, but there was no sign of either of the Fosters.

Lena had been about to head out for the weekend when she passed by the elementary kids' after-care room. Brandon was the only child left, and she couldn't help going in to make sure he was okay. She told herself she would have done it for any kid, but she knew it wasn't true.

The two remaining staff members were finishing the cleanup, and one of them not-so-discreetly checked her watch.

"Why don't you guys go on home for the night? I'll stick around until Brandon's parent comes."

Not having to be told twice to get their weekend started, they shot out the door.

"Hey, Brandon. How's it going?" Lena got down on eye level with him. He was sitting at a table, listlessly coloring a picture of a tree.

"Not good. Where's my dad?" Brandon asked.

"Your dad?" Not having met him, Lena had managed to forget there even was a dad.

"Yeah, he picks me up on Fridays and we go to his apartment. Why do they call it an apartment? Is it because parents who are apart live there?"

Poor kid. Lena couldn't imagine growing up being shuttled back and forth between parents who had split up. "Oh, honey. I don't actually know why it's called that, but it doesn't have anything to do with your parents being apart. I do know both of your parents love you, and I'm sure there's a good reason they're not here to pick you up yet."

Another ten minutes went by, with Lena trying to engage Brandon and the boy withdrawing even further. Finally, she had an idea.
"Hey, Brandon. Your mom says you have one of these at home." She held up the xylophone. "Do you want to play a song for me? Maybe something about a truck?"

His eyes lit up. "Sure!"

When Stef burst in the door a couple of minutes later, she heard her son belting out lyrics about a cement mixer and banging rather tunelessly with a plastic mallet. And there was Lena, a genuine smile on her face as she clapped along. That may have been the moment Stef fell in love.

When Lena looked up, she had her own moment. Stef stood in the doorway in full uniform, her hair up in a bun, and Lena wasn't sure if she'd ever seen anything so sexy. She had so many reasons to be turned off by cops and uniforms, but, wow, Stef Foster was turning her on. Flustered as she was, Stef seemed to stand straighter and hold herself more confidently than when Lena had previously seen her.

The spell was finally broken when Brandon noticed his mother.

"Mommy! Where's Daddy? Are we going home? Do I still have to go to the apartment? Ms. Adams is so nice! She stayed with me when you were late. I played my music and she said it was lovely. What does lovely mean?"

"So many questions, little man. Where should I start? Daddy had to work late, so we're going home tonight. You'll go to the apartment tomorrow. Lovely is like Ms. Adams - nice and pretty. Can you say thank you for staying with you?"

"Thank you," Brandon said dutifully.

"Okay, B, now go grab your backpack."

Stef finally addressed Lena. "I'm so sorry to keep you both waiting. Thank you so much for staying with him - you didn't have to do that."

Lena interrupted, "It was my pleasure. Brandon is a sweet boy."

"You seem to bring out the best in him - he hasn't said that much all at once, probably since Mike moved out. I've tried so hard, but he's been so subdued. I think he's mad at both of us but doesn't know how to say it. Anyway, thanks."

"Stef, don't worry, it's fine. I was happy to help. I hope everything's okay."

"Mike got caught up with a late arrest and had to finish processing the guy. I was out in the field and didn't find out he needed me to do pick-up until right before 6:00. Honestly, I'm surprised we've managed to be on time every night up until now."

"Brandon's father is a police officer as well?" Lena was surprised. Stef nodded.

"And you work together?" Stef nodded again.

"That sounds...complicated."

Stef laughed. "That's one way of putting it. Hey, what do I owe? I know there are late fees or whatever."

"Don't worry about it."

"No, really - I should pay up. I've kept you here on a Friday night. You probably had a hot date or
something." Stef hoped that didn't sound like she was fishing for information about whether or not Lena was still single. Even though she totally was.

"Hardly."

*Whew.*

Lena continued, "I didn't mind at all. It was nice to spend time with Brandon."

"Well, if it happens again I definitely owe you." Stef knew it wasn't Lena's job to do aftercare, and she was touched the other woman would look out for Brandon.

"We'll see." That sounded more coy out loud than Lena had intended. She cleared her throat. "I guess I'd better be going. Enjoy your weekend."

"You too. C'mon, B. Time to go. Let's walk Ms. Adams out to her car." Stef picked up Brandon's backpack and reached out to hold his hand.

"Stef, you really don't have to." Lena was inordinately charmed by the chivalry.

"Nonsense, it's the least I can do."

"Well, if you insist."

"We do, don't we Brandon?"

"We do. What kind of car do you have, Ms. Adams?" Brandon took Lena's hand in his free one as they walked outside. The two women made eye contact briefly, then looked away. It would be all too easy to get caught up in fantasies of something like this happening on a regular basis. Lena knew it was ridiculous to be drawn so quickly to someone so inappropriate, but she couldn't seem to stop herself from allowing the Fosters to extend their time together just a little longer.

The next Friday night found Stef wandering the aisles of Blockbusters. Mike had picked up Brandon, and she was all alone for the weekend. She didn't know what she was in the mood for. Nothing, really. Some people might appreciate the nights off that came with shared custody, but she just missed her son.

She had been staring listlessly at a copy of *Terms of Endearment* for too long, when she heard a voice.

"Tear ducts need exercise?"

She looked up to see Lena smiling down at her. Suddenly, she didn't know what to do with her hands. She and Lena were past the handshake point but perhaps not quite at the hugging stage. Stef settled for waving lamely, then shoving her hands in her pockets.

"Maybe. Brandon's with Mike for the weekend and I don't know what to do with myself. What are you up to?"

"I was in the mood for one of my favorites." Lena held up a VHS tape.

"Fried Green Tomatoes. Haven't seen it." Stef shrugged.

"You haven't? It's so great! Why don't you come watch it with me?" Lena wasn't sure how good of an idea this was, but the words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself.
"Oh, I don't know. I'm probably not very good company." Stef wanted to say yes, but the thought of being alone, probably in the dark, with Lena made her very nervous.

"Nonsense. It doesn't take anything to sit and watch a movie. Come with me - I guarantee you'll love the movie," Lena pressed.

"Okay, sure. Why not? I have to see this movie you're certain I'll like, even though you know nothing about my taste in movies."

"I don't have to know about your taste in movies - this one has universal appeal."

Two hours later, Stef turned towards Lena as they sat in the dark, at opposite ends of Lena's leather couch, an almost empty bowl of popcorn between them.

"You were right, I loved it," she admitted. What she didn't admit was how unsettled it made her feel. There was something between the two main characters, and though it wasn't explicit on the screen, she could feel their connection. Was this why Lena liked it - because it was about two women in love? What did it say about Stef that it resonated so much with her?

"Towanda, avenger of evil!" Lena quoted. "I've wanted to smash a few walls in my day. How liberating it must have been for Evelyn to just let it all out."

Or maybe it was just the message of female empowerment that Lena appreciated. Stef was probably reading too much into things.

Lena continued, "Is that what it's like to be a cop? Is it a little like being an avenger?"

Stef raised her eyebrows. "I don't know, maybe a little. There are so many times when you feel so powerless, though. It's one thing to stop a crime that's in progress, or to catch someone who's done something wrong and make sure justice is served. But the flip side is the victims, who've had their power - and other things - taken away from them. It's hard to see what that does to them and to know in most cases we came too late."

"I guess it gets glamorized. I'm sure there's all sorts of paperwork involved, too. The boring stuff no one ever thinks about."

"True. I imagine you have that as well. 'Administration' sounds like code for 'paperwork.' What made you want to move from teaching to being a vice principal?"

"Assistant vice principal," Lena corrected with a smile.

"For now. I see big things for you."

"Someday, maybe. For now I'm happy where I am. I loved teaching, but I'm interested in creating curricula that will help even more kids, making sure there's comprehensive programming that lets kids express themselves and explore. Being involved on the policy and administrative side lets me have a greater impact. At least, I hope it does."

"Well, you're great with kids, and I'm sure it's their loss you're not in the classroom anymore. But Anchor Beach is a great school overall, with so many opportunities, and I'm sure you're a big part of that."

"You flatter me. I do love my job. It's nice to get to be around kids of all ages."
"You're mostly working with the elementary kids, though, right?" Stef wasn't exactly sure how things worked at Anchor Beach; it seemed there were multiple assistant vice principals but she had only ever interacted with Lena.

"Yes, which is why I gave you your tour and get to check in on Brandon from time to time. He's doing really well, by the way. He's right on track with learning to read, and he's friendly with all the other kids."

Stef wasn't sure if Lena knew that level of information about every kindergartener, but she was pleased to hear Lena had continued to look out for her son. "He's a sweet boy. I hate that he's caught up in this thing with me and Mike. And I miss him so much when he's gone for the weekends."

She paused and reached her hand out to Lena's, making fleeting contact, then retreating back to her side of the couch. "Thank you for inviting me over tonight. It's so hard to be all alone when you're used to being with your family. I don't begrudge Mike his time with Brandon - of course he should have it - but being a single parent is the worst of both worlds."

"How do you mean?" Lena was curious.

"When Brandon is with me, it's just me as the parent. I have to be on and available all the time. There's no backup anymore. No one to give him his bath while I clean up the kitchen. And then when he's gone it's not like I'm enjoying some sort of vacation. He's a part of me, and he's missing. I don't want a vacation from parenting. I want my son with me."

"Sounds like all of the work and not enough of the fun."

"Exactly. It's not that Mike has it easy, but he gets to take Brandon out and do all the exciting things kids do on the weekends. I just have him for school nights, so there's no time for the kind of playing and relaxing we used to do on Saturdays and Sundays."

"Stef, I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what that must be like. But I'm glad you felt like you could share it with me. I get the sense you haven't talked about it much." Lena hated to see how tense Stef looked.

"You're right. My parents are divorced, and though they're mostly okay with each other now, it wasn't a pretty marriage or a pretty divorce when it finally went down. They're a little less than sympathetic. My mom's all about embracing freedom, and my dad hypocritically judges me for not staying with Mike."

Lena hesitated, then spoke. "I don't mean to pry, and you don't have to answer if you don't want to, but what do you see happening with you and Mike? When we met you said you were separated. Are you moving towards divorce, or are you working on reconciling?"

Stef sighed. "I honestly don't know. It's been something of a holding pattern for months. No movement in either direction."

"Do you mind my asking why you split up in the first place?"

Stef took a moment before answering. "I don't mind you asking. It's just not an easy question to answer. Mike and I met on the job. We just sort of got together and moved forward without really thinking about it. Dating turned into engagement, which turned into marriage, and then we had a kid. He's a good guy, but he's more into partying than I am. And in the last few years he's brought the drinking home he used to do out with the guys. I thought it had reached the point of being a problem. He disagreed. But it was about more than that. We had grown apart, and that was a manifestation of our issues. Protecting Brandon gave me an excuse to ask him to leave."
"But you let Brandon spend weekends with him - are you worried?"

"A little. In the first few weeks after we separated, Brandon was with me full-time. Mike got some outpatient treatment and has been going to meetings ever since. It's only been the past couple of months Brandon has been spending the night there. It seems like things are going okay. But I do worry." Stef reached over and grabbed her shoes, slipping them on. "Again, thanks for having me over. It was nice to take my mind off of things."

"Any time. I mean that. We should do this again. Maybe next time you can pick a favorite of yours." Lena knew it was getting late, but she was disappointed Stef was already leaving.

"Sounds good."

"Just one more question, then I promise no more interrogation." Despite knowing they'd be getting together again, Lena didn't want to lose the chance to understand Stef better. She got the sense the other woman wasn't always so open.

Stef laughed. "It's fine. It's nice to let this out. Fire away."

"It sounds like being a single parent is hard and that Mike is making progress on his issues. But it doesn't seem like you're counting the days until you ask him to move back in. What do you want?"

Stef shrugged. What did she want? She wanted an intact family, with Brandon home all the time. But when she imagined that second parent with her, waking up with her, making breakfast and getting ready for the day with her, it wasn't Mike she saw. Not anymore.

"I'm still trying to figure that out. Divorce feels so final, but staying in the place we're in indefinitely isn't fair to any of us. And reconciliation? I have to say I'm with my mom on this. I feel freer without Mike. I feel terrible saying that - he's not a bad guy. Maybe it would be easier if he were. He's made some mistakes, and I have a feeling he'll make a few more. But none of us is perfect. I just - it's like I can breathe more deeply and the colors are a bit brighter now."

"I think I understand, maybe just a bit." Lena's smile was sympathetic.

"Your relationship with the cheating ex?"

"Yes. While I was with her, I knew I wasn't totally happy, but there were enough things that were compatible between us I thought I should have been. Turns out, I should have trusted my gut. And when I caught her and had a reason to dump her sorry ass, I felt a weight lifted."

"But it's still sad."

"It's still sad."

"And it still sucks."

"It still sucks."

"But we're going to be okay."

"That we are."

"I seem to keep saying it, but thank you. For everything tonight."

"I have one more thing you're going to thank me for." Lena cringed inwardly as soon as those words were out of her mouth.
Stef's mind raced. She had a few thoughts on what Lena could give her that she'd definitely appreciate.

Lena got up and walked across the room to her book shelf.

"Here's my copy of Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe. The book is even better than the movie. You're welcome to borrow it, but you'd better give it back. It's one of my absolute favorites."

Lena was pleased they had made tentative plans to get together again, but it didn't hurt to have another excuse to see Stef again.

"Deal. I'll have it back to you by the next time we watch a movie."

"Next weekend too soon?"

"I'm not a terribly fast reader, but I think that'll motivate me. Next weekend is perfect. And I'll think of a good movie."

"Wonderful."

Lena was surprised to see a blonde head poke around the corner into her office Monday morning. Stef, looking totally sexy in her uniform, was holding up a well-loved book.

"I thought you said you weren't a fast reader. Or did you hate it and not even finish it?"

"I spent all day Saturday and Sunday reading. I can't remember the last time I've done that. It was wonderful. I can see why you like it so much."

Stef didn't mention just how much the book affected her. It turned out she wasn't wrong about the connection between the two women in the movie. In the book, they were most definitely together - like, together together - even though it was Alabama in the early 1900's. It sent her imagination spiraling off into directions it probably shouldn't.

"I remember discovering it when I was a teenager and thinking it was the most beautiful love story I'd ever read."

Stef couldn't tear her eyes away from Lena's. "Yes," was all she could say.

Finally, she looked away and moved to make her exit. "Well, thanks again," she mumbled.

"Wait!" Lena thought she sounded more desperate than she meant to. "Are we still on for another movie this weekend."

Stef looked up. Right, another opportunity to be alone with Lena. "Of course."

"I can't wait to see what you pick."

No pressure. Stef's palms were already starting to sweat. She wiped them on her pants as discreetly as she could.

"My place or yours?" Lena continued. "I don't want to be rude and invite myself over, but I also don't want to make you feel like you have to be the one to drive over."

Stef didn't know what she wanted. She liked getting out of the empty house, but there was something dangerous about being at Lena's apartment. It felt too much like being in a different world, one in which she was a different person who could do things the real Stef knew she shouldn't.
On the other hand, having Lena over to her house would be weird. There were still so many signs of Mike, at least to her eyes, and to have this beautiful single woman come over to her messy, lived-in house might change how Lena saw her.

"Your place is fine. I don't mind coming over."

"Great! Hey, maybe we could grab dinner first. There's this new sushi place I've been wanting to try. Do you like sushi?"

Stef had never had sushi in her life, and the thought of raw fish turned her stomach. But the thought of dinner with Lena, the two of them out together, made her feel a different kind of queasy.

"Uh, I don't know. I've never had it." Stef hated seeing Lena's face fall. She seemed so excited about the restaurant. "But I'd love to try it." There was that smile again. Stef felt like she'd do anything to make Lena smile. Apparently, that included eating uncooked, squishy sea creatures.
Lena spent the remainder of the week trying to convince herself she was just going to be hanging out with a new friend. Just a friend. The electric eye contact and pace at which Stef devoured a lesbian love story meant nothing. It was good and healthy for both of them to spend time together. Good and healthy with zero chance of Lena getting her heart broken.

Stef spent her time anguishing over what movie to bring to Lena's. After a week of wracking her brain and coming up with nothing, she was pacing the aisles of the video store, trying to find the perfect thing and not be late to dinner.

She wanted to avoid the romance aisle - what message would that send? A straight romance might be insulting to Lena, but The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love was way too on the nose. Action movies were more Mike's thing. She couldn't even pretend she was into documentaries. Finally, she just grabbed her favorite movie and hoped Lena didn't find her to be a total psychopath.

Lena was standing outside the restaurant when Stef arrived. She observed the taller woman as she walked towards her. The sun was setting behind her, and it made her hair seem to glow. Lena was objectively beautiful. Really, it wasn't odd for Stef to think that - it was just a fact. Maybe it was a little odd for her heart to race quite so much at the sight of Lena, but didn't pretty women make everyone nervous?

Lena wanted to hug Stef when she greeted her. Then she thought she shouldn't - warding off future heartbreak and all that - best not to get too touchy-feely. But she'd hug any other of her friends, and wasn't Stef just a friend? Really, it would be unusual of her not to hug Stef. So she opened her arms as Stef reached her and tried to act like it wasn't going to be the highlight of her day.

Stef wasn't used to huggy friends, and her complicated feelings for Lena made her feel awkward. But she couldn't leave Lena hanging. And she honestly wanted the woman's arms around her. So she stepped into them and reciprocated the embrace. It took a moment for her to relax, and then all too quickly she was having to force herself not to be a total weirdo by smelling Lena's hair. She so wanted to smell Lena's hair. And bury her face in Lena's neck. And -

"I'm so glad you could make it," Stef heard right next to her ear. She shivered.

"Are you cold? We should go inside and get a table." Lena was happy for the excuse to pull away. Stef didn't hug like a straight girl, all arms and leaning over. Stef's embrace was full-bodied, their stomachs and breasts pressed together. It would be too easy to stay in it longer than was appropriate, and Lena didn't want to scare her off.

Stef tried not to appear nervous as she and Lena were seated. Maybe she just wasn't used to spending time with female friends, but she couldn't shake the date vibe. Lena was so attentive, leaning towards her and maintaining eye contact, rather than sitting back and relaxing.

"So, sushi? You going to convince me that raw fish is delicious." Stef looked skeptical.

Lena reassured her, "Stef, you don't have to eat anything raw if you don't want to. There are cooked things on the menu, and the California rolls are pretty tame."

