

Beards

Serena J. Bishop

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Second Edition published 2018

Cover design by May Dawney Designs

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ISBN-10: 172357872X

ISBN-13: 978-1723578724

To my wife.

I think there's something you should know
I think it's time I told you so
There's something deep inside of me
There's someone else I've got to be

- George Michael, "*Freedom '90*"

SEPTEMBER 2014: MEET STEVIE

STEVIE PACED ANXIOUSLY AROUND THE sunny Chesapeake Bay University campus as he waited for Bradyn to emerge from her Calculus II class. He hated math with a passion, always had, but he loved that he had a girlfriend who understood it—especially one as beautiful as she. She was tall, athletic, and every inch of her was covered in smooth, dark skin.

Stevie hit the jackpot with Bradyn.

In his nineteen years on Earth, he never had an issue finding dates. He knew this was because he was taught how to treat a lady. He also knew that a consequence of not treating a woman with respect were multiple ass kickings from a variety of different people.

Of course, Stevie's looks didn't hurt when he tried to capture the attention of females. He had his father's 6'4" frame

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and lean musculature that aided him on the baseball team. He towered over batters when he stood on the pitcher's mound and his long strides covered the bases quickly. He inherited his mother's strong jaw and focused green eyes, which were helping him succeed as a double major in International Relations and History. His eyes were even more striking because they were paired with his warm, light brown skin; a genetic compromise between his white mother and black father. But despite his chiseled features, Stevie had an endearing, boyish dimple when he smiled. His godmother insisted that God wanted him to have at least one trait that was hers alone.

By most definitions, Steven Gino Fields was a stud. And on this particular sunny afternoon, he was also terrified.

So terrified, in fact, that when a gentle hand was placed on his upper arm from behind, he jumped with a squeal. "You scared me," he said with an embarrassed smile as he leaned down to kiss his attacker.

"I know I did. That's why it's so funny." Bradyn chuckled and gave him another chaste kiss before rubbing his rough chin with her thumb and forefinger. "You're really trying to grow a goatee, huh?"

"I don't have to try," he scoffed confidently. Stevie had started shaving when he was fifteen. "Besides, I told my godfather I'd grow one like his."

"I see." Bradyn grasped the hand he held out for her. He began to swing their hands in a gentle rhythm as they walked through the grass.

"You know...I was trying to be sweet and surprise you after class, but it seemed to backfire on me. You're done for the day, right?"

“Yep—although, I do need to work on my lab assignment that’s due tomorrow. I’m guessing you wanted to do something?”

Stevie took a deep breath. What he wanted to talk about was huge and explained the goatee. “Well, I was hoping we could have dinner off campus and talk.”

Bradyn stopped in her tracks and narrowed her brown eyes in accusation. “You better not be breaking up with me. I was just telling my Mom and Dad how good you are.”

“No! There’s no breaking! Absolutely not.” There was no way he was breaking up with her. Aside from being intelligent and gorgeous, Bradyn loved sports, shared his obsession with video games, and had gotten the seal of approval from his best friend, Devin.

He led her over to a shaded bench to sit and rubbed his hands on his cargo shorts to remove his anxiety-fueled perspiration. “I just want to talk privately. I want to ask you something and it’s kind of a big deal and something I haven’t really given you the details about yet.”

“Oh,” she crossed her long, dark legs at the knee and tossed many of her tight braids behind her shoulder, “what kind of details?”

“I’d like you to be my date to a wedding I’m in next month.”

Bradyn’s smile lit up the quad. To be the date of someone in a wedding party was a huge deal. “Of course, Stevie. I’d love to be your date.” The soft kiss following her acceptance made his tense muscles relax instantly. “Is the wedding nearby?”

“It’s a just a couple hours away, back home near Harrisburg. But I want you to know before you go that it’s kind

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of an unconventional wedding since I come from a rather unconventional family.”

“Stevie,” she tried not to roll her eyes at him. He could be such a drama queen sometimes. “I know your mom’s white. It’s no big deal and my parents don’t care either.”

“Well, that’s good, but that’s not what I was going to say. It’s my Mom and Dad who are getting married—”

“Oh my God, they got back together after the divorce. When?” she asked with excitement. Stevie had shared with her that his parents had gotten divorced when he was twelve, but had still lived in the same house, which she found truly bizarre.

Stevie shook his head. She had the completely wrong idea, but if he had to be honest with himself, most people would. “It’s a really long story.”

“And you want to tell me the story over dinner?”

Stevie patted Bradyn’s hand. “That’s my plan.”

DECEMBER 1990

OFFICER GINA DICARLO'S SPRINTING STEPS echoed through the dim alley and into the open street beyond. She rushed through the narrow Harrisburg passage, her arms and legs pumping. Her agile feet dodged shallow puddles and broken bottles as she focused on the alley's tight exit and prepared to surprise her perpetrator. Gina accelerated, her adrenaline giving her a burst of speed she did not know she possessed as she saw a shadow slowly come into her view.

"Police! Stop and raise your hands in the air!" she yelled, not quite out of breath. When the shadow did as instructed, she slowed and decided a little repartee with her criminal was in order. "Thought you could run away, you little —Dammit, Steven!"

"Sorry, to disappoint you," said the tall, black man in

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the matching police issue uniform. “Am I safe to put my hands down, officer?”

“Shut up. Where did they go?” Gina asked exasperated, scanning the area for the two vandals who were destructing public property.

“I have no idea.” Hands on his thighs, Steven caught his breath. “How are you faster than me? My legs are longer.”

Gina leaned down to mock her partner and best friend. Her deep-set brown eyes looked into his even darker ones. “Aw, did the Marine get bested by the Army? Again?”

“I will kick your Italian ass at pull-ups.”

“Racist,” she said with a slight smirk pulling at her lips.

Steven loved bantering this way with her. He smiled and took in the scene a second time. “I say, they either went up one of the fire escapes or busted through the fence over there.”

Gina inspected the soft ground nearest to the rusty chain link fence while doing the tongue clicks she was prone to while searching for something. “I don’t see any footprints. Fire escape is my guess. Want to call it in?” Steven cocked his head at her, annoyed. “What? I called in the last one.”

“I always call in the ones we lose!” he pointed out.

“That’s not my fault! You’ve let your physical training slide.” She pointed, “I see that you’re still huffing and puffing over there, Mr. Semper Fi Pull-Up.”

“Fine. I’ll call it.” He pressed his shoulder radio. “Dispatch. Officer Fields, here.”

“Dispatch, here. What’s up, Fields?” asked the disembodied voice with a mild crackle.

“Suspects were lost in foot pursuit. Officer DiCarlo

spooked them before we could apprehend.” Gina raised her hands in disbelief while her partner threw her under the bus.

“Put it in the report, Fields. Are you in the vicinity of nine-hundred block of Penn?” asked the dispatcher.

“Yeah. Mostly,” he confirmed, as both he and Gina felt raindrops. It had been cold and raining all day intermittently .

“Can you get a disturbing the peace at nine-twenty-eight Penn, apartment 1A?”

“Yeah, we got it. Out.” Steven motioned with his head, “Come on DiCarlo, the Affirmative Action Duo has more citizens to rescue.”