"No, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this. Hit me with the rawest, fishiest thing there is." Stef smiled, psyching herself up for the challenge.
Lena raised an eyebrow. "Okay, but I'll order a variety so if you don't like something you'll have other options."

"Fair enough. So what else are you doing this weekend? Any big plans?" Stef sat back, trying to relax before she was faced with a dinner that hadn't been cooked.

"I'll probably go hang out with my friends, Jenna and Kelly. They have a son who's just a little younger than Brandon. We've been friends for years, but I see them less now that they're parents. I don't know if it's me or them, but for some reason we just don't get together as often as we did before Garrett came along."

"I know what you mean. Mike and I tended to socialize with our co-workers, but once we had Brandon we kind of stopped. We still go to the more organized parties and all that, when my mom can babysit, but we don't just hang out like we used to."

"So your mom is local? That must be nice. Or not. I moved here in part to get away from my mom."

Stef smiled sympathetically. "Well, my mom moved an hour away after I graduated from high school, but yeah, she's pretty nearby. You and your mom aren't close?"

Lena twisted her napkin. "She'd like us to be. I guess. She just has certain expectations and issues she puts on me, and I don't exactly react well. It's better that we see each other a couple of times a year than if we were in each other's hair more often."

"What about your dad? Are your parents together?" Stef wasn't usually one to ask a bunch of personal questions, but things flowed naturally when she was talking to Lena.

"They are. My dad likes to keep my mom happy, and since a lot of my issues with my mom are about me not being black enough it's hard for him to get involved."

"Why not?" Lena's family sounded as complicated as Stef's though in a completely different way.

"Well, he's white."

"Ah, I see. Any siblings? Someone to share the burden with?"

"Technically, yes. I have a half brother from my father's first marriage. But I don't have a relationship with him. He said some unforgiveable things about my mom, and I have no interest in spending time with him." Lena crossed her arms.

"I take it he's white."

"You would be correct."

"Wow, that sounds messy. Makes me appreciate being an only child. Though I always wanted a sibling. Someone to divide my mother's attention and to spread out the pressure from my father."

The food arrived, just in time to lighten the conversation. They shifted to discussing the proper method of consuming what was in front of them.

"So you mix up a little wasabi with the soy sauce - not too much, the wasabi is hot - and then you use your chopsticks to dip in your roll and then eat," Lena explained.

"I have to eat the whole thing all at once?" Stef was hoping to start with just a little bite.

"Well, it's just easier that way. If you take a bit the whole thing will likely fall apart. But you can do
whatever you want." Lena was impressed that Stef was willing to try something new, but she didn't want to overwhelm her.

"I can handle it." Stef looked determined, but still a little skeptical.

"You're quite the tough gal, aren't you?"

"If the guys from the station could see me now. They'd make fun of me for eating sushi, but they'd expect me to down it like a champ."

"All right, champ? You ready?"

Stef was determined to get the worst out of the way, so she aimed for the tuna. It was a pink slab of meat on top of some rice. It looked wholly unappealing, and Stef was under no illusion she'd actually enjoy it. If she managed to be totally honest with herself, she just wanted to impress Lena.

Try as she might, she couldn't get the chopsticks to work. Every time she'd attempt to bring them together, one of them would slip. She hoped Lena found it charming, rather than a sign of Stef's lack of culture.

"Here, let me help." Lena put her hand on Stef's and helped her clamp down on the tuna. Stef held on and picked it up.

"Are you up for the wasabi? You really don't have to if you're not into spicy foods." Lena looked warily at Stef.

"No, no. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it all the way." Stef dunked her sushi into the liquid and quickly brought it up to her mouth. She managed to put the whole thing in, then chewed three times before swallowing. She grabbed her glass of water and drank half of it.

Lena laughed. "So, what did you think?"

Stef hoped her smile looked genuine. "Not so bad. Maybe I'll try one of those rolls next."

"Not a fan of the sashimi?"

"Now I can say I've tried it."

Lena narrowed her eyes at Stef's non-answer. "Yes, you can."

The rolls turned out not to be terrible, and Stef was glad she wouldn't walk away from dinner hungry. Still, she happily accepted Lena's suggestion of going for ice cream afterwards.

They continued chatting comfortably until the check came. Then came the awkward argument over who should pay.

"We should split it," Stef insisted. Anything to make it feel less like a date.

"But I invited you, and I'm pretty sure you didn't enjoy it, no matter how hard you tried to pretend," Lena responded.

Stef held Lena's eyes. "I'll have you know I very much enjoyed myself this evening."

Lena didn't want to read more into that than just Stef being kind, but it was still nice to hear. "Thank you. I did as well. How about I get dinner and you get the ice cream?"
"Deal."

The walk to the ice cream shop was pleasant. It felt nice to Stef to be out with someone, enjoying the evening with no obligations. Of course, she missed Brandon, but it was good for her to be something other than his parent and the city's law enforcement.

Lena hadn't felt like this since Gretchen, and she knew she needed to be careful. It was just so hard when Stef was so much fun to be with. Lena let herself pretend for just one moment that she was walking down the street with her girlfriend, then forced herself to set those thoughts aside. She could keep things platonic. It wasn't like Stef had given any sign she would even consider being with a woman. Right?

"You are a grown woman, Stef. One who's not with her five-year-old tonight. And yet you get bubble gum and cotton candy flavored ice cream?" Lena couldn't imagine stomaching the vivid pink and blue combination.

Stef raised an eyebrow at Lena. "The lady who got the chocolate/vanilla combo is judging what my ice cream says about me? Irony, much?"

Lena laughed out loud. "No one's ever pointed that out before. Did Freud write anything about ice cream selections providing insight into someone's psyche?"

"Probably. In between the cigars and your mom."

Lena shook her head and took a lick. Stef tried not to be distracted by the sight.

"I know it's juvenile, but it's Brandon's favorite. He never ends up eating all of it, so I do. It's kind of grown on me. Want to try?" Stef held out her cone in offer.

Stef had tried sushi - the least Lena thought she could do was try day-glo colored ice cream. The fact that it involved Stef feeding her from something her mouth had been on didn't play into her decision-making at all.

Lena held Stef's wrist to steady it and leaned forward. Lena's touch actually made it more likely Stef would drop the cone, but she managed to hang onto it as Lena had a taste. Lena looked up from the ice cream and licked her lips.

Stef's voice only cracked a little as she asked, "So what do you think?"

Lena smiled. "Now I can say I've tried it."

"Silence of the Lambs? Seriously?" Lena was a bit surprised at Stef's movie choice, which was revealed once they settled onto the couch at Lena's after they finished their ice cream.

"Don't judge - it's my favorite. Besides, it's got law enforcement goodness for me and Jodie Foster for you."

"How do you know I'm a Jodie Foster fan?" Lena was totally a Jodie Foster fan.

Stef shrugged. "C'mon. Even I know Jodie Foster is a lesbian."

"Fine. I'll give you that. But I hate horror movies."

"You haven't seen this?" Stef was appalled. "It's not just a horror movie."
Lena looked skeptical.

"I'm not saying there aren't some pretty gross parts - it's just so much more than a schlocky gore-fest. It's suspenseful and smart, and the acting is amazing."

Lena threw up her hands in submission. "Okay, I'll give it a try. But I'm calling you at 2 a.m. if it gives me nightmares."

Stef wasn't so bothered at the thought of a call from Lena waking her up in the middle of the night. She pictured Lena in some sort of nightie, hand clutched to her chest, needing comfort from Stef. She managed not to offer to spend the night, just, you know, in case.

Instead, she just smiled and popped the cassette in the VCR.

Lena had to admit to herself it was a pretty great movie. When she wasn't covering her face to avoid having bloody images seared into her brain.

For at least the fourth time in the past hour, Stef asked, "Are you sure you don't want to turn it off? You don't have to suffer through this if it's totally freaking you out."

Lena scooted just a little closer to Stef on the couch. "No, no - you ate sushi, I can get through this movie. Just warn me when it's about to get gross."

By the time Clarice was searching for Buffalo Bill in his basement, Lena had abandoned any pretense of bravery and had buried her head in Stef's shoulder. It felt so cliche - the two of them using a scary movie as cover for an excuse to be close to each other. It wasn't that Lena's fear didn't seem genuine, and it wasn't that Stef had picked the movie with this scenario in mind - it was that over the course of the night the "date" vibe had only intensified. Stef knew they were skating closer to some sort of line, but here she was, her arm around Lena, unable or unwilling to pull back.

Lena knew she was overreacting a bit to the movie, but she genuinely didn't care for gruesome scenes. And it was easy to forget the lovely evening (gore aside) she had had wasn't with her girlfriend. Stef was supposed to be just a friend. But the more time they spent together, the less that felt true.

The credits finally rolled, and Lena raised her head. Stef looked over at her, and their faces were closer than either realized.

"So, did you hate it?" Stef asked quietly.

Lena held Stef's eyes as she replied, "No, I definitely enjoyed it more than I thought I would."

The moment went on too long. Stef didn't know how to respond. She swallowed, and it felt like a cartoonish gulp. The blood rushed in her head, and she imagined Lena could hear her heart pounding. She must have looked like a deer caught in headlights. Advance or retreat?

Stef wasn't ready to move forward. She looked away and pulled her arm back from around Lena's shoulder. It was too much.

But the disappointment on Lena's face, quickly masked, gave her a pang. Maybe there was a middle ground.

"How about you pick the movie next time?" she asked, with what she hoped looked like a normal smile, not a grimace.
Lena smiled back. "Definitely. But you can pick dinner. Is that okay?"

Stef got the sense there were always layers to the conversation with Lena. "Yes, it's more than okay."

"Good." Lena looked relieved.

Burgers and Much Ado About Nothing. Indian and Field of Dreams. Pizza and Dead Poet's Society. Friday night dinner and a movie became a regular thing. Both women looked forward to it - Stef a little guiltily, and not just because she didn't like the idea of the best part of her week being a time her son was away from her. She tried to compartmentalize her life - there were the weekdays, when she worked and tried to avoid Mike and took care of Brandon. Then, there was Friday night, when she became someone else, someone who laughed easily and smiled often.

So she was perhaps disproportionately disappointed when she had to cancel Friday night plans with Lena when she had to work late.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized to Lena from the phone in her car. "I wish I wasn't stuck out here, but there's no way around it."

Lena was disappointed as well, but she didn't want to make Stef feel badly. "It's okay. It means I can have sushi."

Stef laughed. "Go right ahead."

Lena hated the thought of not seeing Stef for another week, barring running into each other at school. "Hey, why don't we just reschedule? You're not working tomorrow, are you?"

"No, I'm free. Dinner and a movie as usual?" Stef asked.

Lena pondered for a moment. "It's the weekend, why not do brunch instead?"

Stef had never "done brunch" in her life, but with Lena it seemed she was in for a lot of firsts. "Sure. Where does one 'do brunch'?"

"Just come to my place around 10:00. We'll figure it out from there."

Stef wiped her palms on her slacks and knocked on Lena's apartment door. She normally loved dressing in her favorite, worn jeans on the weekend, but something about brunch sounded like it required dressing up. She had even ironed her blue button-down shirt and foregone rolling up the sleeves. She wasn't totally comfortable in the outfit, but then again she wasn't feeling comfortable in her own skin these days.

Of course Lena was wearing jeans and a casual cotton top. But she looked fabulous in them, not sloppy, like Stef would have. *So much for my assumptions about brunch.*

"Stef!" Lena exclaimed. "You look great! I was thinking we'd go to this little bistro a couple of blocks away, over by the waterfront. Do you mind walking?"

Stef looked down at her loafer-covered feet. They weren't heels or anything, but they were hardly her most comfortable shoes.

"Sure, we can walk." She eyed Lena's sandals with jealousy.
It turned out brunch was just eating normal food at an odd time of day. Stef had skipped breakfast so as to get the full brunch experience, so she enjoyed every bite of her steak and eggs platter. She also managed not to mock Lena's egg white omelette. But, really, what was the point if you left out the delicious part?

"So what else do you have going on today?" Lena made conversation between bites. 

Stef considered. She really was pretty much a homebody on the weekends, not taking advantage of her time alone. She didn't want Lena to think she was a loser with no life, but nothing exciting came to mind.

"Nothing. I should clean the house and make some food to freeze for the week, but I can do that tomorrow," Stef shrugged lamely. "What about you?"

Lena smiled broadly. "I have no plans whatsoever. I think this is the first weekend in awhile I haven't had any obligations with school or plans with friends. I'm looking forward to going wherever the spirit leads me. It's a beautiful day - we could go for a walk on the beach after we're done here?"

Lena looked so hopeful, Stef didn't have the heart to refuse. She was wearing the totally wrong outfit for beachcombing, but she'd make the best of it. Plus, she could probably use a walk after the meal she was eating.

Both women put on their sunglasses as they stepped outside. Lena took a deep breath and let it out. "Vitamin D, here we come."

They walked a couple of blocks to the nearest public entrance to the beach. Once they got to the end of the boardwalk, Stef paused. She couldn't walk in the sand in her loafers, but she didn't have anywhere to put them. Oh well. Better to carry them than to ruin them.

She reached down to take off one shoe, trying to balance on the other foot. Lena realized what Stef was attempting and reached out her hand, grabbing Stef's and steadying her. Stef's head shot up as she figured out why she wasn't falling over anymore. There was an electric moment between them, as their eyes locked, and then Stef had to look away. She fumbled with one shoe, then the other.

Now barefoot in the sand, she reached down again to roll up her pant legs, then rolled up her sleeves. She still didn't feel quite like herself, but this helped. She picked up her shoes and looked up at Lena again.

"Did you have anything in mind, or do you just want to wander?" she asked.

"Wandering sounds good. We can people-watch and guess what their lives are like." The two set off down the beach, not quite near enough the waves to get wet.

"Guess?" Stef asked with a smile. "I'm a cop - I don't need to guess. I'm like Sherlock Holmes."

Lena laughed. "Oh, really? So what's that guy's story over there?" She pointed at a 60-ish bald man wearing knee socks, sandals, and a clashing Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts, arm-in-arm with a beautiful 20-something woman.

Stef pondered a moment. "He's a bigwig at the State Department, and she's a Russian spy. He has a weakness for pedicures - which explains why he's wearing socks - and she posed as a beautician to get close to him. Pretty soon she's going to poison him with tainted nail polish and steal his laptop."

"Wow, you really do know what you're talking about." Lena was amused. This was the perfect way to spend a Saturday - relaxing and having fun with a friend. Just a friend. It's what normal women
"Okay, your turn. Show me what you've got. What's the deal with that lady?" Stef chose a 30-ish woman with short hair, walking along with a man around the same age and a dog.

"She's clearly a lesbian, and he's her beard. She's at the beach today to meet her secret lover - see how she's not paying attention to the guy and is looking over at that redhead on that towel?"

Stef's mouth went dry. "So, is that gaydar or whatever? You can just sense who's gay and who's not?" If that was the case, what did Lena think about her?

Lena looked over at Stef, who seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden. She got the sense this was a more serious question than perhaps their joking game would indicate.

"Oh, I don't know," she tried to keep it light. "It's not like it's one hundred percent or anything. But sometimes I get a vibe. I think people recognize people like themselves, or they get attuned to stereotypical attributes and notice them."

"What about you? I'm not saying I have gaydar or anything, but you don't seem to have too many 'stereotypical attributes'. Not that I think all lesbians are butch man-haters or anything like that," Stef hurried to clarify, lest Lena take what she said the wrong way.

Lena let out a laugh. "I guess gay people come in all shapes and sizes. I'm an epic softball player, if that helps maintain your worldview."

"It does, thank you." Stef was relieved Lena wasn't offended. She pressed on with another question.

"How did you know? That you were gay, I mean. Or a lesbian, or whatever you want to be called." Nope, that one didn't come out right either.

Lena, in her usual way, seemed to see right through Stef's inquiry. She gave Stef an appraising look before answering, her tone light.

"Well, I think I was always attracted to women, though it wasn't until high school I could put a name on it. I tried dating a couple of guys, just to fit in, but it didn't feel right. Then I heard someone call Julie Anderson a dyke and I went home and asked my mom about it. It was the mid '90's, so people weren't terribly accepting, but my mom was very non-judgmental in her answer. I think she had an inkling of what was going on with me, but for once she didn't push. She was just empowering in her 'no-one-should-let-other-people-dictate-how-they-live-their-lives' kind of way." Lena gave a wry smile as she recalled her mother's speech about women not needing men and how they should stand tall and own their truth.

Stef smiled back. "So, does that mean they were fine when you actually told them?"

"Pretty much. They were a little uncomfortable when I introduced them to my first girlfriend, but overall they were great. They recognized that their relationship would have been looked down on not so many years before - and still was by some - so they were sympathetic."

They walked along in companionable silence, until they reached a less crowded stretch of beach and Lena suggested they sit for awhile.

Stef looked down at her slacks and decided to suck it up. So what if she got sand in her pants? When was the last time she had taken the time to just sit and look out at the ocean? Lena, already leaning back on her hands with her legs stretched out in front of her and her eyes closed, seemed like the
kind of person to live in the moment and appreciate the beauty around her or something similarly poetic.

Stef put down her shoes and tried to get comfortable. The cop in her scanned the area for anything suspicious, but she tried to relax and enjoy just doing nothing. Just as she closed her eyes and settled into the warmth, Lena spoke up.

"What are your thoughts on DVDs?"

Stef's brow furrowed as she tried to process the non sequiter. "I can't say I have any. Why?"

Lena sat up and turned towards Stef. "Well, we've been watching a fair amount of movies lately, and I hear how great DVDs are compared to VHS. Maybe I should get a DVD player. The selection at Blockbuster for DVDs is getting as big as the videos."

"I'm something of an if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it person, but if this is anything like the 8-track to tape to CD progression you may as well hop on the bandwagon."

"Ha! I haven't bought a tape in years! I remember my first, though. Whitney Houston's self-titled album."

"Nice. Mine was Billy Idol's Rebel Yell."

"Seriously?" Lena looked over with a smile.

"What? It was my tiny way of sticking it to my dad's religiosity." Stef shrugged.

"Fair enough. So, what do you think? Should we go shopping?" Lena pulled her legs under her and moved to stand up.

Stef's brow furrowed. "Shopping? For what?"

Lena laughed. "A DVD player. Try to keep up."

This day was not turning out quite like Stef expected, or like any she had spent in awhile. Brunch, the beach, and now shopping. She hated shopping. But for Lena…

"Sure. I have no other plans."

"Great! Let's go!"

Shopping with Lena wasn't like shopping by herself. Stef would usually just get the cheapest version of whatever she was looking for and be done. Lena kept reading all the fine print on all the different models and asking the salesperson at Best Buy lots of questions.

Lena enjoyed making an informed decision and, if she was honest with herself, she got a kick out of asking Stef her opinion on things and watching the other woman try to act like she had one. When she was finally satisfied with her selection, the two made their way to the checkout line.

"I don't want to monopolize your day, but I was thinking it only makes sense to test this thing out. Should we do our usual Friday night routine even though it's Saturday?" Lena looked hopefully at Stef.

Saturday was usually when Stef finally swept all of the Cheerios out from under the kitchen table and did the laundry and bought food for the week. But she hadn't yet figured out a way to say no to
the beautiful woman in front of her - so she didn't.

"Sure. Sounds like fun." She hesitated a moment. "But do you mind if I run by my house and change clothes?"

Lena looked Stef up and down and laughed. "Of course. Lounging on the couch requires appropriate lounging attire."

"Yeah, not brunching attire," Stef mumbled. Lena smirked but didn't comment.
To call or not to call? Lena debated with herself. She didn't want to seem needy or intrusive. It was just one missed week of their time together, and she imagined Stef was busy with her family doing Thanksgiving things. Though Lena was pretty sure Stef wasn't braving the Black Friday crowds - shopping clearly wasn't her thing.

Then again, she knew Stef would be missing Brandon, who was spending the long weekend with Mike. It was their first major holiday apart, and Lena was sympathetic. She was home with both of her parents, while Stef was running between her divorced parents with no buffer of her son to distract from the awkwardness. Maybe Stef would welcome a distraction.

Lena blew out a frustrated breath and dialed Stef's number. Calling a friend shouldn't be fraught with such angst.

"Lena? Happy belated Thanksgiving!" Stef greeted her.

"To you as well," Lena responded, immediately berating herself for sounding like a stodgy old man. "How are things at your dad's?"

"Ugh," was Stef's reply.

"That bad? I know you were dreading it, but I hoped it wouldn't be as awful as you thought."

"Somehow holidays bring out the worst in him. Normally, we can cover the awkwardness with chit-chat about baseball, or Brandon's with me and we play with him. But this year he took it upon himself to invite a bunch of people over for Thanksgiving and use dinner as a platform for espousing his opinions as though they're facts."

"Sounds unpleasant. I take it you were the target of some of his rants."

"Of course. He kept commenting to Pastor Dan how tragically high the divorce rate is, and how sad it is when there are kids involved." Stef didn't mention how much she detested having to sit next to the man who made her last year of high school miserable.

"Are you kidding?" Lena couldn't help being indignant on Stef's behalf. "But he's divorced! What a hypocrite!"

"I know. That's never stopped him before. He kept talking about what a great guy Mike is and how it was too bad he wasn't there this year." Stef couldn't bring herself to say how much her dad's comments affected her. Mike was getting his drinking under control, and he really was a decent guy. Was she sacrificing her son's happiness for her own? Was it worth it?

"I'm so sorry. I know he's your dad, but why do you put up with that?" Lena's response kept Stef from traveling too far down that rabbit hole.

"I suppose it's a function of being a child of divorce myself. He lives alone, and I feel like I need to look out for him. If I cut him off, I'd have no way to know if he was doing okay."

"I shouldn't judge - of course we love our parents, even when they try to tell us how to run our lives."

"I take it your mom hasn't held back her opinion either?"
Lena laughed. "She phrases her feedback in the form of questions. 'Lena, darling, don't you think you should stop straightening your hair? It's so much prettier when it's natural.' 'Lena, darling, don't you think you should get back into dating? You don't want to end up alone, do you?"

Stef tried to laugh in response, but that last comment made her stomach turn. "Well, I think your hair looks lovely just the way it is, and I'm here to tell you you might find someone and still end up alone."

"My goodness. I appreciate the compliment, but your pessimism is depressing."

"I'm sorry. Two days with my dad is getting to me. Usually I just drop off groceries and stay for a few innings, and I can handle the small dose." Stef hesitated, then continued. "He gets in my head, though. Maybe he has a point. What are holidays going to be like for Brandon? Not just now, but when he's an adult. Will he dread his parents fighting over his time and making passive aggressive cracks about each other? Would it be better to stay together and put him first?"

Lena gathered her thoughts before answering. It wasn't her place to tell Stef what to do. She seemed to have enough of that already. "Do you think your holidays would be better if your parents were still together?"

"Good point. I'd rather them talk about each other behind the other's backs than fight face-to-face." Those last couple of holidays before Stef's parents finally called it quits had been epically awful.

"I don't know what your relationship with Mike has been like since the separation, but I've never hear you put him down. Sure, you've talked about why you split, but you've never disparaged him as a person. I can't imagine you putting Brandon in the middle of any issues you might have - maybe you'd maintain a good enough relationship that you could still celebrate holidays together." Lena did her best to phrase her comments in the conditional tense. She could hardly assume a permanent split would be the actual outcome of Stef and Mike's separation.

"I can only aspire to have a better divorce than my parents." Stef corrected herself, "I mean, hypothetically. Not that it would take much."

"The next two days with your mom should be better, right?"

"Better, yes, but still stressful. I don't usually spend this much time with her, but she insisted I not sit at home alone on a holiday weekend. And, I think she wanted to make sure she had equal time with my dad. I'm still a pawn in their twisted relationship."

"Well, I hope it goes well."

"Me too. Best of luck answering your mom's questions. If she bugs you, just remind her you're friends with a cop."

"Yes, I'm sure that'll go over well." Lena hadn't mentioned Stef to her mom - it would open the door for way too many questions. And judgments.

"Thanks for calling - I feel like I can face my last couple of hours with my dad without throwing a tantrum like a teenager." Stef laughed ruefully.

"Always glad to help. See you next Friday, right?" Lena hoped she didn't sound too pathetic.

"Of course. Let's be sure not to pick any movies with family drama as the main plot."

"Deal."
"Bye, Brandon. I love you...No, I don't think there are any dinosaurs under your bed - they wouldn't fit...Okay, goodnight." Stef ended the call and flopped back onto the couch.

"How are you doing, hon?" Sharon sat down next to her daughter and patted her knee. "I know this is the longest you've been apart from him."

Stef sighed. After four days of navigating each of her parents and being away from her son, she was too tired to put on a happy face.

"This sucks."

"I know. But consider the alternative."

"Meaning what?" Stef wasn't up for defending Mike to her mom. It seemed as much as her dad wanted to remind her how wonderful her estranged husband was, her mother wanted to point out their problems.

"Do you think Brandon would be better off year after year, with his parents growing more and more unhappy?"

"You assume that's what would happen. Maybe we'll work things out."

"You assume that's what would happen. Maybe we'll work things out."

"Really? Oh, Stef. You deserve so much more than mediocrity." Stef assumed her mother meant to look sympathetic, but it came across as condescending.

"And how do you know my marriage to Mike was - is - mediocre? Just because your marriage didn't work out, it doesn't mean no one's will." Two days ago, Stef was ready to divorce Mike just to spite her dad, and now she was practically ready to reunite just to stick it to her mom. This was why she normally limited her visits with her parents to a couple of hours.

"Sure, it's no secret I've been happier in the ten years since the divorce than the years I was married - being your mom notwithstanding, of course. I've seen the same thing in you the past few months - especially recently. You seem lighter, less stressed."

Stef considered her mother's comments. Was she happier? She had gotten past the initial chaos of transitioning to single parenting, and now weekdays ran relatively smoothly. Brandon was adjusting well to kindergarten, becoming more responsible and self-reliant. Not having to take care of Mike, or worry that he wasn't taking care of himself, was a relief. And she couldn't deny that her Friday nights with Lena were a significant contributor to her overall positive outlook on life. So things were fine for now - but what would they be like five years, ten years in the future? Would she continue to be satisfied with the life she had?

"Mom, do you believe people can stay together forever? Maybe neither of us has found someone we can make it work with, but do you at least think it's possible?" Stef hoped she didn't sound too wistful.

Sharon looked at Stef appraisingly. "Is that what you want? To find someone else and try the whole marriage thing again?"

"I don't know if I want to get married again. But I don't want to be alone forever. No offense, Mom."

"None taken. I'm content. I'm not looking for another husband. I prefer my independence and freedom."
"Is that how you view relationships? As something that holds you back? Don't you think it's possible to be with someone who helps you be a better person, who supports you, rather than holds you back? I know he's a piece of work, but was Dad really that terrible?"

"No, honey, he wasn't that bad. But we weren't right for each other, and the longer we were together, the more we focused on the things we disagreed on, instead of the things we shared. I've dated a few men since your father, and there's just never been anyone worth disrupting my life for. Maybe the men of your generation are more egalitarian."

Stef considered the guys she knew. No one she'd ever dated had been looking for a barefoot housewife. Sure, towards the end it felt like she had two kids to take care of, but before Brandon came along Mike never tried to keep her from doing the things she wanted. Did she want to find another man to move into her house, help her parent Brandon, share her life with? She hadn't felt a twinge of attraction to any man since separating from Mike, and they hadn't talked about dating other people.

The happiest she'd been in recent months - maybe even years - was the time she spent with Lena, and that thought was so terrifying she couldn't even contemplate it. Trying to work around an attraction to the other woman was one thing, but letting her mind wander into visions of domestic bliss together was so far out of what Stef had ever considered for herself that she had to shake her head to clear the thought.

Sharon broke her out of her reverie. "Maybe there's no hope for lasting love for me, and I'm all right with that, but I want to believe it's out there for you, if that's what you want."

"Thanks, Mom. Right now, my top priority is Brandon. Love can wait."

The following Wednesday, Lena was summoned to the nurse's office. When a student had to be sent home sick, they often waited in her office while she called their parents. This time, it was a miserable-looking Brandon who needed to go home. The nurse informed her he had the stomach bug that was going around.

"Hi, honey," she greeted him. "Want to come with me to call your mom? You can wait with me while she comes to get you."

He just nodded and followed her down the hall. She had him sit in her comfy kid-sized chair and pulled out his file. Finding Stef's number, she dialed it. No answer.

"Brandon, your mom's not answering. Do you want to go back the Nurse Buckley's office and lie down?" Lena knew Stef was likely out in the field, and there was no way to know when she'd be back.

Brandon looked up. "What about my dad? He can get me. Even though it's not Friday."

Right, Mike. Lena's denial had hit a new low. "Of course. I think his number is here as well."

She punched in the numbers, hoping for Brandon's sake that he answered but selfishly not wanting to deal with him.

"Hello," she heard a cheerful voice answer.

"Is this Mike Foster?"

"It is. Who's calling?"
"This is Lena Adams from Anchor Beach. Brandon's sick, and we need one of his parents to pick him up. I tried Stef - I mean, Ms. Foster - but she didn't answer. Are you able to come get him?"

"Of course. Poor little guy. I'll be there as soon as I can." Mike hung up without saying goodbye, but Lena didn't take it as a sign of rudeness - she imagined he was just trying to get to his son as quickly as possible.

Fifteen minutes later, a stocky, handsome man in a police uniform appeared at her door. Mike. Lena had to admit he didn't look like who she imagined Stef to be married to, but then again she spent a fair amount of time trying to imagine Stef wasn't married at all.

He stepped in and stretched out his hand for Lena to shake. "Ms. Adams? I'm Mike Foster. Thanks for taking care of Brandon. How's he doing?"

"Daddy!" Brandon summoned the energy to run over to his father and hug his legs.

Lena let go of Mike's hand and put it on Brandon's head. "He's okay. He threw up twice - but he's been all right since he saw the nurse. Quite a few children in his class have had something similar. For most kids it lasts a couple of days, so hopefully he'll be fine by the weekend."

"I'll take him home and make sure he gets some rest."

"Can I watch TV?" Brandon looked up at his father.

Mike smiled down at his son. "Sure, buddy." He looked back at Lena. "He's always excited when he's sick because he gets to watch TV all day. I try to tell him it's not worth all the other stuff that comes with being sick, but hey, I get it."

Lena couldn't help but smile back. Mike seemed like a great dad. Much as she wanted him to be a horrible, ugly person, she was happy for Brandon that he wasn't. And of course she wouldn't want Stef to be married to a monster, but it was jarring to meet him and see he was a regular guy. Sure, she knew more than he'd probably like about his issues with drinking, but he seemed to have it together now and there was nothing about him that made him seem obviously divorceable.

"Jenna, what am I doing?" Lena sighed. She had called her friend after work, needing to process in true lesbian-in-love-with-a-married-straight-woman fashion.

"Maybe it's a reaction to the Gretchen thing. She cheated on you, so your next crush is so unattainable you can't get cheated on," Jenna theorized.

"But I can still get hurt. It's ridiculous. And unhealthy. I should stop spending so much time with her, but I enjoy it too much. It's not like I have anything else to be doing." Lena didn't mean it as a dig against her old friend - it was just hard to align their interests anymore.

"I have this new co-worker, Aliyah. She's cute, single, just moved to town. You should go out with her. If you're with Stef every Friday that's time you're not out meeting someone available. Let me help you along."

Lena pondered for a moment. She knew she should take Jenna up on her offer. At this point she just couldn't imagine being as attracted to someone as she was to Stef. And there was her answer - she definitely needed to stop being into someone completely unavailable.

"Sure. Fine. If she's interested, I'll go on a blind date with your co-worker."
"Great! Okay, I'll talk to her tomorrow and put you two in touch."

"Thanks for listening, Jen-" They were interrupted by unintelligible noises from Jenna's end of the line.

"Sorry, Lena - I've got to go. Garrett needs milk."

"Kelly can't get it for him?" Lena wanted to be understanding, but she knew Jenna's wife was home.

"He wants me. He's four - this is how it goes."

There it was again - the divide between people with kids and those without. "Okay. Call me tomorrow."

"I will. Bye!"

Hey, Lena - it's Stef. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to do our usual dinner and a movie tonight. I seem to have caught whatever awful illness Brandon had, so I'm stuck at home feeling terrible. We'll definitely do it again next week. I really hope you don't get this. This illness, I mean, not this message. Clearly, I need to go back to bed.

Lena flipped her phone shut and tossed it onto the coffee table. She was disappointed, but she wondered if it was for the best. Perhaps this was a good opportunity to back off of seeing each other so often. If she was going to get back into the dating pool she couldn't be busy every Friday night.

Absolutely, it was for the best.

It could still be for the best not to have platonic dates every Friday but still go check up on a sick friend Saturday morning, right? Lena knew her excuse was flimsy, but she found it hard not to see Stef when she had grown so accustomed to their routine.

She raised one hand to knock on Stef's door, balancing the container of chicken soup in her other hand. No naughty nurse fantasies ran through her head as she waited for Stef to answer. Not one.

When the door did crack open, it revealed a surprised and disheveled Stef, bangs sticking up in all directions, wearing a ratty bathrobe over flannel pants and a Padres t-shirt.

"Lena? What are you doing here? And, hey, how do you even know where 'here' is?" Stef asked, pulling her robe closed, even though no skin was showing. This was not how she intended for Lena to see where she lived for the first time.

Lena's brow furrowed for a moment. She hadn't thought about the drawbacks of showing up unannounced. Especially considering the stalker undertones of how exactly she did find out Stef's address.

"Well, I looked up Brandon's address in the school's records." She hesitated, waiting for Stef's reaction. When none came, she continued. "I'm sorry - I should have called. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

Stef stepped back and opened the door wider. "It's okay. You can come in, if you're willing to brave the germs. You just surprised me is all."

Lena walked in and tried not to immediately start looking around. She was admittedly curious about
where Stef lived. "I know it's a little early for soup, but you can reheat it at lunch time if you're feeling up to it."

She held out the container and Stef took it, walking through the modest - and somewhat messy - living room and around a corner to the kitchen. She placed the soup in the refrigerator and turned back to Lena, who had followed her.

"Do you want something to drink, or something?" Stef felt she should be a better hostess, but her head was pounding too hard to think terribly clearly.

"Oh, no - I'm here to help you out however you need it. You just sit down and rest. I can throw in a load of laundry or run an errand for you or whatever."

The two women looked at each other awkwardly, both of them trying not to think about Lena handling Stef's underwear, until Stef shrugged and walked back to the living room, gesturing for Lena to follow her. She plopped down on the recliner, and Lena gingerly sat on the edge of the couch.

"Oh, that feels better. I'm too weak to stand up for long yet." Stef closed her eyes and put up the foot rest.

"I'm sorry, Stef. I can just leave the soup and go. You should get some rest."

Stef cracked open an eye and managed a smile. "No, it's fine. It's nice to have company. The last time I was sick, before Mike and I split, I just wanted to be left alone but now that I got my wish I find it lonely."

Other than their Thanksgiving phone call, Stef didn't usually talk about Mike when she and Lena were together, and the casual reference, combined with being in the house he used to live in, threw Lena. She had been happy to forget he existed, and in the past week she had been continually reminded that he did. It was a necessary dose of reality.

She needed to let go of the feelings she was having for Stef, but that didn't mean she couldn't still be her friend. "Do you want something to drink? Or the TV remote?"

"There's a bottle of ginger ale in the fridge - it's been helping a bit. If you don't mind, I'd love a glass. Help yourself to anything to eat or drink while you're in there." Stef hoped Lena would chalk the dishes in the sink up to her being ill.

Lena couldn't help but look around, wanting to understand Stef better. Their earlier conversation about gaydar and Stef's interest in her coming out process had sparked some hope in Lena that the other woman might have an inclination in that direction. She would never have said it, and it was clear Stef wasn't ready to ask, but her gaydar definitely pinged for the cop.

It wasn't like she was expecting to find some sort of obvious sign in the house that Stef was a repressed or closeted lesbian. Lena wasn't sure what the stereotypical decor would be for someone in that position, but all she saw was someplace that looked pleasant and child-friendly. There were Brandon's drawings held onto the fridge with SDPD magnets, a bright print of flowers on the yellow wall, and a calendar with writing scribbled on most of the dates.

Maybe she was looking for insight into Stef's relationship with Mike. Their conversation the previous week only demonstrated Stef's ongoing confusion about what to do next. Would Stef's environment give clues about what was going on in her subconscious? If it looked like Mike's presence was still evident in the house, that might be a sign they would eventually reconcile. Lena wasn't bold enough
to wander around looking for Stef's bedroom, so she poured the glass of ginger ale and accepted that she wouldn't have her questions answered alone in Stef's kitchen.