Gina walked with him down the rainy street back to the squad car. “You know, I really hate that nickname.”

“It’s what everyone else calls us, might as well use it to show them it doesn’t bother us.”

“But it does bother us. And it’s not *everyone*, it’s Underwood.” But, despite being annoyed by the name, she smiled slightly. “Thank God, I actually like you. But if the brass knew that, then they’d probably split us up.”

Steven had been with the police department for three years before Gina finished training and they were assigned to be partners. They both had similar paths and obstacles to overcome, which made them understand each other in ways others never could. Steven, despite being an All-Star high school athlete and former Marine, still had to endure racism on a daily basis. Gina served in the Army as a translator and faced sexism when she joined the department despite having the highest scores of her police class. Steven and Gina both understood hard work as much as they did hardship.

“And if they split us up then who would rescue the

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High Street sign from being stolen again?”

“Not the Affirmative Action Duo.” She opened the door to the patrol car. “Let’s go get these peace disturbers.”

Gina pressed the buzzer for apartment 1A. “I don’t hear much of a disturbance going around here, do you?”

Steven checked the perimeter. There were no consistent loud noises or evidence that there had been—no broken bottles or firework fumes. “Nah. Only thing disturbing me is the rain, which I’d like to get out of soon.”

“Who is it?” the 1A resident demanded, her voice full of static as it came out of the speaker.

Gina leaned closer to the wall. “Ma’am, did you call the police?”

“It’s about damn time. I’ll be right there.”

Steven and Gina waited, subconsciously huddling together for warmth as they waited to be allowed in. Independently, they surveyed the building. The exterior had clean brick. The windows weren’t barred and had neatly painted trim. In the non-winter months, there would have been a maple tree and several flowerbeds with blossoms in the front yard. In short, it was a pleasant looking place. But looks could be deceiving.

“I really hope this isn’t another domestic,” mumbled Gina.

“Don’t even say it. I still can’t believe we had to testify in court last week, but I’m glad that rich, abusive bastard got his comeuppance. That DA was a shark.”

“She sure was.” Through the glass, Gina saw a woman come towards them wearing a sneer along with slippers and a

robe. “Showtime.”

The disgruntled woman unlocked the door. “What took you so long?” She gave Steven an especially unpleasant eye.

“We’re sorry you had to wait, ma’am,” Gina stated evenly. “May Officer Fields and myself come in?”

“I suppose you’ll need to in order to deal with the situation.” She stepped aside to allow them into the mail area.

“Thank you. What is the situation, exactly?” asked Steven in his nicest tone.

The perturbed woman crossed her arms. “That Mullins girl is having another one of her parties and it is almost ten o’clock at night. The quiet hours for this building start at nine. I called the super and he said to call the police if it was bothering me this much. So, I called...twenty minutes ago. What if I had been shot when I confronted her?”

Gina’s eyes went on alert, her stance tensed. “Shot? She has a weapon?”

“I don’t know. She could. I called her on the phone and told her to knock off the racket, which she most certainly did not.”

“Okay, ma’am. Officer DiCarlo and I will take care of the situation. What apartment is this Mullins woman in?”

“Apartment 2A, the apartment right above me. And her name is Veronica Mullins.” As an afterthought, she added, “I should have known she was no good the first time I met her. I got her mail by accident. You can tell a lot by someone’s mail.”

As they ascended the flight of steps, Gina asked, “I wonder what kind of mail this Mullins woman gets? And I still don’t hear any disturbances.” On cue, a boisterous laugh could be heard coming from the offender’s apartment.

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“There it is,” Steven commented and knocked on the door. The laughter on the other side of the door stopped and the floorboards creaked as someone approached and stopped to look through the peephole.

Muffled through the door, Gina and Steven heard a female voice say, “Guys, shut up. It’s the police.” The occupant unchained, unbolted, and unlocked the door before opening it fully. “Hello, officers. I didn’t call the police. Is everything okay?”

Gina was too distracted by the bright green eyes and soft wavy, blond hair of the woman who had opened the door to answer the question. Steven, however, was not distracted. “Ms. Veronica Mullins?”

She nodded with an uncomfortable smile. “That’s me.”

“There was a disturbing the peace call made in regard to this address. Do you mind explaining what is going on here?” Behind Veronica, five other women were sitting in a circle. In the center of the circle were three bottles of wine and multiple copies of the novel *Misery*.

“Oh...Um...Why don’t you two,” Veronica read their name tags, “Officer DiCarlo and Fields come in and I’ll explain. It’s really pretty funny, actually.”

Gina crossed the threshold. “Thank you, Ms. Mullins, but—”

“Roni.”

“Come again?” asked Gina, as Steven stepped in behind her.

“Please, call me Roni.”

“Roni.” Gina liked that name more anyway. And she really liked that now since she was inside the apartment, she

could appreciate all of her. Roni was trim with exceptionally shapely legs. Gina shifted her focus and cleared her throat. “There was a complaint lodged that you were violating your building’s quiet hours.”

Roni shook her head, annoyed yet amused. “It was Mrs. Fitzgerald, wasn’t it? The lady downstairs? She just doesn’t like me for some reason.” Roni turned to one of the women seated in the circle. “I told you this would happen, Sarah.”

“We’d rather not say who called in the complaint,” stated Steven, keeping his intimidating appearance in check. He was almost a full foot taller than Roni and used his height to scan everyone and everything in the apartment.

“Well, I’m very, very sorry you were called in for this. Normally we,” Roni gestured to the all-female group, “meet on the first Thursday of every month, but the holiday concert screwed up our schedule. Usually, this isn’t a problem because we meet when Mrs. Fitzgerald is out of her apartment for choir practice.”

“Holiday concert? You’re in a band?” asked Gina.

Roni laughed musically. “Oh no! We’re elementary school teachers and this is our book club.”

Steven turned his back and rolled his eyes. Gina, on the other hand, had a different reaction. “Book club?” she asked with delight and pointed to the copies of the novel on the coffee table. “You’re discussing *Misery*? I loved that book! I thought it had so much more depth compared to most of King’s other work...or at least the books of his that I’ve read.”

Roni smiled broadly at Gina, an act that softened her square jaw. “That’s what we were talking about! Well, that and how creepy it would be to see a thumb in a cake. That was probably the ruckus she heard downstairs.”

“Oh, dear Jesus,” muttered Steven in the background.

“I guess book clubs aren’t his thing.” Roni winked at the female officer—she was feeling playful, especially toward anyone in uniform with gorgeous Mediterranean features. Although, finishing a bottle of wine by herself did make her bolder than usual.

Gina smiled in return. It was hard not to when a pretty girl winked at her. “No, book clubs are definitely not his thing. They’re more of my thing.”

“You should join us,” suggested one of the other members from within the circle.

“Yeah!” Roni enthusiastically agreed. “It would be great getting the perspective of someone with your experiences. The rest of us have such similar backgrounds that sometimes it prevents us from having more meaningful conversations. Do you work Thursdays?”

“Not second shift, at least. Are you serious? You’d invite me into your club?”

“Yeah! It’ll be great. Next month is...” Roni snapped her fingers as she tried to remember. The wine might have been fun, but clouded her memory. “Help me out, Sarah.”