As she walked back into the living room she tried to glance around without seeming nosy. Mostly, there were toys and books. But there was a picture of Mike and Brandon on the mantel, next to one of Stef and Brandon. They looked recent, judging by the familiar shirt Brandon was wearing. Lena thought it was a nice way to show the boy he still had two parents, without Stef having to display any photos of the three of them together. Perhaps that was an answer itself - Lena imagined there had once been a wedding picture there, and one of the three of them when Brandon was a baby. Maybe they had consciously been replaced with reflections of the separation.

Still, Lena tried not to let that send her imagination spinning off into a world where a picture of Stef and her joined those on the mantel.

She was jolted out of her reverie by a knock on the door. She handed the ginger ale to Stef and asked, "Were you expecting someone? Do you want me to get that?" Lena hoped her thoughts of Mike hadn't summoned him. Both of them trying to care for an ailing Stef would be too awkward for words.

"It's probably my mom. I told her last night I was sick, so I'm sure she's here to smother me. You'll see why I thought I just wanted to be left alone - I spent my childhood trying to avoid my mom's constant checking in and excess sympathy."

"Yes, that sounds terrible - having a mother who didn't see sickness as a constitutional failing." Lena made her way to the front door.

She opened it to find a short woman with spiky red hair looking at her with confusion.

"You must be Stef's mom," she said with an attempt at a normal smile as she ushered in the other woman.

"Yes - I'm Sharon. Who are you?"

_good question_, Lena thought. _Her totally platonic friend? Her son's vice principal? The creepy lady who can't figure out if this attraction is mutual?_

She settled on the simplest answer. Stef could go into detail if her mother was as inquisitive as she'd been described. "Lena Adams - a friend of Stef's. I heard she was sick and wanted to check in."

Sharon's face lit up. "Of course you are! Stef has told me so much about you! How nice of you to come take care of her. How is our patient?" she asked as she walked over to Stef, putting her hand on her daughter's forehead.

Lena hoped that question was directed at Stef, since she was still processing Sharon's greeting. So Stef had mentioned her? Lena wondered what she had said.

Stef was silent, but Sharon answered herself. "Clearly you have a fever. Have you been taking any medicine?" All Stef could do was nod, before Sharon was turning to Lena and asserting, "This one is always so stoic. I'm fine, Mom. I don't need anything, Mom. Just let me stay in bed, Mom.' But here she is out of bed and entertaining guests."

Stef managed to break in. "Lena's hardly a guest, Mom." She would have said anything to prevent her mother from launching into an embarrassing story from her childhood.

Lena gave her a look of mock insult.
Stef flopped back against the couch. "You know what I mean - it's not like I invited you over to have tea." She turned her head towards her mother. "Lena's here to help. She brought soup."

"What a nice friend. I worried about you sitting all alone when Brandon's with Mike, and I was so pleased to hear you had met someone to spend time with."

Stef's eyes widened. "Mom! You make it sound like I'm a loser with no life."

Lena couldn't help but smile, though she covered it with a cough lest Stef get offended. So far she liked Stef's mom.

"Stef is a lovely woman, and I've enjoyed getting to know her the past few months." That came out sounding more like an attempt to please a future in-law than Lena meant it to.

"Of course she is. But she's cranky when she's sick. I hope she's been nice to you since you've been here." Sharon gave Stef a pointed look. Stef rolled her eyes.

"I've only been here a few minutes. Just long enough to put some soup in the fridge. She hasn't had time to be cranky. But now that you're here, I should probably go." Lena picked up her purse and moved towards the door.

"Nonsense. I'd love to get to know the person who's been keeping my daughter from going nuts while her son is away. You're not late for a hot date or something, are you?"

Lena couldn't stop the blush that spread across her cheeks. She wasn't late yet, but after Stef's text the day before, she had indeed set up a lunch date with Jenna's friend Aliyah for that afternoon. It seemed a little fast to her, but she supposed there was no time like the present. Why put it off and leave time to get worked up about it?

"You do!" Sharon exclaimed. "Tell us all about the lucky guy. Stef, have you met him?"

Stef knew she looked like a deer in the headlights. She was trying to simultaneously process the fact that Lena had a date and the need to inform her mother that said date would be a she, not a he.

Lena couldn't meet Stef's eyes as she answered Sharon, sparing Stef from having to form a sentence. "Not exactly, though I do have a blind date at lunch. My friend set me up with a co-worker."

"How exciting! What do you know about him?" Sharon asked. For someone who didn't think much of relationships, Stef thought her mom was overly into Lena's love life.

Lena finally made eye contact with Stef, who just shrugged. Clearly Stef hadn't mentioned to her mother that Lena was a lesbian. Coming out was a never-ending process, she reminded herself.

"Not much. She's a new co-worker of a friend of mine. Apparently she just recently moved to San Diego." Lena waited to see how Sharon would react to the pronoun switch.

Sharon only paused for a moment, then responded. "It'll be nice for you to introduce her to the city. Where are you going out?"

Stef zoned out while Lena and her mother continued to discuss Lena's plans. The thought of Lena going out with someone else unsettled her. Someone else? That implied Stef was the original someone. Stef had no claim to Lena's time. But if Lena were in a relationship, she probably wouldn't have time for weekly Friday night get-togethers, and Stef would go back to being the loser with no life her mom already implied she was. Maybe it wouldn't go anywhere. But didn't Lena deserve happiness?
Lena interrupted Stef's racing thoughts. "I'd better get going. It was so nice to meet you, Sharon. Stef, I hope you feel better soon. I leave you in your mother's capable hands." She smiled sympathetically at the other woman, knowing Stef was likely to get the third degree as soon as she walked out the door.

Sharon ushered Lena out, then turned to Stef. "What a nice woman. Taking time out of her Saturday morning to check on you."

Stef looked at her mother warily, as Sharon sat down next to her on the couch. "Yes, she's very nice." She waited, knowing what was coming next.

"You never mentioned she was a lesbian." Yup, there it was.

"It wasn't relevant. Was it? You're not going to send her to counseling or anything, are you?" Stef couldn't keep the venom out of her voice.

Sharon's shoulders slumped. "Letting your father convince me to have you talk to Pastor Dan was a mistake. I'm so sorry about all that. I'm not a bigot. If your friend is gay, I have no problem with that."

Stef stayed silent. She appreciated the apology, but she still doubted her mother's sincerity. It was one thing to be fine with someone else's kid being gay - that acceptance didn't always extend to people's own children. Not that she and Tess had been doing anything gay. Nor she and Lena.

Sharon pressed on. "You were awfully quiet while she talked about her date. But you looked like you just sucked on a lemon."

"I've been throwing up for the past 12 hours. I feel like I just sucked on a lemon."

"That's all? You sure." Sharon raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

This was why Stef preferred to be alone when she was sick. There was no escaping her mother when she was confined to the couch. "It's just that her last girlfriend cheated on her, and I don't want to see her get hurt again."

"Of course. What a protective friend you are. Lena's lucky to have you."

Was there an unusual emphasis on the word 'friend'? Stef was too tired to read into it.

"Hey, I'm suddenly feeling well enough to eat. Can you heat up some of that soup Lena brought?" Time to change the subject.
Chapter 4

Lena sat across the table from a beautiful, intelligent woman, and all she could think about was how Stef might be doing. She had looked awfully pale when Lena had stopped by. She knew Sharon was there to take care of her, but she wondered if Stef might need anything else. Maybe to escape Sharon.

"It's hard when you want something from someone, and they just don't feel the same." Lena suddenly snapped back to attention when she heard those words come out of Aliyah's mouth.

"I'm sorry, what?" Lena's mother would be appalled if she witnessed such a poor display of manners.

"No, I'm sorry. Jenna was kind enough to set me up on this date, but all I've done is talk about the woman I left behind in New Orleans." Aliyah smiled ruefully and leaned back in her chair. "I moved here in part to try to start fresh. We were never going to work out, and if I stayed we'd just keep trying, but I knew we didn't want the same things."

"It's fine," Lena assured the other woman. "It's totally okay. In the interest of full disclosure, I've been thinking about another woman this entire time as well. What a pair we are."

Aliyah laughed. "Oh, good. We can give up the pretense of trying to impress each other - which I've clearly failed at miserably - and just dish about our relationship issues. Tell me all about the woman who's on your mind. I'll take my mind off my own problems."

Lena smiled and took a deep breath. Who better to talk to than a total stranger with similar issues? "Are you sure? Mine's pretty pathetic. It involves a married straight woman with a kid."

"Wow. Definitely more drama than my situation. I'm impressed. Let me hear it."

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Stef didn't want to seem nosy - or desperately jealous - so she managed not to ask Lena about her date throughout the next week. She focused on not throwing up anymore and keeping Brandon from picking up any of the swear words her mom had gotten used to using now that she lived alone and apparently had no one to talk to but the sailor version of herself.

But Friday rolled around, and it was movie night, and Stef was trying to figure out the subtlest way to bring it up. Lena didn't mention it at dinner, and Stef found she couldn't concentrate on Die Hard - another of her favorites she was introducing Lena to - due to the thoughts swirling in her head.

What if Lena really liked this woman and started seeing her? Would her girlfriend put a stop to a regular get-together with a friend on a prime date night? Stef realized how sad she would be if she and Lena didn't see each other once a week. It was like she was living a double life. Five days a week she was a full time parent with a stressful job, navigating the land mines of taking care of Brandon and avoiding Mike at the station. Saturday and Sunday she spent time with her parents, tried to catch up on the responsibilities that got away from her during the week, and relaxed as much as she was able.

But Friday nights were special. They were the one time Stef got to be someone other than a mother or a daughter or an estranged wife. She could have fun and be witty and do things she wanted only for herself. And what she wanted was to spend time with Lena, a smart and beautiful woman who -
This was where Stef’s thoughts started to short circuit. Her heart beat faster Friday nights; her palms sweat more. In those fleeting hours, Stef allowed herself to forget all her responsibilities and hangups and fears. But they always ended, and in the harsh light of the next morning, Stef remembered how complicated things would be if every day were like Friday.

The movie wound down, and Stef looked at Lena to see what she thought.

"They sure blew up a lot of stuff," was Lena's take.

Stef laughed. Lena was a good sport. But she feared their next movie would be some French documentary with subtitles, just to make up for all the cursing and shooting.

"Speaking of dying hard, my date was a total bust." Lena dropped that bomb like she was Hans Gruber.

Stef attempted to appear casual. "Oh? That's too bad."

"Yeah, it turns out she was still hung up on another woman." Lena didn't seem too broken up about it.

"Hm." Stef wasn't sure what to say next. "My mom liked you." When in doubt, change the subject.

This made Lena inordinately pleased. She couldn't help the big smile that spread across her face. "I liked her too. If I had stayed a little longer, I was pretty sure I could have gotten her to show me all your awkward teenage pictures."

Stef playfully whacked Lena on the shoulder with a couch cushion. "I'll have you know I was never awkward. I just transitioned smoothly from an adorable child to a beautiful adult with no bad perms, braces, or acne. Nope, none of that for me."

Lena gently pushed back, looking into Stef's eyes as they both laughed. "No bad perm, eh? So if I asked Sharon about it she wouldn't contradict you with photographic evidence? I bet your bangs were sky high in high school."

"I admit nothing. What about you? Big hair, bad teeth - what were your ugly ducking years like?"

Stef couldn't actually imagine Lena as anything but beautiful, but she certainly wasn't going to say that out loud.

"What a coincidence - I was gorgeous from birth until now. Good genes, I guess."

"Hi, Mommy!" Brandon exclaimed as he ran up the walkway to throw his arms around Stef. Mike hung back a bit, holding Brandon's backpack.

"Hi, sweetie! I missed you! How was your weekend?" Stef kissed the top of her son's head.

"Good. We had pasketti for dinner last night. I ate all mine," Brandon reported.

Stef looked up at Mike and raised an eyebrow. "Spaghetti, eh? You cooking now?"

Mike shrugged and walked towards the pair. "The kid can't eat McDonald's all the time. I figured it was time to expand the old repertoire. Mom gave me her recipe and I tried it out. It wasn't half bad, was it B?"
"It was yummy. The brownies were too. Mommy, do you have brownies? I want brownies for dessert tonight."

"Wow, you went all out."

"The brownies were from a mix. Don't give me too much credit. I did bring the leftovers, though, so you can answer yes." Mike smiled. What Stef would have found charming once upon a time only made her cringe internally now. She knew he was on his best behavior with both her and Brandon, and it felt artificial.

"Good news, kiddo, we have brownies."

"Can Daddy stay and eat them with us? He hasn't had dinner yet. Neither have I. What are we having?" Good grief, the kid was obsessed with food. Stef wondered if she should start a grub fund for high school to accompany the college fund she was occasionally able to contribute to.

Stef and Mike exchanged an awkward look. She could tell he wanted to stay, but of course he demurred.

"I don't know, B. I should probably get home soon. Besides, your mom may not have enough for me." Mike ruffled Brandon's hair.

Stef tried not to read into that last sentence. Too many ways to be offended by it. She grit her teeth and smiled at her son, who was looking up at her expectantly. "Of course there's enough food. We're having chicken casserole. Daddy can stay if he wants to."

Unsurprisingly, Mike's hesitance turned to enthusiasm as he followed Brandon inside. "We love your mom's chicken casserole, right buddy?"

Dinner was a stilted affair, with Stef mostly directing her comments and questions to Brandon while deflecting Mike's attempts to reminisce about better days. She found that, although Mike's drinking in the year before their separation was the nominal impetus for their time apart, she didn't look back so fondly on the "good times" that preceded the bad.

Going with the flow was the best description Stef could think of for the path her relationship had taken up to the point she asked Mike to leave. Mike was a nice guy who liked her, so she said yes when he asked her out. They got along fine, so when he proposed she figured it was the right thing to do. If she were totally honest with herself, she'd have to admit she appreciated that having a husband silenced the voice in her head that said people might think a single, female cop must be a lesbian.

The year or so they were married before Stef got pregnant, she mostly kept up with him at parties or went out with her own friends when their schedules didn't align. It didn't bother her her too much when they were apart, even when he forgot to call when he was running late or didn't handle the things he said he would. They didn't fight like her parents had, so she didn't have anything to complain about.

Having a baby kept her right on the 'normal' path she desired, but it woke her up a bit to some of the dissatisfying elements of her relationship with Mike. Despite them having the same job, he used his odd hours as an excuse not to do as much as she thought he should as a parent. Once she stopped going out with him to bars and parties, he stayed later and drank more. Not only was her own social life decimated, but her home life was also deteriorating.

It took Mike driving drunk with Brandon for Stef to finally take control of her life. She could put up
with an awful lot, but she couldn't risk her child. Looking back now, she recognized that she wasn't totally satisfied in her marriage, even before the acute issues. But would she have ever done something so drastic as insisting on a separation without that impetus? Was that a sign that things were worth salvaging now that Mike was on a better path or that she should have separated from him sooner?

Trying to end that train of thought, as well as an awkward dinner, Stef announced, "Bath time, young man. If you're quick, we can read three stories before bedtime." She stood up from the table, hoping Mike got the message that the meal - and his visit - was over.

"Is Daddy staying? Can he take me to school in the morning? I want to show him the fire truck picture I drew. Ms. Stein says it's very pressive." Brandon looked up at Stef hopefully.

This time, Mike didn't demur. "Yeah, Stef, can I stay?" His smile was hard to read - was he joking? Stef decided the best course was to assume he was. "Ha, ha. Have a good night, Mike. See you later. Sorry, B, but Daddy's got to go back to his apartment."

To his credit, Brandon didn't throw a tantrum, but his eyes filled with tears, and his lower lip stuck out. Stef's shoulders sagged. Poor kid - it wasn't his fault he was caught up in being shuttled back and forth between two people who couldn't figure out what they wanted. Mike turned on the puppy dog eyes, as he gave Brandon a hug. Stef shook her head. The thought of sleeping with Mike - even just sleeping - made her stomach feel funny, and not in the good way. Still, seeing her son so sad was devastating.

Steeling her resolve, she put her hand on Brandon's head. "Buddy, Daddy can see your drawing when he picks you up on Friday. I know it's hard to say goodbye to him. You can call him tomorrow night and he can read you a story."

Mike stood up and stepped back, while Brandon transferred his hug to Stef's leg. "Mom's right, Brandon. I'll call you at bedtime tomorrow. Sleep tight."

He turned to go, then turned back around. "Hey, Stef - the Alvarezes are having their usual Christmas party again this year. It's on a Friday night, so I was planning on taking Brandon. He hasn't seen Julio in awhile, and I know they'd love a chance to play together."

"Yeah, sure, of course." Pedro Alvarez had transferred out of their unit a few months ago and she hadn't stayed in touch with him, but he and his wife always threw a fun holiday party, and their six-year-old son was adorable. It was good Mike was still friends with him.

"You think you might want to come?" Mike looked so hopeful. "Things are still so up in the air with Brandon - it would be good to do something familiar that we used to do together. We had so much fun last year."

It was a low blow, but that didn't mean Mike was wrong. Especially around this first holiday season apart, anything they could do to help Brandon was worth it. Hadn't Lena made this very point when they talked at Thanksgiving?

"Yeah, sure. I'll go with you guys. I hate to miss out on Maria's churros." Stef hoped Mike got the message that it wasn't some sort of date.

His smile was wide, though, and Stef cringed internally. Hopefully she'd manage to have fun while navigating the inevitable questions from everyone involved. At least she'd be sending Brandon the message that his parents could still be friends and that he didn't have to pay the price for their issues.
"Awesome. See you Friday. Good night, B."

"Bye, Daddy!"

Stef closed the door behind Mike and sighed. She hoped this wasn't going to be a mistake.

Okay, so it wasn't exactly a mistake. Stef had to admit seeing old friends was fun, and Brandon was having a blast playing with the other kids. She had managed to circulate in a different direction from Mike, but she still had to field question after question about their relationship.

"I heard you and Mike split - it's good to see you back together," another concerned colleague commented.

Stef trotted out her pat response for what felt like the tenth time. "We're still separated. We just want to keep things as normal for Brandon as possible."

As she listened to the inevitable reply about how great that was, Stef's eyes drifted across the room. There was Mike, soda in his hand, laughing with his buddies. He looked up at her, and she couldn't take the affection in them. Her feelings for him were mostly positive these days, but they didn't seem to extend beyond friendship and appreciation for him as Brandon's other parent.