“*Clan of the Cave Bear*,” Sarah mumbled around a thumb-less piece of cake.

Roni grimaced. “That’s right. Historical fiction isn’t my favorite, but what are you going to do?” she asked rhetorically. “Still interested in coming?”

“Absolutely.” Gina watched as Roni went to the nearby desk and wrote on her Penn State stationary. “My resolution for next year is that I’m going to be more social and this is a great way to start.”

“It really would be.” Roni finished writing and handed Gina a slip of paper. “That’s the date and time of when we meet along with my phone number, in case you have any questions.”

“Thank you.” Gina graciously accepted the note. She also appreciated the accidental graze of Roni’s thumb that had slid over her finger. “I don’t think there will be a problem, but it’s good to have, just in case.” She peered over her shoulder to her partner. She could tell he hated every second of the past few minutes. “Officer Fields, I think the situation is taken care of.”

“You think?” Steven quipped and approached the circle of women. “Consider this a stern warning. Keep the noise down and wrap up your club soon. I don’t want called here again.”

“Absolutely, officers.” Roni led them out of her apartment. “Have a good night and I’ll see you next month, Officer DiCarlo.” She shut the door and smiled.

“I can’t believe that just happened,” commented Steven as they descended the stairs. “One of those ladies was actually wearing a sweater with a reindeer on it.”

“Gotta love school teacher fashion.”

“You just love the teachers, especially the ones with pretty green eyes.”

“Was it that obvious?” Gina asked, worried.

“Of course not. I’m the only one who knows that the only thing that shuts you up is a pretty lady. Just don’t forget,” they exited the building and entered the cold night, “you’re a married woman now.”

“I keep forgetting that,” Gina said seriously.

ONE MONTH LATER, JANUARY 1991

“HI, SORRY I’M LATE. BUSES were running a little behind.” Gina stood at the door with a paper bag, her sheepish expression framed by wind-blown short, dark hair.

Roni smiled and held the door open wider. “Not a problem. We just sat down with our drinks. Come on in and let me take your coat.” While Gina removed her coat, Roni suggested to the others, “Why don’t you all introduce yourselves while I put this with the others?”

The small group of mostly middle-aged women quickly rattled off their names. A woman with a gray-silver bob, Sarah, asked, “I’m guessing you don’t want us to call you ‘officer’?”

“That’s correct. Please call me Gina,” she sat and removed her book copy along with a bottle of wine. “The last time I was here I couldn’t help but notice what kind of book

club this was.”

“A very astute observation,” replied Roni. “There are glasses out and a corkscrew on the kitchen counter. Help yourself to the snack food we have out as well.”

A short while later, Gina returned with a glass of red and helped herself to a vacant seat across from Roni. “Who brought the all of that jerky I saw out there?”

Nancy’s frail hand went up proudly. “That’d be me. It seemed appropriate given the primitive nature of *Clan of the Cave Bear*.”

“We always try to bring some sort of snack or drink that relates the book we’re going to discuss,” added Mary. “And speaking of discussion...”

“There is to be no discussion of husbands, children, or work unless it relates to the book. This is a stress-free zone.” Louise, without her reindeer sweater, pointed out to the newcomer.

“I think that’ll be easy enough,” Gina said. “Especially for this book.”

“Really?” Sarah’s gray eyebrows arched in surprise. “There are definitely elements of male aggression. I would think that would seep through, between your profession and your husband.”

Gina was momentarily confused, but then caught on. “Oh, right,” she forced a laugh, “him. I’m a newlywed, so I keep forgetting.” She held up her left hand, which featured the simplest of gold wedding bands. “It’ll be difficult, but I promise I won’t bring him up.”

Roni watched her newest guest with extreme interest. She had never met a newlywed woman who didn’t talk about her new marriage incessantly, let alone a woman who had

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forgotten. Roni fluffed her blond hair off of her shoulder. “Well, now that we have that rule out of the way and we have our drinks, let’s talk about the book. I wrote down some topics of discussion.”

In two hours they discussed what it meant to be a “strong female” between thoughtful sips of wine and nibbles of jerky. They also explored the practicality of herbal remedies, the nature of beauty, and the pros and cons of banishment. Soon, the gathering wound down and the membership gathered their things to leave.

“What time does your bus come?” Roni asked Gina as she moved a chair back to her dining table.

“Not for another half-hour.” Gina picked up two chairs, one for each arm.

“You can stay here for a little while longer where it’s warm if you’d like.”

Gina smiled and truly appreciated the gesture. “I would like that. Although, that does sound like a ploy to get me to help you clean.”

“You caught me,” Roni teased. “But you’re already doing it anyway, so I can’t feel too bad.”

“See you tomorrow, Roni. See you next month, Gina.” The other women yelled as they left in mass.

“It was nice meeting you all. Drive them home safely, Francis.” Gina was pleased that while there was plenty of wine, there was also a designated driver.

Roni locked the door behind them and felt a sudden burst of anxiety. She had hoped Gina would take her up on her offer to stay, but realized she was now actually alone with the woman who possessed dark, penetrating eyes and strong arms. Roni made pushing in the chairs a complicated task to stall as

she thought of something to say. “You added great viewpoints tonight. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“I really did,” Gina continued to consolidate paper plates and napkins before she followed Roni into the tiny kitchen to throw them out. “I have to admit, while I love to read, I’ve never been a part of a book club before. I wasn’t entirely sure what to expect, but it met my expectations.” Gina paused as she did recall one strange moment as she casually leaned against the counter. “Okay, that’s not entirely true. I was a bit surprised when Sarah grabbed my bicep like that.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. She can get a little personal sometimes. I thought you took her comment about ‘not looking so tough’ pretty well.” Roni reached across Gina to tear a paper towel off the roll, “Pardon me.”

Gina was thrown by Roni’s sudden close proximity. Not that she minded the incidental contact. “I understood what she meant. Once I take off my vest and puffy police jacket I don’t look so big or intimidating, which is fine by me. I’m not trying to be intimidating when I discuss cavemen and feminism.”

Roni chuckled as she wiped down her countertop. “You’re pretty funny. I liked your crack about all the snappy dialogue there was in the book. Although, I think the sarcasm was lost on half of them.”

Gina smiled broadly at the compliment. “Well, just as long as you understand my jokes.” She peered into green eyes that were now scrutinizing her face. “What?”

Roni grinned, “You have a dimple when you smile.” She left out the part where smiling made Gina’s already delicate facial features even softer.

“See, I can’t be intimidating even if I wanted to be. Dimples don’t terrify.”

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“I bet that isn’t true at all,” Roni retorted and turned on the faucet to fill the kitchen basin. “I bet there are times you want to be and you can scare the hell out of people. Just like me.”

Gina snickered. That was just too funny. “Okay, I’ll admit given the situation I can be a little scary, but there is no way you could ever—” Roni narrowed her eyes and jutted out her broad jaw slightly, as she stared Gina down. They were similar heights, but Roni made her feel small, even with her ten-pound muscle advantage. It was like she was being reprimanded in Catholic school all over again. “I take it back. You’re terrifying. You direct that look at children?”

Roni smirked and added a squirt of soap to the water. “Only when they deserve it.”