So why didn't she tell him the marriage was over - put him out of his misery and at least let him start over? Divorce was so final, and if Stef were being honest with herself, it would mean she had to exit the somewhat safe limbo of not deciding and face the fact that if she were truly single she would have some big decisions to make - decisions about the beautiful woman she usually spent her Fridays with. She felt like she was cheating on Lena when she told her she was going to this party with Mike. Shouldn't she have felt the other way around about her usual time spent with someone who wasn't her spouse?

But it wasn't like Lena had indicated she had interest in Stef beyond friendship. Lena knew Stef was married and had never crossed any lines. A lesbian and a straight woman could just be friends, right? Even if said straight woman wasn't so sure that label applied to her anymore.

Lena had suggested dinner with Jenna, Kelly and Garrett on Friday as a way to take her mind off of Stef, but she couldn't help the visions that popped into her head - visions of the two of them and Brandon sharing a life that looked a lot like what the other couple had. She tried not to mention Stef too much during dinner, but once Garrett went to bed the conversation inevitably turned to her predicament.

"You know how it is when lesbians get crushes on straight girls - you skate closer and closer to the line until it gets weird for the straight girl and she backs off," Kelly commented.

"Yeah, but if she doesn't back off, then you cross the line and then you're all caught up in that first-same-sex-experience nonsense," Jenna added.

Kelly leaned over to refill her wine glass. "Which can be fun, but is more often just messy."

Lena opened her mouth to try to interject something more hopeful, but Jenna jumped in to keep the dire predictions going. "It's such a pain to have to figure out if she's just curious and you're going to
get left in the dust as soon as the next cute guy comes along, or if she's really okay with it."

"And even if she is really a lesbian or bi or whatever, that doesn't mean it's smooth sailing. There are all of the coming out issues - is she going to want you to keep things a secret and all that?" Kelly piled on.

Lena finally managed to get in a comment, only because both of the other women took a sip of wine at the same time. "Well, Gretchen was a lesbian, and that still ended in disaster, so pseudo-straight women don't have a monopoly on issues. I know if we got together, Stef would never cheat on me like Gretchen did."

Kelly looked straight into Lena's eyes. "Wouldn't that be exactly what she was doing to her husband if she got together with you?"

Lena had no answer. She wanted to make excuses about how Stef and Mike were separated, and how it was practically the same thing as being divorced, but she knew it wasn't true. If Gretchen's infidelity was so devastating to her, she had to think of Mike and the position she would be putting him in if she pursued Stef in earnest. Who had she become that she would even consider such a thing? Maybe she should stop spending so much time with a married woman.

But then her self-serving justifications kicked in. It wasn't like Stef had given her any indication that she was interested in her. It was strictly platonic. Lena could handle her feelings for Stef appropriately - it didn't mean they had to stop spending time together.

Both women felt more awkward than they ever had when the Friday before Christmas rolled around a week later. Each had done some soul searching in the two weeks they had been apart, and those thoughts weighed heavily on their minds.

Stef wasn't much of a gift giver, and she had agonized over what to give Lena. Something material seemed too fraught with connotations. Perhaps that was because the material things she considered were things like jewelry. Clearly, she hadn't had enough female friends if she couldn't come up with a better innocuous present.

In the end she settled on something she still thought was lame, but she hoped Lena would appreciate it.

"Good for one sushi dinner with no complaining from Stef," Lena read aloud from the card as they sat together on her couch.

"I know we go to dinner every Friday, but if I'm going to consistently monopolize one of your prime going-out-to-dinner nights, you should at least get to eat what you like sometimes." Stef stumbled through her explanation of her gift. "I mean, I want you to get to do something you enjoy, and I shouldn't hold you back from it."

Lena put her hand on Stef's. "I love it. I can't wait to go with you. This time you don't have to feel obligated to try anything you know you won't like."

Stef smiled. "And you should feel free to order whatever raw squid parts you want, and I won't even make a face."

Lena laughed and pulled out an envelope. "Perhaps after exerting such self-control you'll be ready to use my gift to you." Lena had bought Stef's present before her dinner with Jenna and Kelly, and now
she was second-guessing it. She tried to play it off with a joke.

Stef opened the envelope. "Gift certificate for a 60-minute massage at Luna Spa. You think dinner with you will make me tense?"

"I hope not. But with being a cop and a parent and everything, I thought you deserved a chance to relax, even just for an hour." Lena tried really hard not to picture Stef's naked body partially covered by a sheet, prone on a massage table, having oil rubbed into her tired muscles. Yeah, this gift was probably a bad idea.

"You're very kind. Thank you so much." Stef found herself moved by Lena's sentiments. It wasn't like she wanted a bunch of romance, but Mike had never given her anything like this. She was lucky if he remembered flowers on their anniversary. Not that Lena intended anything romantic with her gift.

Clearing her throat, she tried to cover her emotion by changing the subject. "You know, I've never had a massage."

"I hope you like it more than you liked sushi," was Lena's wry reply.

Stef couldn't help laughing, and it broke the tension that had been present all evening. She had to take a moment to get herself back together, and her hysteria had Lena laughing too.

"Maybe you should come with me - show me the ropes like you did with the raw fish." And there was the tension again. Stef looked at Lena, realizing the implications of her statement too late. She might not have had a massage before, but she was pretty sure one didn't wear clothing while partaking.

Lena swallowed hard, the visions she had just dispelled returning. "Uh, yeah, maybe we can have an appointment at the same time or something."

"Or not. Whatever. If we happen to be free. No big deal." That wasn't awkward at all.

"Right. Well, thanks again for the gift." Lena stood and smoothed her skirt.

"Of course. You too." They were at Lena's house, but Stef took that as her cue the evening was over. She hated that she had ruined a lovely moment, but she didn't know how to make things normal again.

"Merry early Christmas." Lena played with her hair, not sure what to do with her hands.

"Same to you. Have fun with your parents." Stef picked up her purse.

"Right. You too. I hope it's better than Thanksgiving."

"I'll have Brandon, so it definitely will be."

"I guess I won't see you again until after New Year's." Three weeks apart sounded interminable.

"Oh, yeah. I had forgotten. You want to get that sushi when you get back?"

"Sounds good."

"Okay, happy holidays and all that." Stef finally moved toward the door, ready to escape whatever twilight zone she had created.
Lena leaned in at that moment, apparently going for a goodbye hug. Her arms went around Stef, who froze momentarily. Lena dropped her arms, afraid she had made Stef even more uncomfortable. Of course, Stef chose that moment to reciprocate the hug. Lena laughed, and Stef let go and stepped back.

"What's with us tonight?" Lena asked, smiling.

Stef smiled back, glad the odd mood had dissipated again. "I don't know. End of the year anxiety?"

"Could be. Things will be back to normal after the holidays are over, right?" Lena wasn't really sure what normal was anymore - this more-than-a-crush on a straight woman situation wasn't sustainable.

"Normal. Right." Stef knew she needed a new definition. The old one included Mike as her husband, and she was more certain every day that wouldn't be part of the definition of normal once she finally resolved their separation. "Good night, Lena."

"Good night, Stef." Lena opened the door and Stef walked through.
Stef had thought of Lena constantly in their three weeks apart. She enjoyed her holidays - she tolerated her dad, avoided her mother's questions, and reveled in her son's joy - but in the back of her mind was the thought that she'd be having more fun if Lena were with her.

Now that she was knocking on Lena's door, finally able to see her in person, she was seized by the terror that this evening would go as awkwardly as the last time they had been together. What if they never got back to the level of comfort they'd had up until their gift exchange? She was determined not to say anything weird this time.

When Lena opened the door there was an initial moment of silence as they both stared at each other that could have turned uncomfortable, but Lena pulled herself together and greeted Stef with an over-enthusiastic hello.

Lena had only allowed herself two phone calls to Stef - one on Christmas and one New Year's Eve. She called a couple of other friends the same days in a desperate attempt to prove to herself her relationship with Stef was no different than her other platonic friendships. But seeing Stef after so much time apart left her breathless.

Dinner was somewhat subdued. Both women shared their holiday stories, but it felt a bit like a "what I did for summer vacation" rundown. As promised, Stef didn't comment on the sushi and managed to find a noodle dish she could tolerate, but Lena found she missed the wisecracks. Neither suggested ice cream as a follow-up, and Lena wondered if Stef just wanted to get the evening over with.

Just as Lena resigned herself to a car ride back to her place in silence, Stef spoke up. "Look at that beautiful sunset." She pointed out the passenger window, where the sun was setting over the water. "We should stop - go for a walk on the beach, enjoy it. How often do we take the time to appreciate things like this?"

Lena pulled over into the nearby parking lot and turned the car off. "Is this a New Year's resolution? Stop and smell the roses more?"

Stef gave a wry smile. "Something like that."

They set off down the beach, but after a few steps Lena stopped short. "I just need to take off my shoes. I feel like you did after brunch that time."

Stef laughed. She felt Lena's hand in hers, and she looked down to see the other woman balancing as she removed her wedges. Lena stood up, her eyes meeting Stef's. The look they shared was intense, but in keeping with the evening, neither commented.

They continued walking, both acutely aware that their hands were still connected, but neither wanting to be the one to let go. Stef glanced around and noticed a few other people enjoying the ever-darkening evening. Would they think she and Lena were a couple? Would that be so bad? Maybe she could handle any stares or negative comments that came her way, but what would it mean for Brandon? Would he suffer if she were to take this leap?

While Lena couldn't deny that her heart sped up like a teenager and the warmth of Stef's hand pressed against hers, there was something so natural about it. The thought of their closeness over the past few months evolving into something more felt right, all other complications aside. Lena's relationship with Gretchen had been hot and heavy from the beginning. They had met and
immediately started a relationship, but perhaps they had never been friends. There wasn't a foundation of trust and shared values.

But if she crossed the line with Stef now, she couldn't claim anything about trust and values. She couldn't be the person to put the final nail in the coffin of a marriage, no matter how broken it already was. And she deserved better than to be waiting in the shadows, hoping to be allowed out into the light.

So why didn't she drop Stef's hand? Why didn't she start canceling more Friday nights with Stef in favor of more dates with new people? Lena didn't want to consider the word 'love' as an explanation, but she couldn't honestly deny it was rattling around in her mind. This was like a car wreck happening in slow motion - Lena knew it was going to hurt when the crash inevitably happened, but she couldn't bring herself to hit the brakes or turn the wheel.

"Should we turn around?" Stef's question brought Lena back to reality.

"Sure - it's going to be completely dark if we don't head back soon."

They didn't speak further on the walk back, but their hands remained joined. When they got near the parking lot, Lena stopped to put her shoes back on. Stef held onto her as she slipped them on, and when she stood back up she couldn't help but take Stef's other hand. They stood close together, and Lena slipped her arms around Stef, unable to bear looking into the other woman's eyes for too long. What she saw reflected there mirrored her own feelings, and Lena knew things couldn't stay unspoken much longer. They were creeping towards that line Jenna and Kelly talked about, and Lena was torn between excitement that they might actually cross it and sadness that it might destroy everything they had built.

But the tension wasn't sustainable. They weren't just friends, and pretending they were would only torture both of them, leaving them in an unfulfilling limbo. Also, pretending a hug of this length happened between people whose feelings were strictly platonic was pretty ridiculous. Really, how long was Stef going to let this go on for?

Stef would have held on forever in this perfect moment, embracing the woman she couldn't deny she had fallen for and not yet having to deal with the consequences of the evening. She knew now that Lena shared her feelings - there was no sense in pretending there were other reasons they spent so much time together, not after a 30-minute sunset stroll on the beach while holding hands. But if they acknowledged those feelings out loud, Stef would have to deal with the ripple effects, and those would be far-reaching and not all pleasant. She wasn't sure she was ready, but she knew if she could hold Lena in her arms like this again, it would all be worth it.

It was Lena who finally pulled away, smiling gently at Stef and unlocking the car. Stef smiled back and opened the passenger door.

"So what movie are we watching tonight?" she asked.

Lena tried not to look disappointed as she realized Stef wasn't going to talk about what had transpired that evening. If she wanted to pretend nothing had changed for a little while longer, Lena would allow her that time. But eventually they were going to have to get it out in the open.

"A League of Their Own," she replied.

"Awesome - a sports movie and a chick flick all in one."

"Exactly."
In the tiny piece of her brain that was still capable of rational thought, Lena was baffled at how she had gone from determination not to cross any lines with Stef to making out in the car with her like a teenager, all arms and hands and tongues. She was going to take the high ground, to insist things truly be over with Mike before anything happened between them. She had been where Mike now was, and it wasn't fair. She tried to mitigate her self-condemnation with the caveat of Stef and Mike's separation, but she knew Mike still held out hope they would reconcile.

But she couldn't yet bring herself to pull away, to stop what was literally steaming up the windows, just yet. The taste of Stef on her lips and the little sounds she was making as they kissed and kissed and kissed short-circuited her brain. It had all started so simply. Lena had picked Stef up the Friday after their walk on the beach to go to an outdoor concert that doubled as a fundraiser for a local charity Lena was on the board of. There hadn't been much opportunity for talking, but they had managed to act relatively normal. An outsider probably wouldn't have picked up on the terribly unresolved sexual tension between them as they made small talk between the opening act and the main event.

Lena wanted to ask what it was that was happening between them, what it meant to Stef. But that wasn't the place, and she was still too afraid of the answer. And as long as they hadn't said anything out loud, hadn't done anything overt, perhaps there was no need. When Stef pulled up to her apartment at the end of the evening, she made the mistake of leaning over to hug the other woman good night before she got out of the car. She couldn't help but place a light kiss on Stef's cheek, which Stef seemed to think warranted one in return. There they were, so close, staring into each others' eyes, and they both leaned in for one more kiss, this time a peck on the lips. If it had stopped there, they could have stalled just a little longer in their denial, could have pretended it was just something friends do, but that one little kiss wasn't nearly enough.

The charged moment went on, until they dove back in, this time much less chastely. It was as if a dam had broken, and all those feelings, all those desires burst through with no outlet but each others' lips. And, oh, those lips. Lena had kissed her share of women, but nothing in her life compared to this one. Stef was holding nothing back, kissing Lena as though this might be her last. Lena realized that was what fueled her matched response. If this was it, if it would all be over by the light of day, she was going to enjoy every moment. She couldn't yet bring herself to stop. She gave herself back over to the light-headedness and told her brain to shut up for just a little longer.

Stef, for her part, felt completely aware of everything that was happening. Nothing she had done up until that point compared, and she cataloged all of it so she would remember it later in intense detail. She started with Lena's lips. They were incredibly soft, as she knew they would be. But it wasn't so much her lips that were so unique - it was the skin around them. It felt completely different to kiss a woman than a man. Stef felt like it shouldn't, and yet the absence of stubble was like a revelation. She had always endured that with Mike and the men who preceded him, had accepted it as part of the deal, but now she knew there was an alternative. A glorious alternative that inspired her imagination. If the brief places where their skin touched felt so incredible, what about the rest of Lena's face?

She managed to tear her lips away from Lena's in order to rub her cheek against the other woman's. Yes, it was as wonderful as she had imagined. Rather than stinging, it was soothing. It also put her lips in close proximity to Lena's earlobe, so she thought she'd see what kissing there felt like.

Heaven, she decided, and by the sounds it elicited from Lena, she agreed.

Stef had kept her hands relatively still while she focused on the sensations of just kissing Lena, but after she had committed that to memory, she added another element. She buried her hands in Lena's abundant hair, another stark difference between the woman in her arms and any man she'd been
with. She scratched Lena's scalp, which seemed as pleasurable to Lena as the ear kissing had been - good to know. She wondered what would happen if she combined the two.

The answer was the sexiest moan she'd ever heard in her entire life. She moved her lips to Lena's neck and her hands to Lena's lower back. Lena responded by pulling Stef even closer. She mirrored Stef's actions, and all of a sudden Stef understood the earlier moan. Her neck had never been a terribly responsive site - until now. There was a delicateness to the way Lena kissed her that made all the difference. It was just on the right side of ticklish, sending shivers through her whole body.

Abruptly, all those wonderful sensations ceased. Lena pushed Stef away, literally holding her at arms' length.

Stef sat staring, mouth unattractively agape. She couldn't form a sentence.

Lena spoke. "What does this mean?" There had to be a better way to ease into this conversation, but after dancing around it for so long she could only be direct. Her heart was still beating wildly from their previous activities, and her fear of what Stef would say next kept it racing.

Stef blinked rapidly and then finally managed a barely-more-than-incoherent, "What?" Why did Lena have to ruin such a perfect moment with talking? Why couldn't they just keep kissing and never stop, never have to deal with the consequences?

Lena sighed. "This." She gestured between them. "Whatever is going on between you and me. We can't pretend this is something people who are just friends do. And I've been the straight woman's experiment too many times to let this go any further without making sure we're on the same page."

"You're not an experiment." Stef was emphatic, her eyes wide.

"Okay, then what am I? What are we?"

"I -" Stef wasn't ready for this. She could kiss Lena, but she couldn't talk about what kissing Lena meant. "I don't know," she answered, her shoulders slumping. Lena deserved more than that, but Stef still wasn't ready to shine a light on the things she had pushed out of the way for so long.

Lena wanted to push, to cajole Stef into processing her feelings, but more so she wanted Stef to tell her things were simple - that their feelings for each other were mutual and the natural next step was for them to become a couple. That's what would happen with a lesbian, and Lena could only blame herself for getting in this deep with a straight woman.

"Well, let me know when you figure it out. But don't expect me to wait around while you decide," was all she said before she got out of the car and walked to the entrance to her building. If this were a movie, Stef would chase her down and tell her she couldn't bear to lose her, but Lena entered without incident, and she refused to look back and see if Stef was even still there.

Stef was indeed still there, too stunned at the night's turn of events to drive away. But she made no move to go after Lena.

"Stef! What are you doing here? It's almost midnight!" Sharon opened the door to see her only child on the doorstep, looking out of breath.

"I kissed Lena," was what came out of Stef's mouth.

"Of course you did, honey. Come inside and tell me all about it."
Stef walked in but didn't sit down. She paced agitatedly. "What do you mean 'of course' I did? How could you know? You met the woman once."

"Mothers know. You've been so much happier lately, and it wasn't hard to figure out why." Sharon shrugged.

"You seem to be taking this well. Forgive me if I'm surprised." Stef stopped moving and flopped into a nearby armchair.

"I told you I regretted letting your father force you to talk to Pastor Dan. I wasn't supportive then like I should have been. In the intervening years, I came to terms with who I thought you were. But then you married Mike and I thought that was the end of that. If you were happy, that was all that mattered." Sharon sat on the couch and patted Stef's knee.