Gina thoroughly enjoyed her time with Roni, but didn’t want to risk overstaying her welcome. “It looks like cleanup is just about done so I should probably get going. Just my luck the bus would be early this time. Plus, it’s a school night for you so I know you need to get your rest.”

“Don’t remind me—with tomorrow being Friday *and* just coming off of break, the kids definitely don’t want to be in school. Neither do the teachers, for that matter.” Roni saw that small dimple in Gina’s cheek emerge again. “I um...I should get your coat. Just give me a second.”

Roni met Gina by the door with the peacoat in her hand, reluctant to see her last guest leave. Gina did more than demonstrate that she was an interesting addition to the club. She was also kind and playful. “I really hope you’ll be able to come to next month’s book club.”

“Me too.” Truly, this was the most fun Gina had in ages. Roni was considerate, but had a dark, mischievous side. She suspected Roni had been keeping those traits a bit more in

check than normal. She wanted to be around to see more of that side emerge. “What’s next month’s book?”

“Love in the Time of Cholera.”

Gina shrugged her coat on. “Who doesn’t enjoy a good romance?”

“I know I do.” Roni casually leaned her slender frame against the door jamb and allowed herself the luxury of appreciating her guest’s attractive face one more time.

“Goodnight, Gina.”

Gina let the image of the leggy blonde in front of her settle into her brain so she could rewind it at will and remember the moment exactly as it was. “Goodnight, Roni.”

Gina handed Steven a cup of coffee and shifted her gun belt to sit comfortably in their patrol cruiser. “I used two packs of sugar this time.”

Steven took an appreciative swallow. “Mmmm. That’s more like it. Black and sweet, just like me. You ready?” At Gina’s eye roll, Steven turned the ignition and started the first loop of their shift. “I didn’t get a chance to ask you earlier. How was your book club?”

“It was fine.” Gina smiled and sipped her coffee.

Steven pursed his full lips and nodded. He wasn’t buying that answer. She only used three syllables in one sentence. But he knew that if he kept quiet long enough, Gina would spill her guts. It was a technique his older sister, Monica, used on him when he was a boy.

His silent response drove Gina mad. “Okay, I had a really good time. The book discussion was more interesting than I thought it would be, given the nature of the themes. This

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one woman brought phenomenal venison jerky. Afterwards, I helped Roni clean so I wouldn't have to stand in the cold. Her suggestion.”

“Her suggestion...Right,” he drawled out. “Did this extend any more of those vibes you had felt before?”

“It's tough to say. You know how some people are just naturally, really friendly? That may just be her way. Plus, I know what you're going to say—”

“You're married.”

“There it is. And speaking of my husband, did you two have a fun boys night?”

Steven grinned. “We went to the batting cages. I may have jogged around the bases afterward.”

“I bet you did.”

Roni sat with her friend, Allison, as they waited for their Educational Law class to start. Their matching hair, fair coloring, and figures made them almost twin-like. This was somewhat fitting since they had been sorority sisters at Penn State. After graduating from college, they both followed the job market to central Pennsylvania. Naturally, starting graduate school together in Educational Leadership seemed like the next logical step.

“Back for more, huh?” Allison asked.

“Yeah, I guess we're both gluttons for punishment. How was your semester break?”

“Positively fantastic. It was great having a few weekends where I didn't have to use a t-test. How about you?”

“I read a lot. Fun stuff though, not this,” Roni held up

their tome.

“Are you still in that book club with your friends from school?”

“I am, and things just got a lot more interesting. You know, if you wanted to, you could come.”

Allison bit down on her lower lip as she thought about the offer. It could be fun. “Nah, I just got HBO. Between grad school, teaching, and that, my evenings are pretty filled. I love that they can swear and show nudity.” Her attention drifted to the show in front of her. “Oh boy, look at this guy.”

Their instructor for the semester waltzed into the room with extremely torn jeans, flip-flops, and a tee shirt that read, *More Bush in '92*. “Welcome to Educational Law. Is there anything wrong with my outfit?”

Allison whispered to Roni, “This is a good omen for you—this guy likes bush too.”

“Shut up, Allison.”

ONE MONTH LATER, FEBRUARY 1991

OH GOD, SHE'S GOING TO hate me. Faint frown lines appeared on Roni's face. "You're going to hate me." Gina stood outside of Roni's threshold. "Why would I hate you? And are you wearing pajamas?"

Shit. And I'm not wearing makeup either. "Yes, I am. But please come in and make yourself comfortable. I'll explain both the hating and the pajamas."

Gina did just that as Roni explained to her how they had to cancel book club at the last minute due to a raging stomach virus that was going around the school. She had left a message on Gina's answering machine earlier in the day to tell her of the postponed event. But, clearly, Gina didn't receive it in time.

"I'm really, really sorry, Gina," Roni said, in her

oversized PSU sweatshirt and sweatpants while they sat at either end on her couch. “You came all the way out here for nothing.”

“It’s okay. It’s not too far and I’m sure you did leave the message in time. Steven and Early are just awful at relaying messages to me...probably because no one ever leaves me any.”

Roni propped her arm up on the top of the couch. “You live with two men?”

Gina blew an exaggerated breath out. “Yeah, I do. I have four brothers so I knew what I was getting myself into. I live with Steven, my partner, who you met, and Early.”

“That’s an unusual name. Early is your husband?”

Gina folded her lips inward and nodded. “Yep. He’s from Louisiana, although his name is pretty much the only southern thing about him.”

“Interesting. And he’s fine living with your partner?”

“Oh, they’re pretty good friends. Very close, those two. They’re doing boys night while I’m at book club.”

“I guess that arrangement works out pretty well then.”

“It does.” She regarded Roni quizzically. “You know, most people are normally shocked that I work and live with Steven.”

Roni shrugged her shoulders, which had practically disappeared in the large sweatshirt. “Why? Rent is high in the city and a room’s a room. I mean, I would probably get sick of having to live and work with the same person, but I don’t judge how other people want to live their lives.”

Gina smiled at the news. She should have known that Roni would understand and be non-judgmental. “I’m glad you see it that way, but speaking of living life, I should probably let

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you get back to your evening since we're not meeting tonight.” Gina started to rise, but Roni lightly pressed her hand on Gina's knee.

“Nonsense. You're here, so we can still talk about the book or just get to know each other. Besides, ‘my evening’ was going to consist of watching *L.A. Law*.”

“I love *L.A. Law*!”

Roni sat up quickly and tucked her feet underneath of her body in one swift move. The act was spontaneous and joyful, but also graceful. It brought an immediate smile to Gina's face. Roni excitedly asked, “We could talk about the book and then watch the show together? I see you brought some wine, you could have that while I nurse my tea.”

“Actually, could I keep the wine here for next time? Tea and conversation sound great.”

Roni left to make their tea while Gina laid out her notes and copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera* on the coffee table. She had noticed how well prepared Roni had been last month and wanted to come with her own, hopefully original, ideas. Gina skimmed over her notes. She had some insight about love letter correspondence due to what she had witnessed when she was in the Army. She also noted the importance of public health and safety, and the virtues of fantasy love versus reality. The creaking of boards caused her to stop reading and glance up. Roni had undergone a transformation while making tea. *My God, she's gorgeous.* “You look...different.”

Roni had changed into jeans and a v-neck cotton shirt. “Now that I have company I thought I should clean myself up a bit. I love that ratty sweatshirt, but I like to reserve it for when I'm either depressed or alone.” She rested the tea tray on the coffee table and was pleased to learn that under Gina's peacoat, she was wearing a fitted sweater. The material hugged her

surprisingly ample chest and highlighted the tiny gold hoops she wore. “You’re looking more comfortable now too.”

“I am more comfortable. Thank you for making this,” Gina picked up her teacup and thought of Roni’s sweatshirt, even though her new look was definitely more flattering. “Did you go to Penn State? You seem to have a lot of their stuff.”

“Yes, I did,” Roni stirred a sugar cube into her tea, “much to my parents’ chagrin. They wanted me to go to Pitt. That’s where I’m from.”

Gina’s mouth opened in pleasant surprise. “No way. I’m from Bloomfield!”

Roni grinned. “Little Italy? There’s a shocker. Technically, I’m from near Bethel Park, but no one usually knows what that means so I just say Pittsburgh.”

Gina’s brow furrowed as she thought. “Bethel Park? Isn’t that...”

“In the sticks? Yeah. I grew up on a dairy farm away from society.” She sipped her tea. “That’s how I got into books, actually. I didn’t like it there, nor was there anything to do that I liked. So, I read as an escape. Of course, it didn’t help that my brother, David, was there.” Roni contemplated the relationship she had with her brother. “I still kind of hate him.”

“My brothers were okay to me growing up. I had to share a room with my brother, Enzo, until I was eleven, but then I got my own room because Antonio and Sal moved out. I was pretty close with Enzo, but having the quiet of my own space really gave me an appreciation of reading. It let me go to my own world. Then I kept reading once I enlisted in the Army. Where I was also surrounded by men.”

Roni would have killed herself if she had to live that way. “My imagination isn’t vast enough to picture living with

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all of those different guys.”

Gina shrugged. “You get used to it. Why do you hate your brother?” If Gina’s hands hadn’t been cupped around her tea, she would have slapped herself on the forehead with one of them. “I’m sorry. That’s too personal.”

Roni folded her legs on the couch again in that perfect, elegant movement. “It’s fine. My parents just always favored him. They wanted me to be a boy so I could help on the farm. Since I wasn’t a boy, they just ignored me. David knew that, so he used it as a chance to pick on me. At home, it wasn’t so bad as when we were in school. He’s only two years older so we were in the same school a lot together.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I can make a call, have him pulled over,” she added with a grin.

Roni smiled back. “That’s okay, it worked out for the best. If I had been more influenced by my family I might not have been able to form my own opinions and personality as easily. They’re pretty backwoods.” She sipped her tea and shook her head in disapproval. “I want to hear more about your time in the military. That’s pretty exciting.”

“It was pretty boring, actually. When I wasn’t reading, I drove people around. Which isn’t much different than what I do now.” She mused with a smirk. “I was mostly stationed in Europe acting as a translator.”

“Oh, what languages?”

“Italian. And some Spanish. They’re pretty similar.”

Intrigued, Roni leaned forward on her crossed legs. “That is so fascinating. Did you join the police as soon as you were done with your service?”

“I did. I was paired up with Steven immediately...Talk about a perfect match. He’s my rock and best friend. I honestly

don't know what I'd do without him." In fact, Steven was the best man she had ever known. He was reliable, responsible, and sensitive when he needed to be. Gina's brow furrowed slightly as she thought of the one negative aspect of their partnership. "There's this one guy at work who calls us the 'Affirmative Action Duo'. I really hate that guy."

"I'd hate it if I had that nickname too." Roni thought of their stories, and while different, were running parallel. "We're probably about the same age. Twenty-four?"

"I turned twenty-five a few months ago. I guess I'm the older and wiser of the two of us." Gina feigned an air of superiority and sipped her tea.

Roni laughed and it warmed Gina's heart. "I don't know about wiser, but older I'll give you. Why don't you share some of these notes you wrote and then I'll determine just how wise you are?"

Gina read her notes thoroughly. Roni was taken by how sensitive and perceptive Gina was. Her ability to sympathize with the point-of-view of the different characters was especially interesting. No one else in the book club would do that. In addition to enjoying Gina's slightly husky voice, Roni appreciated that someone else did most of the research for a change. All she needed to do was chime in with her own conclusions and thoughts.

"I never really thought about how feelings of love could be similar to being ill, but maybe that's because I've never experienced love as intensely as Florentino did," Roni concluded.

"I don't think most people have. But I do think most have experienced heartbreak so visceral it's reduced them to purging their system."

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Roni sat back into her couch and flashed back to her first real relationship. Allison held her weeping body as Roni poured her heart out and, consequently, came out to her. “That, unfortunately, I can relate to.”

“I’m sorry.” Gina’s eyes held nothing but sympathy. “I didn’t mean to say something to make you feel uncomfortable. Was it recent?”

“No,” Roni smiled sadly, “but it still hurts to think about sometimes. I guess you can’t truly understand or appreciate great romantic love until you’ve had the pain to compare it to, which is exactly what you just said. You know...you’re pretty smart.”

“For a cop, right?” Gina had heard that so many times she debated getting business cards with it written.

“No. You’re just pretty smart.”

Gina grinned and tucked her head down bashfully, causing some of her loose, dark hair to sweep into her eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Roni resisted the urge to move the hair that was covering Gina’s eyes. Instead, she glanced down and saw that Gina’s cup was empty. “Would you like some more tea before the show starts?”

“I’d love some, but are you sure you wouldn’t rather I head home? I mean, I’ve had a great time, but I don’t want to intrude on your personal space or time.”

Roni giggled at Gina’s rambling and bent to pick up the tea tray. “I don’t think you’re intruding at all. To be honest, I’ve really enjoyed your company so I’d like you to stay—unless, of course, you need to scamper back to Early.”

Gina tried not to stare at Roni’s bent form. “I would

really hate to interrupt his boys night. I'll stay put."

"Great! Why don't you get the TV cued up and I'll get us more tea."

On opposite ends of the couch, they watched *L.A. Law* in comfortable silence, sipped tea, and stole the occasional glance. Roni noticed that Gina's hair appeared longer than last she saw her and she was pushing it behind her ear often, only to have the strand fall again. Roni bet it felt as smooth as black silk. Gina observed that when Roni was anxious about something on the TV, she would bite her lower lip. That lip was so full and soft. Roni bit her lip often towards the end of the show.

The onscreen behavior had started off benign. Two female characters were talking and laughing as they walked out of a restaurant to a parked car. They hugged as female friends usually do at the end of the evening, but then the taller of the two leaned in for a kiss. And then another. It wasn't a passionate kiss, but it wasn't a chaste kiss either.

Both Roni and Gina turned their heads to each other at the same time to catch the other's reaction to the display of affection before them.

"So," Gina began and cleared her throat, "that was unexpected."

"It was." Roni nodded her head in agreement, but needed to subtly find out answers to a few questions that had been gnawing at her "Did watching two women kiss like that bother you?"

Nice and calm, DiCarlo. "No. Did watching two women kiss like that bother you?" asked Gina timidly.