"Really? You're saying you knew all this time that I -" Here, Stef stumbled.

"That you're a lesbian? Or do you think you're bisexual? I don't want to assume." Sharon looked completely calm as words Stef never expected came out of her mouth.

"Why did I come here? I don't want to have this conversation." Stef leaned forward to stand up.

Sharon pinned her with a look. "Yes, you do. Deep down, I think you knew I'd be okay with this, or you wouldn't have driven an hour to tell me you kissed this woman."

"Fine. But it's weirding me out you're so happy about this." Stef slumped back.

"Would you rather I judge?"

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get that from Dad."

"You're going to tell him you kissed Lena?" Sharon raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think she'll let me kiss her again until I do." Stef sighed.

"I take it you want to kiss her again."

Stef rubbed her hands over her face. "Of course I do. She's amazing and wonderful and probably hates my guts right now."

Sharon crossed her arms. "Why would she hate you? You didn't run away or something, did you?"

"No! If anything, she ran away from me." Stef couldn't bear to think about the pained look on Lena's face as she exited the car.

"What did you say?" Sharon asked.

"Nothing. And that's the problem. She asked what the kiss - kisses, if I'm going to be honest - meant, and I told her I didn't know."

"Poor Lena. This must be hard for her."

Stef was surprised. "Hard for Lena? What about me?"

"Of course this is hard for you, too. But imagine what it's like for Lena. She's a lesbian who has the misfortune to fall for a married, ostensibly straight woman."
"Hey - misfortune?"

Sharon held up her hands. "Let me finish. If she fell for another lesbian, they'd just start dating like normal people, and there wouldn't be this drama. The fact that she has hung in there with you while you figure things out says a lot about how she feels about you."

"It does? You don't think I've blown this completely?" Stef looked at her mother hopefully.

Sharon smiled and squeezed Stef's leg. "No, honey. I think if you show her you're serious about her she'll give you a chance. If she makes you happy, don't let her get away. But don't ask her to be kept a secret. Everyone deserves better than to be with someone who acts ashamed of them."

"I would never be ashamed of Lena!" Stef was still wrapping her head around what to do next, but in no circumstance could she see herself asking Lena to hide their relationship. Assuming there was a relationship to be had.

"I know. But this is going to be rough on you at times, and I don't want you to blame Lena for that."

Stef sighed, knowing there would be more people than just her dad who wouldn't understand. Would Mike be one? She wasn't looking forward to finding out.

Sharon continued, "After Thanksgiving, I was afraid you might decide to sacrifice your own fulfillment in a misguided attempt to 'do the right thing' for Brandon. If Lena is your person to find happily ever after with, I'm glad."

"Me too. Thank you for being supportive." Stef moved over to the couch and put her head on her mom's shoulder. Sharon wrapped an arm around her.

"Of course, honey. You'll do the same for Brandon when he comes home and tells you he wants to drop out of college and become a rock star. You'll tell him you love him and want him to be happy."

"No, Stef. I don't accept this. You're just confused because of whatever's going on with Mike. If you need to divorce him, fine. But that doesn't make you a -" Frank stopped his rant, unable to say the word out loud.

"Lesbian, Dad. I'm a lesbian." Stef stood calmly in her father's kitchen.

Frank remained agitated. "No daughter of mine is one of those. I'll call Pastor Dan. He'll know what to do. He talked sense into you when you were in high school, and it seemed to work. He can do it again."

Stef's hands balled into fists. "Absolutely not. What he said to me then messed me up for a good long while. I've finally made peace with who I am, and I'm not going to let some bigot come tell me I'm bound for hell."

"But you are if you go down this path! I can't allow this!"

"It's not yours to allow. I'm a grown woman, and I'm happy." Stef took a deep breath and let it out. She refused to get emotional. "If you don't want to see that, it's your choice. Call me when you're ready to meet Lena. Until then, I love you, but I'm not going to let you judge me anymore."

"Well then you won't be seeing me for a very long time. I just - can't." Frank looked defeated now, rather than angry. Stef hoped it meant his love for her would eventually outweigh his faith in a condemning God. But she wasn't putting her life on hold while she waited.
"All right, then. The ball's in your court." Stef gathered her things and walked out the door, hoping it wouldn't be the last time.

"A lesbian, huh?" Mike finally managed to speak after Stef's declaration.

"Yes, a lesbian." Now that she had started saying it, it seemed Stef couldn't stop.

"So you're saying it's not my fault we broke up." Mike smiled, and Stef exhaled the breath she had been holding.

"Yes, Mike, you're totally off the hook. You didn't turn me gay, and this was going to break us up eventually."

"But meeting someone sped that up. Who is it? How long have you been seeing her?" Mike's tone was a little less playful as he asked the inevitable questions.

"I want to be clear that my asking for a separation wasn't even really about this. I'm not saying that to make it sound like it was all your fault - I just don't want you to think I've been carrying on an affair behind your back."

"Okay. But you still didn't answer my questions."

"Her name is Lena Adams - she's an assistant vice principal at Brandon's school. I think you've met her."

"She was the one with Brandon when I picked him up when he was sick, right? Wow, Stef. If you're going to leave me for a woman, I can't say I blame you for it being her."

"Mike!" Stef swatted him on the arm. "First, I didn't leave you for a woman. Second, don't talk about my -" She didn't know how to finish that sentence. She couldn't call Lena her girlfriend. She hadn't even spoken to the woman since the night of their kiss four days prior.

"Look, I kind of already screwed things up with her, so let's not congratulate me just yet."

"I'm not sure what to say next, Stef. I can't pretend I'm happy things are really over between us, but I appreciate you being honest with me. I'll go ahead and I wish you the best with Lena, and I hope you can work things out. It sounds like even if they don't, you and I don't have a chance of reconciling anyway."

"We don't. I'm sorry for hurting you, and I'll always be glad I married you because it gave us Brandon. I hope we'll still be able to parent him as a team - I couldn't stand the thought of us not being friends, even just for his sake." Stef twisted her napkin in her lap.

Mike's smile was sad, but he agreed, "Of course we'll still be friends. Speaking of B, have you told him anything?"

"No. He knows Lena from school, but he's never seen her outside of there. I don't want to say anything until I know what's happening with her - I don't want to confuse him any more than I have to."

"He'll be okay. Kids are pretty open-minded."

"I hope so." Stef was overwhelmed by the conversations she'd already had in the past few days - the thought of a similar one with a five-year-old was more than she could contemplate.
"You had me at lesbian."

Stef had become so terrified Lena wouldn't give her a second chance she almost missed Lena's statement. Stef gently reached out to take Lena's hands, moving carefully so as not to scare her off or risk her changing her mind, pulling them together. The kiss was gentle and tentative, a product of their nervousness and the public venue.

When they broke apart, Stef rested her forehead against Lena's. "I missed you so much. I'm so relieved I didn't screw everything up Friday night."

Lena smiled and squeezed Stef's hands. She pulled back a bit to look into Stef's eyes. "I don't mean to give you a free pass on all future disagreements, but the fact that I let myself get in this deep already was a strong indication I wouldn't have let you go this easily. But I needed you to be sure of what you wanted."

"I wanted to call you so badly, but I knew my words would be empty without actions. I told the people who are most important to me, and I'll tell anyone else you want."

Stef looked so earnest Lena felt compelled to give her a hug. Or it could have been that she now knew she could touch the other woman without worrying it would be misconstrued. Into Stef's ear she told her, "You told me, and that's what matters right now. I'm in love with you, too, by the way."

Stef tightened her embrace of Lena, then let go. "Nothing like a school parking lot for sweeping declarations of love, huh?" She looked around them, but no one seemed to be paying attention.

"I feel like we're freshmen sneaking out of class to make out."

"Oh, we're going to make out, are we? Hey, none of my co-workers is likely to be walking by," Stef laughed as she leaned towards Lena.

Lena smiled and put a hand on Stef's chest, playfully holding her back. "Down, girl. How about we postpone this until there are no impressionable children around?"

"Friday? Just like normal, but this time with kissing?" Stef felt like waiting two more days to be alone with Lena was far too long, but she didn't want the possibility of Brandon waking up making her anxious. It would feel too much like sneaking around if Lena came over after he went to bed.

"Date night it is." Lena laughed.

"It really has been date night all along, hasn't it? It always felt like that to me," Stef admitted.

"Me too."

"I don't want to leave you just as this is all happening, but I have to pick up Brandon." Stef inclined her head towards the school building.

"I understand. I should get back to work. But if I could freeze time, I would."

"You're very sweet. And very forgiving - thank you for not giving up on me. I promise I'll do everything I can to make you glad you did."
"Hey, Lena. It's Stef." Stef felt like a high schooler calling her first girlfriend. She and Lena hadn't talked on the phone much, but she couldn't seem to go two days without speaking now that they were together.

"Hey. Is Brandon asleep?"

"Yeah, after three trips to the bathroom and two glasses of water. The kid's quite the staller."

Lena laughed. "How was your day?" It seemed like the thing to ask, but she and Stef had never been much for the daily rundown when they got together on Fridays.

"Good. No major drama. How about you?"

"Same." She paused. "You didn't call so we could chat about our day, did you?"

Stef laughed. "No. Is it pathetic if I say I just wanted to hear your voice and remind myself that you feel the same way about me as I do about you?"

"Not at all. I was debating making up some sort of excuse related to dinner just to call you."

"You don't have to make up excuses anymore – you can call any time you want."

"I used to, you know? I tied myself in knots trying to justify that wanting to call you was a totally platonic thing to do."

"But it wasn't, was it?" Stef's voice dropped just a bit, and though Lena knew she was doing it on purpose, it still affected her.

Lena's voice was breathy as she responded. "No. I always missed you when we had to skip a week of getting together."

Stef agreed. "Thanksgiving was hard. I was so miserable, and I just wished I could be wherever you were."

"Christmas was worse – things got so awkward between us, and I didn't know what to do."

"What were you thinking then?" It was like solving a mystery to finally be able to ask Lena what the past few months had been like for her. "I know I was finally coming to terms with the fact that I needed to end my marriage and that if I did I couldn't pretend that being with you wasn't possible. But I was scared I was misinterpreting things and that you really did just see me as a friend."

"I was really struggling with the knowledge that you were still married. Knowing how hard Gretchen's cheating on me was, I was feeling guilty about my feelings for you and the idea that we were moving towards something without your situation being resolved."

"So you knew I had the hots for you?" Stef preferred the flirty banter to heavy conversation about cheating and guilt, so she steered things back in that direction.

"I had an inkling. It made me feel less guilty to pretend you couldn't possibly feel that way about me, but really – what straight woman spends that much time in the dark with a lesbian?"

Stef laughed. "It's no wonder my mom figured things out."

Lena was surprised. "She did? She only met me once, and I thought I was pretty neutral in that conversation. Good grief - we talked about my blind date."
"Yeah, but she saw my face when you mentioned it. She claims she's known all along, but I think she's just trying to make up for high school."

Lena paused. She really wanted to tease Stef about her jealousy of Aliyah, but she sensed that whatever happened in high school was really important. There wasn't much of a choice about which direction to take the conversation.

"What happened in high school that she has to make up for?"

Stef sighed. So much for keeping things light. She debated asking Lena to take a rain check on this story, but she figured it wouldn't hurt for Lena to know Stef's attraction to women predated her. Not to make her jealous, but to help her be confident it wasn't an experiment.

"I had this friend, Tess."

"Tess, hm? Was she cute?"

Okay, maybe this could be both light and serious. "Not as cute as you. But we were best friends, and we spent a lot of time together. At the time, I didn't identify my feelings for her as romantic. I just loved being with her, and sometimes we snuggled on the couch when we watched movies."

"Sounds familiar."

"Ha - I suppose it does. Well, one day my dad came in when we were together and interpreted things in the worst way possible. He made her leave and sent me to Pastor Dan, the creepiest homophobe I've ever met, to be shamed and judged."

"I'm so sorry. That's terrible. I can't imagine going through that - and at such an age. I can see why your relationship with him isn't so great."

"Well, it's pretty much done now. I told him if I had to choose between you and him I'd choose you and that when he's ready to meet you he can call me."

Lena was stunned. She hadn't meant for Stef to take such a drastic stand. Thoughts of Jenna and Kelly's negativity about relationships with newbie lesbians surfaced. What would the long-term repercussions of their relationship mean for Stef, and would she resent Lena for setting them in motion? What if she had issues with Mike, or at work, or with Brandon? This wasn't a casual thing they could test out and back away from if it didn't go well. Stef was a soon-to-be-divorced mother who was coming out of the closet. All three were biggies by themselves.

"I feel like a broken record, but I'm so sorry. I don't want you to give up your family for me."

"Don't be. I've spent years resenting my father while at the same time wishing he was proud of me. It's not healthy, and I'm through with it. I deserve better, and you deserve better. I'm not going to lie to him or to you. I wish he were different, and maybe someday he will be, but I'm not putting aside my own happiness just so he doesn't have to be uncomfortable."

"Wow. Okay. I hope he comes around."

"Me too. But I'm not holding my breath."

Lena tried to keep perspective - Stef had only come out a few days ago, and things were bound to settle down once the initial drama was over.

"What about Mike? How did he take things?"
"Better than expected. He congratulated me on such a catch, if you can believe it."

"I knew I liked that guy."

"Ha ha. The last thing I need is you guys ganging up on me. But I do think he's going to be cool about it."

"That's a relief. You hear about cases where one parent tries to get full custody because the other is gay, and I can't even imagine that happening to you."

"Me neither! Way to scare someone! That never even crossed my mind."

"Sorry! Of course it wouldn't be an issue. Let's go back to talking about how you fell madly in love with me the moment you met me."

"Right, and how you found my flustered discombobulation adorable."

Stef wiped her sweaty palms on her pants under the table at the Italian restaurant Lena had chosen for Friday night. So far, things felt exactly the same as a usual "date" night, other than the peck on the lips they had exchanged when Stef picked Lena up.

She should do something overt - Lena deserved to be with someone who was comfortable being out and open. Stef reached across the table to take Lena's hand, almost knocking over the other woman's water glass in the process.

"Oops, sorry!"

Smooth move.

"It's okay." Lena smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

When the dinner came, Stef offered Lena a bite of her lasagna, this time almost stabbing her in the face in her overzealous attempt to be romantic.

"Stef, are you nervous? It's just you and me, like always." Lena was amused at how flustered the other woman was.

"No, of course not," Stef denied. She was determined to be suave and charming.

Five minutes later, Lena was doing all she could not to laugh out loud. Eating her food was a challenge when she only had one hand available.

"Hon, are you refusing to let go of my hand because you can't bear not to be touching me or because you feel obligated to prove you're okay with public affection?"

Stef's shoulders slumped. But at least she let go of Lena's hand. "Okay, fine. I'm a little nervous. I just want this to be normal for you. Like, how things would be if you were dating a real lesbian."

"What are you, the Pinnocchio of lesbians? You won't be a real one until -" Lena stopped there and took a sip of her water to cover the fact that she was about to reference sex with a woman who was already freaking out a bit about hand holding.

"Never mind. That came out wrong." Lena backtracked.

"Maybe I came out wrong," Stef grumbled.

Lena smiled. "What I mean is, this is just about you and me. There's no rulebook."
"That's too bad - I could use one." Stef was used to feeling competent, but here she already felt in over her head.

"You'll be fine. My expectations are that you continue to be the wonderful woman I fell in love with, not that you conform to some nebulous set of standards. We'll do what feels right for us."

"Okay." Stef looked only mildly less disgruntled than before.

"And what you want matters, too. You can't just focus on what you think I want - I'm sure there are things you want from the person you're dating, and you should be able to communicate those to me." Lena thought what she was saying would be helpful, but Stef's expression made her doubtful.

"This isn't even a little weird to you? We used to be so comfortable with each other, even with the underlying feelings we weren't addressing. Now that those feelings are out in the open, it's like we're navigating some sort of minefield."

"I think you're overthinking things. I'm still me. You're still you. Before, we had to hold ourselves back from doing some of the things we wanted, and now we're free to do them. But we don't have to do them every second we're together."

Stef finally smiled. "I'm sorry. I want to do this right, and I'm scared I'm going to mess it up before it even starts."

Lena relaxed a bit. "Not possible. I hope you don't think I'm so unforgiving that I wouldn't understand that this is different for you and that it might be bumpy as we get going."

"Of course not. We're going to be great. Let's just enjoy our meal, and I'll stop making up problems."

Stef stabbed her lasagna as though it was the source of her anxiety.

On the couch, in the dark, pretending to watch Desert Hearts, Stef found herself overthinking again. Would it be okay for her to hold Lena's hand? That hadn't gone so well at dinner. Maybe just an arm around her? She didn't want to make a big, sudden move, so she started by just putting her elbow on the cushions behind her but still on her side of the couch.

Well, that wasn't very comfortable. She figured she may as well do the full arm stretch out but maybe not touch Lena just yet. Okay, so far so good. She moved her arm down onto Lena's shoulders just as Lena turned her head. Or, she tried to. Stef's arm on her hair made it impossible to swivel her neck more than a few degrees.

Stef pulled her arm back, apologizing. Lena reached for the remote and pressed pause. Lit only by the glow of the television, she turned towards Stef.

"Stef. Honey. It's okay," Lena reassured her. "I'm sorry if I've made you feel weird about being affectionate."

Stef flopped back against the couch. "Ugh. Why is this so hard all of a sudden? My high school boyfriend wasn't this awkward. Before, it took everything I had not to touch you, but now that I can I seem not to know how."

"We did just fine that night in your car," Lena observed with a smirk.

"That we did. How do we recreate that?" Stef sat up and oriented herself towards Lena but still didn't touch her.
"I don't know that it's about recreating that moment - it's just about getting used to the fact that we're free to explore something we used to have to fight." Lena put one hand on Stef's thigh.

"Right. No overthinking. Just feeling." Stef leaned in, her eyes drifting towards Lena's lips.

"Just feeling," Lena whispered before they closed the distance and their lips met.

For Stef, this kiss was a beautiful happy medium between the intense first kiss she feared would be their only, and the tentative kiss they shared in the Anchor Beach parking lot. This time, she got to enjoy herself without the fear she could never do it again. She applied what she had learned the first time, kissing Lena's neck and ear. Yup, still responsive. Hm, where else could she explore?

Lena was rather impressed with how quickly Stef had overcome whatever anxiety had plagued her. Lena was already feeling lightheaded from what Stef's lips were doing to her. Without the guilt that overshadowed their first kiss, she was finally able to fully appreciate kissing Stef. She found herself falling backwards, with Stef following. The warm weight of the other woman was wonderful, making her feel grounded and safe, rather than trapped.

Stef was more turned on than she could remember ever being in her entire life. It sounded like hyperbole in her head, but it was true. Being in this position, with Lena underneath her, was so different than being with Mike or any other man. Lena was smaller, but softer, and Stef was careful not to put all of her weight on her. She rolled to the side a bit, pulling Lena towards her so there was no space between them. This lost her the use of one of her hands, since it was trapped against the couch, but she made up for it with the other. She caressed Lena's cheek, stroked her hair, then slid her hand down Lena's back to rest gently on her thigh.

Lena realized how easy it would be to lose herself completely, to spend all night wrapped up in Stef's arms - and legs - and she wanted it so badly. Clearly, even if they were having some difficulty communicating with words, they had figured out the nonverbal.

But that's what had happened with Gretchen - they had slept together on their second date, and the talking never took priority again. Any time the conversation got hard, Gretchen just kissed her, and they ended up in bed rather than resolving their issues. Lena knew there were hurdles to overcome - Stef was just coming out, and she had a young son - and if Lena was in this for the long haul, which she was, she wanted to do this right. And that meant not moving too quickly.

She felt like she had pulled Stef around like a yo-yo all night. First, she asked her to back off of the PDAs, then she encouraged this makeout session they were currently engaged in, and now she was about to pull back again. She was determined not to give Stef any more of a complex than she already had, so she tried to keep things low-key.

"Mm," Lena hummed, then rubbed her nose against Stef's. "That was wonderful. Did it help with the nervousness?"

Stef smiled and rolled onto her back, settling Lena's head onto her shoulder. She took a deep breath, then let it out. "It was perfect. You're perfect. I still can't quite believe I can kiss you whenever I want now." She laughed, then corrected herself, "Except at the dinner table. I promise no excessive displays of affection just to prove to the world I'm not in the closet."

Lena was glad Stef wasn't holding onto any bad feelings about how the evening had gone up until that point. "Like we said, we'll just do what feels right for us."

"Right now, there's nothing else I want. Except maybe to find out if Vivian and Cay get a happy ending."
The two women rolled onto their side, Stef the big spoon, and Lena turned the movie back on, content to just snuggle on the couch with her girlfriend.

"This is how we should have been watching movies all along," Stef commented, kissing the top of Lena's head.

Friday evening dates expanded to spending almost all day Saturdays and Sundays together. For a few weeks, it was a blissful continuation of the feeling Stef had when she and Lena first started spending time together. She got to be young and in love - openly now, pretending real life didn't exist. But when Brandon complained one Monday morning that there wasn't any milk, and Stef realized she hadn't done her usual weekend grocery shopping, she knew the honeymoon couldn't continue quite as it had. Not to mention she was wearing her last pair of clean underwear.

When she was leaving Lena's that Friday night, she forced herself not to immediately say yes when Lena asked if she wanted to get brunch the next morning.

"I should probably do a few things around the house tomorrow - is that okay? We can get together in the afternoon if you want."

"Of course!" Lena put the pieces together. "I've been taking up all of your free time - I'm sorry. It's all too easy for me to forget your week nights aren't the same as mine."

"It's okay. I want to be with you. But my son is going to starve and rats are going to invade my house if I don't get some things done tomorrow."

"We've been in the typical ditch-everyone-and-spend-all-your-time-together phase of the relationship, and I suppose we'll have to come up for air," Lena observed.

"Is that the technical term for it?" Stef smiled.

"Absolutely. So I'll see you tomorrow afternoon? No rush - and if you need to cancel that's totally fine." Lena pulled Stef close. "I'll miss you, but I don't want to have to fight the rodents for your attention."

Saturday morning, Lena invited herself over to Jenna and Kelly's. While they watched Garrett play on the nearby playground, Lena opened herself up to a necessary reality check.

"I know you guys think that by knowingly dating a recently straight woman I only have myself to blame for any issues that arise, but I need to talk this out or I'll make myself nuts." Lena twisted her hands together.

Kelly reassured her, "We're not judging you - I think you're judging yourself. I'd say we've been nothing but supportive since you and Stef started actually dating, but we'd have to have heard from you to say anything."

"I know I've been in that honeymoon phase," Lena admitted. "I haven't meant to be out of touch, but it's hard not to fall into that self-imposed cocoon at the beginning of a relationship."

Jenna spoke up. "I take it you're working on coming out of that cocoon and you're not sure what to do next?"

"Something like that. Stef said she had things to do around the house this morning, and I realized that I've been doing my shopping and cleaning and errands on week nights and then spending all my time
with her on weekends. But she doesn't have that luxury - she has to take care of Brandon on week nights, with no second parent to support her then."

"So you haven't been over to her house at all?" Kelly raised an eyebrow.

"Well, no. I guess I've only been there the one time I came over when she was sick." Lena realized that Stef had never invited her over. Was that weird?

"Stef's kept her life compartmentalized, even now that you're together. Doesn't that bother you? Don't you want in on the whole thing?" Kelly pressed.

Lena considered. She loved Stef. And Brandon was a great kid, but the truth was she hadn't really spent much time around him. Obviously, she loved kids in general, but she was being very careful not to push her way into Stef's son's life. She respected that she hadn't earned a place there yet. When was the right time to open that door, though?

"Of course I want it. I mean, I've never dated a parent before, but it's doable, right? People make it work all the time." Suddenly Lena was overwhelmed with how complicated things could get with Stef. As much as Lena felt sure of her feelings for Stef, the two of them hadn't talked about how things might play out over the long term.

"Don't let us stress you out," Jenna reassured Lena. "Before you sprain your brain creating things to worry about, let's change the subject. How's the sex? Is it all hot and passionate now that Stef can unleash her true desires, or is it shy and awkward with adorable fumbling around?"

Lena slapped Jenna on the arm. "Like I'd tell you that kind of detail!" She paused, then went ahead and confessed, "We're not having sex yet, if you must know."

"What?" Jenna's surprise was a little offensive.

"Hey, just because I moved so quickly with Gretchen doesn't mean I'm normally that kind of girl," Lena huffed.

"No judgement from us," Kelly insisted. "I think Jenna just means that in this case you guys have been hanging out for months, and we'd assume you'd want to tear each others' clothes off the second you were finally able to."

"Yes, honey, that's exactly what I was trying to say," Jenna kissed Kelly on the cheek.

"So, what's the deal? Is Stef still not quite ready to cross the line into full lesbianism?" Kelly asked.

"I don't know," Lena admitted. "We haven't exactly talked about it. She just leaves every evening we spend together, and then comes back the next morning."

"Have you asked her to stay?" Jenna wondered.

"Well, no. I don't want to rush her or make her feel pressured. She's dealing with a lot, and I don't want to add to it."

"Want me to ask her?" Jenna smirked. "I have a great idea - you guys can come over to our house for dinner tonight, and that will kill two birds with one stone. You can start to break out of your cocoon, and we can interrogate Stef about why she won't sleep with you."

"Wow, when you put it that way, who could refuse?" Lena couldn't think of anything more horrible than her so-called friends putting Stef on the spot.
Kelly spoke up, "I think half of that idea is great. If I promise to put a leash on Jenna -"

"Hot!" Jenna piped up.

"Zip it, you," Kelly admonished. "If I can make Jenna behave, I think it would be really good for you and Stef to leave your apartment and join the wide world of other people. You have to start somewhere, and introducing her to your friends is a normal next step. The Brandon stuff can wait, although I'm happy to offer up Garrett as a play date option."

"Maybe someday. I mean for the play date. But as much as I hate to admit it, I think you're right about dinner. As long as you're sure you're up for hosting on such short notice, I'll check with Stef and see if she's interested."

"Excellent!"
Chapter 7

Lena watched Stef playing on the floor with Garrett while they waited for dinner to be ready, and she kicked herself mentally. In the previous fifteen minutes, she had found out more about Brandon than she had in the entire time she and Stef had known each other. Stef had immediately engaged Garrett when they arrived, talking with him and Jenna about the things the two boys had in common. Lena had been content to see Stef in a vacuum, and it worked when they were just spending Friday evenings together, but now she had to consider what life would be like if she were allowed into the entirety of Stef's world.

Stef looked up at Lena and smiled. Kids always made it easier to get to know new people. Jenna and Kelly seemed nice, despite Lena's warnings that they would pounce on her as soon as Garrett went to bed. Garrett was a sweet kid, and she could see Brandon getting along with him. Lena's suggestion of a play date sometime in the future sounded like a good one. Of course, she'd have to explain why Lena from school was with them, but she'd work that out. He was going to have to make sense of all that soon enough, and it might be good for him to see that other kids had two moms. Not that Lena was his other mom. Stef was not going to rush that for any of them. Though she couldn't help picturing the three of them spending time together, something she had tried to avoid when she and Lena were just flirting.

Dinner was pleasant, the conversation remaining PG while Garrett was with them. But, just as Lena predicted, as soon as the boy went to bed Jenna and Kelly's expressions turned predatory.

"So, Stef, tell us all about your intentions towards our dear friend Lena here," Jenna started. "You're ending your marriage and coming out in dramatic fashion, it sounds like, so I assume you're serious about her."

Stef smiled and leaned forward. These ladies were creampuffs compared to the drug dealers and carjackers she had faced on the San Diego streets. "I appreciate your concern for your friend. I can promise you my intentions are sincere. I'm very lucky that Lena is willing to stick with me as I work all of this out."

Lena relaxed just a little bit, seeing how calmly Stef handled the question. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"So, Lena, how are you handling the gossip at work? I imagine dating the mom of one of the kids there was fodder for at least a couple of weeks' worth of chatter." Kelly immediately ruined Lena's hopes for a comfortable conversation.

"Well, I haven't exactly told anyone yet," Lena admitted.

"What?!" Kelly and Jenna chorused. "What happened to out-and-proud Lena?" Jenna followed up.

Lena was defensive. "Hey, it's not like I announced I stopped being a lesbian. I'm out to people at work. I just haven't told them I'm dating Stef. Good grief, it's only been a few weeks."

Stef was amused. "I told my captain and a few other co-workers. They were cool."

"See, Stef's already telling people about you. I can't believe you wouldn't do the same for her," Jenna admonished.

Before Lena could reply, Stef stepped in to put her out of her misery. "It's totally fine. We haven't really talked about it, but I would never want Lena to do anything to jeopardize her job or to make
Kelly looked thoughtful. "Dating at work is inevitably tricky. I know you don't exactly work together, but I can see how it could get messy. I rescind my 'what?!'"

Lena looked somewhat mollified. "Thank you Kelly. And Stef." She stuck out her tongue at Jenna.

"Keep that thing in your mouth unless you intend to use it," Jenna quipped.

Lena shook her head, hoping Stef wasn't too scandalized.

"Speaking of tongues and cops, I bet the uniform is hot for role play, right?" Jenna waggled her eyebrows.

"Jenna!" This time it was Lena and Kelly who spoke in unison.

Jenna put up her hands. "Sorry - I can't help myself. Seriously though, Stef, I bet being a cop is a wild ride. What's the craziest thing you've ever had to do?"

As Stef told a story about having to convince a naked man with a knife, who was high on meth, to come out of a tree, Lena realized there was another gaping hole in her understanding of the other woman. They hadn't talked much about Stef's job during all those Friday nights together. Stef's job was dangerous, and Lena hadn't allowed herself to contemplate what it would be like to worry about someone coming home at the end of every day. Thus far, they had only spent time together on weekends, when Stef wasn't working, and the few times work had kept them apart or made Stef late it never sounded like a big deal.

Lena's head was reeling through the rest of the evening, questioning the foundation of her entire relationship with Stef. What was it based on, if work and family weren't part of the equation? The cocoon phase definitely needed to come to an end.

Stef noticed Lena seemed distracted, but she was enjoying talking with Jenna and Kelly. She hadn't spent any time with a lesbian couple before, and it was nice to see an example of normal people living a normal life - they just happened to both be women. If the ditch-everyone phase had to come to an end, it was nice to think they'd be moving into a place where they socialized as a couple with other couples.

Lena had assumed Lena would be happy the evening had gone so well, so she was surprised when the other woman seemed tense in the car ride home.

"Is everything okay? That seemed pretty mild compared to what you warned me might happen." Stef tried to understand why Lena was distant.

Lena tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "How come you never talk to me about Brandon? You just met Jenna and Kelly, and in that short time tonight I learned more about him than in the past few months."

Stef was momentarily taken aback. Lena's tone was a little accusatory, and Stef wasn't sure what she'd done wrong. In typical interrogation fashion, she answered the question with another question.

"How come you never ask about him?"

Lena was silent for a moment. She had to admit to herself that she certainly hadn't fished for information about the boy. Sure, she generally asked 'How's Brandon?' when she and Stef got together, but Stef always said 'Fine' and the conversation went somewhere else from there.
"I don't know. I'd love to say I was just taking my cues from you, but that wouldn't be fair. What we had on Friday nights was like something separate from the rest of my life, and maybe I didn't want the real world imposing."

"Exactly. It was a time we got to just be ourselves, with nothing external distracting."

"Is that why you didn't talk much about work either?" Lena wondered.

"I guess. Maybe I was afraid if I talked about my son and my scary job you wouldn't want to spend time with me. Or maybe I just liked the chance to be something other than a cop or someone's mother. With you there were no labels. And if I'm totally honest, it let me pretend I was single and unattached - just a woman spending time with a woman she was attracted to without complications."

Stef worried her explanation sounded cheesy, but it was how she felt.

Stef's statement was touching, but Lena was still worried about the future. "So what do we do now? We know we can't live in a Friday-night world forever. It feels like I only know part of you. How can I be in love with someone I don't really know?"

Stef was stunned. She turned in her seat toward Lena. "You're the person who knows me - the real me - best! That's not to say those other parts of me aren't important and that we don't have to integrate them into our relationship, but you're who I feel most comfortable being myself around."

Lena was relieved, but Stef's acknowledgment didn't change the fact that there was work to do in their relationship. "Okay, we have a good foundation. But we still have to figure out how to get to know the whole of each other."

"Sure. That's part of any relationship. We still have friends and family of each other's that we haven't met. Those things unfold naturally, right? It's not like people go interrogate everyone connected to someone they're interested in dating. They get to know someone little by little, and if they keep liking what they find out they keep dating."

"And if there are issues?" Lena still wasn't totally convinced.

"What if aliens attack?" Stef countered, throwing up her hands. "Neither of us has a crystal ball. Are you saying you want to bail out now just because you don't have all the information? Or are you saying what you've found out today has changed your mind about us?"

Not letting Lena answer just yet, Stef continued. "I thought I'd be the one to have a freak-out, but it seems like you're the one panicking. Is the reality of dating a parent - and a cop - too much for you?"

Lena took a deep breath and let it out. She didn't want to just answer no immediately and dismiss the question. It was important. "I'm not running away. I want this, I want you. There's a lot we still need to learn about each other, but you're right - that's true for any relationship. We'll just keep talking and keep integrating more of our lives."

"I know this isn't as simple as dating a woman who's been out for years and doesn't have the baggage of a pending divorce and a five-year-old," Stef shrugged.

"I don't think of Brandon as baggage. Nor Mike. They helped make you who you are, and I love that person." Lena reached over and squeezed Stef's hand.

"Thank you." Stef squeezed back. "So we're okay?"

"We're okay."
As they pulled into Stef's driveway, Lena fleetingly thought of asking Stef if she could come in, but that seemed like one too many heavy topics for the night. If they had tackled Stef's son and her job, her house and her bed could wait for another time.

Stef unbuckled and pulled Lena in for a hug. They held on to each other, and the tension of the car ride dissipated.

Lena pulled back but kept her hand on Stef's cheek. "Good night, Stef. Thanks for putting up with my crazy friends for the evening."

Stef took Lena's hand and kissed it. She smiled. "Are you kidding? They were great! We should do it again soon. With Brandon next time. I guess we'd have to do it on a week night or I'd have to work something out with Mike, but we should get him and Garrett together."

Lena's head swam with all the logistics it would apparently require just to have a play date, but she told herself this was part of the deal. Dating a parent meant life wasn't always simple. If she was serious about Stef, she would have to get used to this. Embrace it, even.

"Definitely," she replied.

Stef leaned in and gave her a sweet kiss. "You want to do something tomorrow?"

"Sure. Call me in the morning."

"Can't wait." Stef got out of the car, and Lena waited for her to enter her house.

Maybe someday there wouldn't be the goodbye at the end of the night. Maybe someday soon.

When Stef called in the late morning the next day, Lena insisted to herself she would casually see if she could work it out so they ended up at Stef's house instead of hers. If they were ripping the band-aid off of all the things they had avoided dealing with, they may as well tackle this one too.

"You want to do brunch or lunch or whatever?" Stef asked. It turned out that brunch thing wasn't so bad when you wore the right shoes.

"Well, would it be easier for you if we hung out at your house? I know you said you had things to take care of at home." Lena hoped that didn't sound rehearsed.

"Uh, yeah, I guess. You can come over here. I'll try to clean up Brandon's junk I've left lying around. And this will let me work on the laundry, if you don't mind."

Lena was quick to reassure Stef, "Of course. We can just spend time together. Like we talked about yesterday, it'll be good to get out of the bubble."

"Even though the bubble was a wonderful place."

"Yes. The real world isn't so bad, though, is it?"

"I guess we're about to find out."

The real world seemed like a fabulous place, from Lena's perspective. She brought lunch from her favorite deli, and then she started a book she found on Stef's shelves she'd always wanted to read while Stef folded clothes. And now, Stef was on top of her, doing amazing things to Lena's ear with her tongue. Lena arched and pulled Stef closer. The fact that her hands landed on Stef's ass was a
bonus. The fact that that extra squeeze ground Stef's thigh between Lena's legs was a total cherry on top.

Stef's lips met Lena's, and the kiss was exquisite. Stef knew how to dive in but then pull back, leaving Lena chasing her. More, Lena just wanted more. She didn't want things to go too far without them talking, but she couldn't bring herself to stop just to have a conversation about continuing. So she buried her hands in Stef's hair and bent her leg just so, eliciting a moan from Stef. They weren't too far gone yet - there was plenty of space between where they were and -

"Oh, crap! What time is it?" Stef asked, pulling away from Lena and sitting up on the couch.

Lena lay there, stunned at the sudden removal of the warm body that had just been covering hers. "Uh, I don't know." She propped herself up on her elbows. "What's the issue?"