"I can't say that it does. You know," Roni placed their tea cups back on the tray, "in the past, I may have had a few

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women kiss me.” She left for the kitchen not able to bear a possible look of contempt from Gina.

“Really?” Gina followed her, anxious to get to the bottom of this disclosure. “What did you think?”

“That doesn’t bother you? That I’ve been kissed by women?”

“No, I’m not bothered.” *Let’s get to the real question.* “What did you think?”

Roni smirked, pleased by Gina’s persistence and apparent comfort level. “Let’s just say, some kisses are better than others.”

“Oh.” Gina wished her jeans had pockets so she had somewhere to put her nervous hands. She settled for placing her hands on the counter behind her. “I’d have to agree with you that some kisses are better than others.”

“Kisses, in general, or just kisses from women?” Roni inquired, as she decreased the distance between them to place the cups into her washing bin. She grinned at Gina’s confounded expression, but decided to catch her a break. “But I suppose that’s the kind of thing you don’t need to concern yourself with now that you’re married. Your lips are for his only.”

“Yeah, my lips are for his only,” Gina said more glum than she wanted to. The reality of her marriage reminded her of another inconvenience. “The bus!”

“Shit!” Roni had completely forgotten too. “Did you miss it? I can drive you to the stop.”

“That’s okay. All I have to do is hustle.” Gina dashed from the kitchen, pulled her peacoat on quickly, and collected her note-stuffed book. “What’s next month’s book? I’ll be near

the library tomorrow and I'd like to see if they have it.”

“Um. I forget. I have a list somewhere on my desk.”
Roni shuffled through the papers on her desk near the door.
“Ah ha! Here it is. March is *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. That should be an interesting discussion.”

“I don't even know what it's about,” Gina wrapped her scarf securely around her neck.

“Oh, I think it's right up your alley,” Roni smiled and opened the door once she saw that Gina had all of her things.
“I'm glad you decided to stay. I had a lot of fun.”

“Me too. Goodnight, Roni.”

“Goodnight, Gina.”

“You need to be careful,” warned Steven, as he jogged alongside Gina.

“I am! I'm not touching or flirting. I'm not dressing provocatively in any way, shape, or form.”

“I don't even know if you'd know how to dress provocatively.”

“Shut up. You'd be surprised what kind of response I get from the ladies when I try.”

“I've seen the response, remember?”

Gina chuckled to herself. Sometimes going to bars where Early performed did have its advantages. “I'm behaving myself the best I can and it's nice to think that I might have a friend that's not you or Early. I've been in this town for three years and don't have any other friends. I'm lonely.”

“Okay. That I understand. You haven't really branched out into your own social group. Even I have my baseball team

to hang with and Early has his people.”

“Right! This book club could be a great start for me. Really, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m keeping myself under control and she’s probably not even gay. A lot of women experiment in college or have had a round of truth-or-dare. All the lesbian-based evidence is entirely circumstantial.”

“Wouldn’t hold up in court,” Steven added helpfully.

“Exactly. She’s probably just really nice and going out of her way to make me feel welcome.”

“Keep thinking that.” Steven slapped her on the back and sprinted ahead.

“I swear to you, this class is tons better than last semester’s Understanding Education Statistics,” Allison tried to convince her friend.

“Yeah,” Roni stated simply.

Allison eyed her suspiciously. “What’s up with you? You’re really quiet.”

“I’m getting over some kind of bug and I just have a lot on my mind.” Roni flipped to her notes from last week’s class.

“Which makes it even weirder, because when you’re preoccupied you usually won’t shut up.” Roni stared ahead, wishing the professor would start class. “Hmmm.” Allison continued to scrutinize her friend.

Roni gave her perfected teacher glare to her friend. “Stop analyzing me. You opted not to go the school counselor route, remember?”

“I got it!” Allison, being a teacher herself, was immune to Roni’s glower. “Who is she?”

Roni squirmed in her seat from frustration. Allison knew her too well. “She just joined my book club. Her name is Gina and she’s a cop.”

“Knew it!” Allison smiled triumphantly. “Is she butch?”

“More in appearance than demeanor. She’s so insightful and funny, even though she doesn’t try to be. She didn’t freak out when I mentioned that in the past I had kissed women.”

“Woah! How’d that come up?” It took Roni two years to come out to Allison and that was only because she was a crying, drunk mess after her first girlfriend dumped her for a member of Delta Chi.

“We were watching *L.A. Law* and there was that kiss so I asked her if that made her feel uncomfortable.” Allison nodded, given the hoopla that episode made, the conversation topic made sense. “It didn’t. Add on the fact that she has those dark Italian features going for her and a voice could melt butter—throaty, but not too throaty.”

“Not Kathleen Turner throaty?”

“Right.” Roni sighed, forlorn by a single fact. “And she’s married...even if she is really, really gay.”

Allison’s excited face fell. “Well, if she’s married it doesn’t matter how gay or hot or smart she is. You,” she pointed sternly at her friend, “need to respect the vow even if you didn’t take one yourself. At the most, you can indulge yourself in a little fantasy. But you should just be happy with the fact that you may have made a friend other than me. A friend who, by the sounds of it, won’t care that you’re a lesbian.”

“You’re right,” Roni begrudgingly admitted. “Even if I do think that she’s gay, she still made the decision to marry this Early guy. I need to respect that.” Roni opened her notebook

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and thought about Allison's suggestion of fantasy. "Do you think she's allowed to use her handcuffs for personal use?"

ONE MONTH LATER, MARCH 1991

GINA COULD NOT BELIEVE HOW slowly time moved.

So slowly, in fact, she volunteered for extra duty in the hope to make time move faster. She helped direct concert traffic and even did tours of a few different classrooms talking about Stranger Danger. The latter experience was truly frightening—twenty incredibly small people stared at her and asked questions. She didn't know how Roni did it.

Dammit! Stop thinking about her. Gina knew she had to stop her infatuation with the blonde. All it was doing was adding tension and possibly complicating her already complicated marriage further.

Gina did the only thing she knew of that could take her mind off of the situation. She reached for her copy of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, propped herself up

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with a few pillows, and lounged comfortably as she started to read in bed. She enjoyed the writing style, the quirky characters, and the vivid setting of the turbulent nature of the Deep South. As she read, she felt the need to reread the page she had just read. And then she read it for a third time, just to make sure she wasn't missing a small detail that would change her assessment. But she hadn't missed anything and what she had read made her smile.

“Oh, my.”

“Oh my God, Gina, what did you bring?” Roni laughed, as she opened the door further. Gina held an overstuffed paper bag in her hands.

“I may have gone a little overboard at the store, but I was inspired. Since you said on the phone that you were making iced tea, I bought all kinds of snacks the characters would have liked. If we had green tomatoes up here, I would have made those.”

“You've made fried green tomatoes?” Roni asked surprised and took the bag from Gina.

“No, but it can't be that much different than eggplant. I make a mean eggplant parm.” She watched Roni arrange the snacks meticulously on a platter and then lick honey glaze off of her thumb. Gina had never been so envious of a thumb in her life. She also realized how much of a challenge the evening was going to be. Gina muttered, “I'm such an idiot.”

“Did you say something?” A knock at the door disrupted Roni's organization and her follow-up question. “Oh, sounds like the rest of the gang is here. Would you mind getting the door? I'm all sticky,” she held up her shiny fingers.

Gina nodded since her ability to form words was

paralyzed. *God help me—she’s sticky.*

Based on the themes of the book, Roni anticipated this to be one of their more thought-provoking conversations, but she hadn’t expected it to be so captivating or spirited.

“Our society is so obsessed with anorexic ‘beauty’ right now, it’s disgusting,” commented Francis, who like many women felt the burden of accumulated weight over the years.

“I agree,” interjected Louise. “What happened to being healthy and beautiful? I mean, there is still the classic beauty, like Roni.”

“I’m not—”

“Oh, shut up, Roni. Yes, you are. Must be all of the dancing you do.”

All nodded their agreement except for Gina who was busy entertaining herself with images of Roni dancing. That did explain why Roni had such a grace about her when she moved.

Sarah noticed Gina’s silence right away. “You don’t agree, Gina?”

Gina felt trapped. It was just like when Roni showed Gina her intimidating look, except multiple teachers stared her down. She looked to Roni for assistance, but she absently flipped through the book, trying to ignore the fact she had been dragged into this. Gina swallowed nervously. “I...ah...of course, I agree. Roni is very attractive. She has beautiful eyes.” With that comment, Gina’s eyes met the emerald eyes she spoke of and Roni coyly smiled.

“That reminds me,” Sarah jumped in, “I heard that some people think there are lesbian tones to this book. I didn’t get that at all.”

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“Are you kidding?” Roni exclaimed in outrage. “It’s plain as day.”

“It is not,” remarked Louise. “You’re reading into the story too much.”

“She is not!” Gina backed up Roni. “The love that Idgie has for Ruth is undeniable and heartbreaking.”

Sarah chortled, “That I’ll agree with, but Ruth did *not* reciprocate.”

“She did too!” Roni defended Gina. “Her protector, her ‘beecharmer.’ And how about this? If Ruth was so traditional and good-looking, why didn’t she remarry after leaving that awful man? I’ll tell you why. Because she loved and was committed to Idgie just as much as Idgie loved and was committed to her! End of story.”

Louise rolled her eyes. “Ruth didn’t want to remarry because her first husband beat the tar out of her. And just because she didn’t remarry doesn’t mean she’s a lesbian.” She gestured to Roni, “You’re getting up there in your years and you’re unmarried, doesn’t mean that you’re a lesbian.”

“I’m twenty-four! Okay, twenty-five next week, but since when is that old?” Roni chose to ignore the other suggestion.

“It’s not old,” answered Nancy, the eldest of the group at fifty-seven. “But that does bring up how aging was portrayed in the book. I’d like to talk about that next.”

“Oh, I wanted to talk about race,” interjected Mary. “Can we talk about race?”

After more heated conversation of aging and race, the book club was adjourned. The older women felt proud to have life experience. The heavier women vowed to view their health through energy and not a number on a scale. And both Roni

and Gina were riled up from having to defend lesbian subtext that was hardly hidden.

The others walked out of the apartment, but Mary paused at the door. “Gina, are you coming to the movie next week?”

“What movie?” Gina looked directly at Roni for the answer.

“I’ll fill her in while we clean up. I’ll see you all at school tomorrow,” said Roni as she picked cups off of the floor. The door shut and she found herself alone with Gina once again. She noticed Gina’s dark brown hair was trimmed shorter on her neck, but longer up top. *Just long enough to grab*. “Did you get your hair cut?”

“Yeah, I did. It was getting a bit too long for my liking. I’m surprised you noticed.” Shock would have been a more accurate term.

“Well, I did, and it looks nice,” Roni smiled and stacked the cups with the rest. “So, movie night...nights, actually. We’ve never done a movie night as a book club before, but it’s *Silence of the Lambs* so, we feel like it’s our duty to see how true it is to the novel. We were talking about it at school and settled on Tuesday and Thursday nights next week. Would you like to come?”

All Gina needed to hear was the title and she was sold on the idea. “I’d love to go. The book was fantastic.” She did a mental check of her schedule as she picked more trash off the coffee table. “I work Tuesday night, but I could go on Thursday.”

“Great! That’s when Mary and I are going. She could only get a sitter for Thursday night and I have grad school Tuesday night.”

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Gina consolidated the snack trash in the disposable cups. “I thought you were in grad school. The last time I was here you had a law book on your table. Even for someone as studious as you, I doubted that was reading material for pleasure.”

“I think I should call you Detective DiCarlo.” Gina smiled wide enough to show her lone dimple and Roni’s heart swelled at the sight. “Do you have to run home or would you like to stay for *L.A. Law* again?” Roni thought that was an innocent enough suggestion.

“I don’t know if I should.” She saw subtle frown lines mar Roni’s pristine face. She couldn’t be responsible for that. “What I mean is, the last time I almost missed the bus, so I could watch most of it but then I’d have to leave when there’re five or ten minutes left. You can tell me how it ends over the phone?”

“Or we could watch it together and I drive you to the bus stop when it’s over?” *Friends do that.*

“Sounds fun.” *I’ll just sit several feet from you.*

“Repeat that last part,” Allison asked, as she pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, “because it sounds like you just said she smelled you.”

“I didn’t say that. I said ‘purposeful inhale’ when her nose was in my hair. I’m probably imagining it, but I did not imagine the hug. That happened.”

“Roni,” she drawled in warning.

“I know what you’re thinking and I’ve been good. She initiated the hug when I dropped her off at the bus stop. She was very grateful.” Roni wore a blissful expression as she thought about the embrace. “She hugs likes I dreamed she

would.”

“Who dreams of hugs?”

“I do, okay! Between teaching, this class, and my married fantasy woman, all I have are dreams.” She smiled mischievously, “Which do lead to more than just hugs, but they’re just harmless dreams.”

“If you say so,” Allison remarked skeptically. “Just do yourself a favor and don’t sit next to her during this movie. The last thing you need is to sit next to her, in the dark, seeking protection during a horror movie.”

“Coconut. I said her hair smells like coconut.” Gina slammed the door to the back of the patrol car leaving their serial shoplifter squirming inside. “Roni drove me to the bus stop, which in the female friend world means a gratitude hug. It would have been weird if I hadn’t hugged her. And then during the hug, I needed to breathe so I inhaled. If I don’t breathe, I’ll die. That is a fact!”

Steven paused at the passenger side. “The deal was to be married a year in case there was any suspicion. You’ve only been married six months. This puts all of us at risk, Gina.”

“But why can’t I be married and see Roni? Lots of married guys have mistresses.” The idea of Roni as a mistress instantly placed sexual images of Roni in red lingerie into Gina’s mind. “As long as she knows I’m married, which she does, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Gina, eventually, you can see her romantically if she’s into it. My concern is trust more than anything. I trust you. I trust Early. I don’t trust this girl.”

Gina pointed sternly. “She’s not a girl. She’s a woman

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—a smart, compassionate, and beautiful woman.”

Steven sighed. Clearly, she wasn't going to give up. “Just please be careful, Gina. If this Roni *woman* isn't who you think she is you *would* lose your job and could go to jail. Early could go to jail too and I would probably be forced to resign.”