"Brandon's going to be home any minute."

"Oh." Lena ran her fingers through her hair. Obviously it was inappropriate for him to catch his mom in the middle of a makeout session. A really good makeout session.

"With Mike."

"Oh." Lena sat up completely. "I thought you said he was okay with things."

"He is. In theory. I just don't want to put it in his face or anything. But mostly I want to make sure I introduce you to Brandon right."

"He's already met me."

"You know what I mean. As my girlfriend."

Lena couldn't help smiling. "So I'm your girlfriend?"

"Seriously?" Stef smiled back. "I know I don't have time to string along multiple ladies, so I've been assuming this is an exclusive thing. Have you been stepping out with your weeknight woman or something?"

"Hardly. You're my one and only." Lena exaggeratedly batted her eyelashes at Stef.

"Good." Stef expression changed to one of concern. "Will you still be my one and only if I ask you to leave?"

Lena took Stef's face in her hands and kissed her. "I understand. You want to do things right for your son. You're a wonderful parent, and I respect that you take seriously how this relationship will impact him. I would never want to pressure you to move faster than you're comfortable about this, but if I haven't made it clear, I would love to spend time with Brandon. I love his mother, and I get that you're a package deal. I don't want to be your secret from him, and I don't want him to be your secret from me. I want all of you."

Stef wasn't sure if Lena meant the entirety of herself or both she and Brandon, but either interpretation was okay. She needed to have a conversation with Brandon, and she felt like it was time. Her conversation with Lena the night before had helped.

She had to admit to herself, though she couldn't bring herself to say it to Lena, but she had worried that Lena didn't really want in on Stef's whole life. Weekends were great, but Monday through Friday was a whole different story. Lena had never seen frazzled Stef, who sometimes yelled at her
son when he wouldn't put on his shoes and caused her to be late for work. She hadn't seen how messy the house got when Stef didn't have the energy to clean up.

But she couldn't hide forever. She had let Lena into her house, and that had gone rather well, so maybe things with Brandon would be fine.

When Mike dropped off Brandon, Stef gave him a heads-up that she would be talking to their son about Lena.

"He won't hear anything bad about it from me," was Mike's response. It was good enough for Stef.

Despite committing to holding the conversation, Stef struggled during dinner with how to bring it up. She probably should have read a book or something.

"So, B, you know how Daddy and I have been living apart for awhile?" Stef began.

"Yeah," Brandon looked up from his macaroni and cheese.

"And how we told you we're not going to live together again?"

"You're getting a duh-borse." Brandon took a bite.

"Divorce, yes." Stef took a deep breath, then let it out. "Well, sometimes when people aren't married anymore, they meet someone else they want to spend time with."

"I like to spend time with Rashad. We play Legos." Brandon's best friend lived three houses down.

"Kind of like that. But grown-up stuff."

"Sounds boring."

"Right, well, maybe to kids. Anyway, my point is there's someone I want to spend more time with, and since you're the most important person in my life I want you to spend time with her too."

"Okay. Can we go to the park? Maybe I should bring Rashad since I like being with him."

Stef was rattled by the lack of drama so far. "Uh, sure. So, the person I'm dating is someone you know - Ms. Adams from Anchor Beach."

Brandon perked up. "Oh, dating - my friend Libby from school said her older sister goes on dates. Does that make Ms. Adams your girlfriend?"

Clearly, Stef should have just called it what it was, rather than going all around the world. Brandon wasn't stupid. "Yes, she's my girlfriend."

"Okay."

_Really? It was that easy? "You don't have any questions? Like about how Ms. Adams and I are both women?"

"Rashad and I are both boys," Brandon wasn't fazed.

Stef had no idea how to explain the concept of romantic love to a kid who hadn't experienced those feelings yet.
"Being girlfriend isn't quite the same as just being friends. Ms. Adams - Lena - and I might hold hands or kiss or something like that."

"Gross. Why would you want to do that?" Brandon's face looked like he'd smelled something terrible.

"You know, what, never mind. Maybe Lena and I will take you to the park soon."

"Cool. I'll tell Rashad. But I'm not going to kiss him."

"That's fine, honey." Stef felt a headache coming on.

"It's getting late," Stef announced, as she and Lena wrapped up a conversation about how terrible the movie version of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was in comparison to the book. "Gotta get my beauty rest if I'm not going to terrify you tomorrow morning." She fidgeted a bit but made no move to get off the couch.

Lena hesitated, then asked, "Do you want to just stay? It doesn't really make sense for you to go home, just to come back first thing in the morning. We have to leave by 9:00 if we're going to make it to the bike tour on time." She hoped it sounded innocent, but her eyes strayed to Stef's chest before heading back up to her eyes.

Stef swallowed. "Uh, well, I don't have any clothes for tomorrow or anything. Or for tonight." Her mouth was unnaturally dry, but her palms were suddenly sweating.

"We could just stop by your house tomorrow on the way out, and you could change clothes. You can shower here." Lena's voice sounded tight to her own ears. Neither mentioned that Lena hadn't addressed the sleepwear issue.

"Right. Yeah, okay. We could do that. So, are you sleepy?" Stef thought the question sounded stupid, but she wasn't sure where to go next.

"Oh, I don't know." Lena was torn between wanting to get Stef into her bedroom as fast as she could and ensuring she didn't give any signals that she actually wanted to go to sleep just yet. "I guess we could head to bed."

"Sounds good." Stef stood up and held out a hand for Lena, which Lena found ridiculously charming. Pulling Lena up brought the two of them almost nose-to-nose. The eye contact was electric.

Lena, ever afraid of rushing things or pressuring Stef, blurted, "We can just sleep, if you want."

Stef's forehead wrinkled. "Is that what you want? Do you not want to, you know, have sex with me?" She had done her research in the past few months, and she was pretty sure you had to get to the bed at some point before any stereotypical "lesbian bed death" could occur.

"God, no!" Lena exclaimed.

Stef's face fell.

"No, wait!" Lena explained. "I don't not want to have sex with you. I mean, I absolutely do want to have sex with you."

"Oh, thank goodness! I thought there was something wrong with me. Or you. Or lesbians. If we
"don't have sex I think I'm going to explode." Stef hadn't mean to say all that, at least not exactly like that, but all these weeks of Lena pulling back as things got heated were driving her to insanity.

"Right now?" Lena fought the urge to ask even more questions.

"Yes, please." Stef's pupils were dilated and her heart was pounding.

After a moment of utter silence, both women reached for each other in a frantic embrace. Their kisses were sloppy, and their hands were everywhere. As Stef's knees became weak, she gave Lena a gentle nudge in the direction of the bedroom.

Lena worked at the buttons on Stef's shirt as she walked backwards. They paused so Stef could pull Lena's shirt over her head, shedding her own immediately afterwards. Both were torn between staring at the skin exposed and keeping things moving. Stef stepped back towards Lena, pushing her against the hallway wall.

Lena's head thumped the wall as she arched into Stef's kisses on her neck. Their legs scissored, and Stef ground against Lena. Lena's moan spurred Stef to do it again, this time rubbing herself more deliberately on Lena's thigh.

Wonderful as this was, Lena was determined to make it to the bedroom. She maneuvered them once again in that direction, this time trying not to escalate further until they arrived. Once in the bedroom, though, Lena started unbuttoning Stef's pants, pulling back enough to check that Stef was okay with it.

Stef nodded and reciprocated. Both women stepped out of their pants, then paused, panting. Stef feared she looked like a fish out of water, but Lena clad only in her underwear was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen, and she could only gape, mute.

Lena thought she should slow things down or be more romantic, but she was too far gone. And the way Stef was looking at her convinced her they were on the same page. No one had ever communicated their want for her so clearly.

Not wanting any rookie issues to slow them down, Lena reached behind and unclasped her own bra. Showing off, she undid Stef's as well.

Stef would have thought she'd be freaking out a little at this point, with ever-dampening underwear the only barrier between her and another equally-naked woman. But the months leading up to this point only made her desperate to keep going.

Lena's breasts were perfect, and Stef couldn't wait to feel them - with her hands, with her mouth, with her own breasts. She started with her breasts, pressing her body against Lena's and shivering at the sensation. Lena backed up but pulled Stef with her. She laid down on the bed and Stef hovered over her, brushing their nipples together. Lena closed her eyes involuntarily, then opened them to find Stef looking at her hungrily. Stef lowered herself down, kissing Lena thoroughly, their bodies flush against each other all the way down to their toes.

Stef started grinding again, and Lena matched her thrusts. Stef was totally lost in the experience, trying to process all the ways her body was on fire, when suddenly Lena pulled away.

Stef tumbled to the side, stunned. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?" She never imagined Lena would be the one to put the brakes on things.

Lena was panting, her eyes wide. "No, no. It's just -" She smiled sheepishly. "If we didn't stop I was going to come."
Stef was still confused. "Isn't that the goal here? Or is there something different about lesbian sex?"

Lena laughed, which Stef took as a good sign. An orgasm was definitely on her agenda, and she hoped Lena was on the same page.

"It's totally the goal. I just wanted our first time to involve us being totally naked, touching each other…” Lena trailed off. "You know what, it's stupid. There will be plenty of other times. Possibly even tonight. Come back here - don't stop."

Stef smiled. Knowing how turned on Lena was gave her confidence. "No, no, I think you're right. We should definitely be naked." She trailed her hand down Lena's body, cupping her breast on the way, then hooking her fingers under Lena’s waistband. She slid the underwear down, with Lena's help, then shimmied out of her own. She settled back on her side, dropping a kiss on Lena's lips.

"I believe you said something about touching?" Stef's voice dropped half an octave, and Lena's nipples tightened at the sound. She definitely wasn't going to last long. Swallowing hard and nodding, she signaled to Stef to continue.

Stef took a deep breath, then stroked Lena's cheek, tracing patterns down her neck, her chest, and her stomach. Her eyes stayed locked on Lena's as she dipped further.

The sound Lena made could only be described as a whimper. Stef explored, her expression one of amazement. Lena wanted to move, to thrust, to chase Stef's fingers and keep them right where she wanted them. But this was new to Stef, and she wanted to experience it all.

"Is it okay if I…?"

Lena understood the unfinished question and answered, "Please."

Stef entered her, and Lena forced herself to keep her eyes open to maintain the intensity of their eye contact. "More," she begged. "I've never been this wet."

This time it was Stef who moaned. "You're so beautiful," she murmured.

In, out, around - Stef repeated the pattern over and over, and all too soon Lena arched up, shuddering. She clamped her hand around Stef's wrist, encouraging her to continue until it was too much. Then she pulled Stef's hand up to her mouth and sucked her fingers inside.

Stef could swear she felt the flicker of Lena's tongue between her fingers somewhere further south. Why had they denied themselves this for so long? And how long before they could do it again? Stef knew she could spend a lifetime learning all the ways to make Lena feel good.

Before she could contemplate that further, she found herself on her back, Lena looking down at her predatorily. "Your turn," she heard.

Lena wanted to spend hours mapping Stef's body, but she could only imagine how pent up the other woman must be. There would be opportunities for slow and sweet later. She rolled onto her side and pulled Stef into a kiss. She slid her hand down Stef's body and found the other woman as wet as she had been. Any lingering worries about whether or not Stef was ready for this went out of Lena's mind.

Even more quickly than Lena, Stef was clutching the sheets and crying out her release. As she fought to regain her breath, she panted, "I love you."

Lena smiled. "I love you, too. So much."
"I assume my lack of pajamas is not going to be an issue?" Stef smirked.

"Not at all."

Stef and Lena decided it was best for Lena to let a few folks at work know about their relationship before Lena started seeing Brandon outside of school, lest he share something inadvertently. It inevitably led to some gossip, but Lena was hardly the first person to have a relationship with the parent of a student. Most of the teachers' kids went to Anchor Beach, so people were used to maintaining boundaries. The upside was Stef could stop by Lena's office after dropping off Brandon or before picking him up, and they didn't have to make up increasingly plausible excuses.

Because Brandon was with Mike on weekends, they started with dinner at Stef's house on a weeknight, hoping it was a low-key way to introduce Lena.

"Ms. Adams!" Brandon greeted Lena excitedly, when he opened the door for her.

"Hi, Brandon," she replied. "Thanks for having me over for dinner."

"It's not as fun as the park. And Mom said I couldn't invite Rashad over. But I can play you my new song." He scampered off to find his xylophone.

Stef, who had made her way to the door while Brandon let Lena in, smiled at the other woman. "So far so good?"

"It's hard to mess things up in 30 seconds." Lena smiled back.

"Tell that to Bill Buckner," Stef muttered.

"What?"

"Never mind. Please come sit down and relax. I think the concert is about to start."

Lena made sure not to sit too closely to Stef on the couch, but she tried to relax. From what Stef had shared, it sounded like Brandon wouldn't be phased by her presence.

Brandon gleefully banged on his xylophone, singing tunelessly about building a castle. Lena observed Stef as she watched her son. Stef talked about being freer and more herself when she was alone with Lena, but the smile on her face was open and genuine. Stef seemed less edgy. The slightly cynical vibe she usually gave off was absent, replaced by a softness Lena had never seen before. It was beautiful.

"That was awesome, B! Do you think you can teach it to Lena while I finish getting dinner ready?" Stef winked at Lena as she walked to the kitchen.

Lena took a deep breath and exhaled. She hoped Brandon couldn't sense her nervousness.

"Great song, Brandon. Maybe you can play it at the next school talent show."

"Me and Rashad are going to play a song together. He's really good at the harmonica."

Somehow, Lena doubted that.

"Rashad's mom has a boyfriend. He says it's weird that my mom has a girlfriend."

So much for keeping it light. Lena was tempted to just try to change the subject, but she refused to be
scared of a five-year-old's opinion.

"What do you think? Is it weird for you that your mom has a girlfriend?"

"I'm sad that Daddy doesn't live with us anymore. That's kind of weird. But Rashad's dad doesn't live with him anymore either. So maybe it's not weird. Mommy says girls can have girlfriends and boys can have boyfriends, and she's really smart, so it must be true."

"Your mom is really smart. Have you talked to her about what Rashad said?" Lena didn't want to overstep her role.

Brandon sighed. "She seems so happy about having a girlfriend. I didn't want to make her sad. Besides, Rashad says Superman is the best, but I know it's Batman so he doesn't know everything."

"Soup's on!" Stef called from the kitchen.

Relieved, Lena followed Brandon to the table.

Dinner was mundane in the best way possible, and after his bath Brandon requested Lena be the one to read him his story.

Stef couldn't help but smile as she watched her son convince her girlfriend to read the story for the fourth time. Lena looked like she was having a great time, whereas Stef would have told him it was time for lights-out two repetitions ago.

She knew this was still a honeymoon phase for them all, but she was determined to enjoy it while it lasted. Hopefully Lena would still find them both endearing on the nights Brandon insisted he was starving an hour after ignoring his dinner, refused to take a bath, and got up every five minutes for water after he was supposed to be in bed, and when Stef lost her patience and fed him cereal, put him to bed dirty, and confiscated his cup.

Eventually, she had to break up the party. "Time for bed, kiddo. It's a school night for all of us. Lena needs to go home, and you need some sleep."

"So what do you think?" Stef asked as they stood in the open doorway to say good night. "Can this insta-family thing work for you?"

"Brandon is a wonderful kid, and I'm so glad I'm getting to know him better." It sounded like a canned answer, but Lena meant it sincerely. Seeing Stef interact with her son made Lena fall even more in love with her.

"If he had been a monster tonight, would that have scared you off?" Stef smiled, but Lena sensed the question wasn't rhetorical.

"Of course not. I work with kids - I know they're not always angels."

"Good. Because he was on his best behavior and that won't last forever."

*Will we?* seemed to be the unspoken question that hung in the air. It was too soon - and too cliche - to think about voicing it, but Stef seemed to need reassuring.

"I think if either of us knew a year ago we'd be here now we wouldn't have believed it."

Stef looked torn between being offended and agreeing.

Lena continued, "I, for one, am so glad we are. You've made my life so much richer, and I can't wait
to see what happens from here."

Stef’s shoulders finally relaxed. She waggled her eyebrows. "If it includes a repeat of last weekend, neither can I."

"Oh, it definitely does." Lena pulled Stef closer. "Starting tomorrow night, I plan on keeping you in bed for two days straight - no 9:00 outings, just you and me and maybe those handcuffs of yours."

Stef kissed Lena deeply, then stepped back and held Lena at arm's length. "You had better go now or I'm going to drag you inside and get a head start on the weekend."

"I'm so glad you spoke up about the theme," Lena commented to Stef as they swayed to the music.

Stef tipped up her eye patch to gaze at the wench in her arms. "Arr, milady. And I'm so glad I get to be a better date than you had last year."

"Amen to that." Lena realized she hadn't thought about Gretchen in quite some time.

"Do you know, I had that very thought at the first PTA meeting we sat by each other?" Stef admitted.

"You were into me already?" Lena asked with a smirk.

"Oh, come on. You wanted me, too. 'You're a parent, I'm a teacher - why shouldn't we associate?' It was wicked obvious."

"Fine, I admit it. When I said I hoped I'd have a better date my imagination filled you in as that person."

"And now, here we are. Are you happy?" Stef asked.

"You mean tonight, or in general?" Things had been going well, and Lena wasn't sure if Stef was just checking in or if there was something more to her question.

"Either. Both. I don't know. I just want to be sure we're on track. You know, something to check in on every quarter or so."

"Aw, is it our three-month anniversary?" Lena grinned and pulled Stef closer. "That's so sweet that you're counting."

Stef's cheeks turned pink.

"But you're wrong," Lena continued. "The three-month anniversary of our first date isn't for another five days."

"Oh. Is that when we're counting from? I was going with our first kiss." Stef leaned in for a quick kiss to emphasize her point.

"Technically, it was in the parking lot at school that we acknowledged our feelings," Lena countered.

Stef smiled and conceded, "True. But if we're going back to when we fell for each other, it's been quite a bit longer than three months."

"As we've already established tonight. Should we count that first PTA meeting as the date, then?"
Lena remembered that night fondly.

Stef shrugged and pulled Lena closer. "Does it matter? I'm in love with you, you're in love with me, and we both intend to stay that way. That's all that matters to me."

Lena leaned back to look into Stef's eyes. "Me too. Here's to the sexiest pirate at this cheesy school fundraising gala and to all the ridiculous themes we'll have to endure in the future."

"To the future," Stef concurred, twirling Lena around.

The End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!