Gina stood with her hands on her hips. She hated that her partner was right. She was letting a crush jeopardize her life and the lives of her two best friends. “I know. I'll try harder. I won't even sit beside her at the movie.”

“Good.” Steven wanted to see his friends happy, but he needed to see that his friends were safe. However, the shift of excitement to disappointment in his friend's eyes made him soften his harsh tone. “Look, I'm sorry you're lonely, Gina. I really am. I want to see you happy. I want all of us to be happy. I'm just asking that you—”

“I know, Steven!” Gina snapped and instantly regretted it. “I get it. I'll try harder.”

Gina stood inside the theatre and checked her watch. Mary and Roni were late, and to her knowledge, teachers were never late. That was why she had arrived early. She even had time to sneak into the bookstore and get a small gift. A quick tap on the shoulder took her attention away from the coming attraction poster she had been reading. She turned to a wonderful, but slightly surprising sight. “Hi, Roni. Where's Mary?”

“Mary wasn't able to come. She called me just before I was about to leave to tell me that her sitter canceled at the last minute. I guess that stomach virus is still around.” Her hands nervously fidgeted in her denim jacket pockets. “Sorry, I'm late.”

“That's okay. Is it just us then?” Gina tried not to sound

as anxious as she felt when she asked.

“Yep.” Roni rocked back and forth trying to look casual. “Well, um, I don’t know about you, but when I go to the movies, I hit the concessions.”

“Me too. Would you like to share some popcorn?”

“Yeah. And we can split a soda.”

They walked their snacks into the theatre and shared an amused look. “Where would you like to sit?” Gina asked rhetorically in the almost completely empty theatre.

Roni smiled and led the way to a pair of seats in the center. She shrugged off her coat and revealed a red sweater that was equally as tight as her jeans. This time Roni caught Gina staring, but what she was staring at she didn’t know. “Everything okay? I didn’t sit on gum, did I?”

“No! No gum. Everything’s fine,” she said as soon as moisture returned to her mouth. “I just realized I forgot to grab a second straw for the drink. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, okay.” *This is good. People who are just friends don’t share saliva.* “I’ll make sure no one steals your seat.”

Roni watched the screen as the previews started and Gina left to get a second straw. When Gina snuck back into the dark room, she sat and whispered, “I grabbed more napkins too. They went really overboard when I asked for extra butter.”

“I don’t mind slippery.” *Did I just say that?*

Did she just say that? Gina’s mind whirled with imagery of a slippery Roni as she stared at her movie date dumbfounded and tried to think of a witty retort. “I have a straw.” *Smooth.* “I, um...I’ll bend it so we know it’s mine.”

Roni nodded her understanding and they continued to watch the previews. As the movie opened, she reached for a

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fistful of popcorn and flashed an easy smile at Gina. “I’m really excited for the movie.”

“Me too. Oh, I almost forgot.” She reached inside her jacket pocket, but kept her hand hidden from view. “Close your eyes.”

Roni smiled at Gina’s playfulness, but did as instructed. Gina reached in her pocket and removed her recent mall purchase. “Okay, you can open them now. Happy birthday! You mentioned something last week in book club about it.”

Roni smiled and took the gift from Gina. It was silly, but the silhouette dancer bookmark was the best present she had received. “Where did you get this?”

“The bookstore here in the mall. It’s just a little thing, literally, but someone said that you danced last week. I thought you might like it.”

“You were right, I do like it.” Roni leaned over the armrest for a hug. “I don’t know what I’m more struck by, how you remember every single detail or how thoughtful you are.”

The last hug they shared had a tinge of awkwardness to it, but this was so spontaneous they had no choice but to join together in a way their bodies best saw fit. When she pulled back, Gina still saw the joy in her bright eyes. Every part of her wanted to lean in further, except her brain. *Don’t kiss her.* With her brain engaged she was able to resume the conversation. “I make it a rule to be nice to my friends, especially the ones who have gone out of their way to make me feel welcome. You’re very kind. I hope you know that.”

Roni had been called a lot of things: obsessive, neurotic, a control freak—kind was not an adjective she heard often. “I honestly don’t know what to say.”

Gina smiled softly. “You don’t have to say anything

except maybe ‘thank you’.”

Roni reciprocated the sweet smile directed at her.
“Thank you.”

Gina gulped and turned her attention to the screen. Any more eye contact with Roni and she knew she would cave.
“You’re welcome.”

During the film, they sipped their Coke and ate their very buttery popcorn while occasionally they asked the other a question or commented about the movie. Generally speaking, they were pleased, but noticed discrepancies between what was on screen and the novel. At one point, Gina made a disgruntled noise, but the movie still captured their full attention. When the film reached its climax in the pitch-black basement, both Gina and Roni felt Clarice Starling’s fear.

Especially Roni.

Instinctually, Roni gripped Gina’s forearm as Clarice was stalked with night vision goggles. Gina gripped the armrests on each side of her and hadn’t noticed Roni’s hand clutching her until after Buffalo Bill met his demise. She felt Roni’s fingers wrapped around her, but the experience was short lived. Roni realized her faux pas and removed her hand.

When the credits finally rolled, they were both completely overwhelmed by their cinematic experience. Between the movie and their close proximity, their heart rates had yet to come back down to normal as they exited the theatre. They left together in silence until Gina said what they were both thinking. “That was intense.”

“Thank God you thought so too. I thought maybe I was being a wimp.” Her sore fingers were a reminder of that fact.
“And I’m sorry about your arm.”

“It’s okay. Nothing a little ice and compression won’t

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take care of. You have quite a grip.”

“It must be from all of those notes I take and papers I grade.” Despite being scared out of her wits for the past two hours, Roni did not want her evening to end. “I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty wound up right now. Would you like to do anything else?”

“Well, there is something I’d like to look up in the book that’s going to nag at me if I don’t confirm my suspicions. Do you still have it by any chance?”

“I do. What do you want to look up?” Roni unlocked the passenger side first when they reached her car. Gina looked at her quizzically. “You’re getting in the car,” Roni said with a confident grin. “There’s no way you’re waiting in the damp cold for the bus to go to my place.”

“Guess that makes sense,” Gina said as she got into the vehicle. “Anyway, to answer your question, Lecter said something in the movie that I’m almost positive wasn’t in the book. When he was talking about eating that guy’s liver, he said he paired it with Chianti. I know that was changed from the book.”

Roni started the car. “Is that why you made that little upset noise?”

“I made a noise?”

“You did.” Roni pulled out of the dark lot. “Maybe after we check out this supposed inconsistency of yours we can have some wine and talk?”

“Sounds good to me.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK my wife for encouraging me to write, editing the first draft, and creating the cover to the first edition. You're the best and I love you.

I am forever grateful to Korrie (teaching me about the “no fly zone”), my mother, Mayme, and “Two Sandwich” for their insight and editing contributions.

I would like to compliment “Dr. Twinkie” for her calm reaction when she learned I wrote a novel during the “downtime” of my thesis. I finished both...eventually.

I also need to thank all of the television, movies, and books I referenced in this novel.

Lastly, I would like to thank the trailblazers of the gay community, including my Yodas, for standing proud and

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fighting the good fight.

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