



# The Mask He Wears

Fae Sutherland & Marguerite Labbe

## THE MASK HE WEARS

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ALSO BY FAE SUTHERLAND &  
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*629 Miles To Love*  
*Fortunate Son*

# THE MASK HE WEARS

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BY

FAE SUTHERLAND &  
MARGUERITE LABBE

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THE MASK HE WEARS  
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*For our readers, past, present and future:  
Thank you for your support and enthusiasm.  
Without you, we'd be nowhere.*

*—Fae and Marguerite*

# CHAPTER 1

Ian adjusted his mask, glancing around as he stepped into the opulent ballroom. It was decked out in garish extravagance as was the norm for Mardi Gras. The room teemed with masked ladies in ball gowns, masked men in suits and tuxedos, a handful of braver souls having gone all out in costumes complete with feathers and beads and glaringly bright colors.

Ian had opted for his best suit, with a bright, metallic gold tie to match his gold mask. The firm had invited all their employees to this fundraiser, but still Ian felt a little out of his element. Making conversation with a senior partner in the elevator at work was one thing; sidling up to make conversation here was different.

There was one reason he'd come and one reason only—Stephen Caulfield. A man with a brilliant mind, a devastating smile

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and an ass that made Ian's mouth water. Also...his boss. Despite the strict no-fraternization rules and despite not even knowing if Stephen swung gay or not, Ian hadn't been about to pass up an opportunity to see him. Especially outside of work, possibly tipsy.

A shiver of awareness raced down his spine and Ian turned, not surprised to find Stephen across the room, eyes on him. Ian gave him a small smile and a nod of hello. His heart raced as Stephen excused himself from his conversation with one of the senior partners and picked up another glass of champagne as he easily worked his way through the crowd.

Ian took a steadying breath and straightened as the other man approached. Stephen closed the distance between them and handed Ian the second glass with a smile. "I'm glad you showed, Ian."

Ian's stomach flipped over as he took it, their fingers brushing. The sizzle of electricity raced up his arm, and Ian's eyes flicked up to Stephen's, quick enough to wonder if he'd seen a flash of the same heat in the other man's dark eyes. Good God, he was breathtaking.

Stephen wore a white suit that on anyone else would probably have looked pimptastic, but on him just looked devastatingly smooth and heart-poppingly sexy. His mask was white leopard fur, emphasizing his chocolate brown eyes and olive skin and the precise tumble of jet-black hair across his forehead. Just enough rake to turn heads and weaken knees, but not so much that he wasn't perfectly proper. The combination was all the more bone-melting, and Ian wondered if he'd have to be mopped up by the time the night was through.

"Well, you went to the trouble of making sure I was on the list, it would've been rude not to come." Sure, that was why. If Stephen believed that, he might not be as worldly as he seemed.



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Stephen smiled, a quick flickering of his lips, and tapped his glass against Ian's. The tiny crystalline clink sounded above the muttered voices and string quartet. It sounded...promising. "Here's to tonight then."

Ian smiled in return, the air heavy with an arousing tension. "Tonight," he murmured back.

There was a moment of silence as they each took a sip of the champagne, eyes meeting over the fine crystal before Stephen glanced away, gesturing to the throng around them. New Orleans had turned out in all its best glitz and old world glamour, and Ian had never seen anything like Mardi Gras before.

"What do you think?"

Ian forced himself to tear his gaze from Stephen and look around. He smiled, shaking his head. "I think I feel like I've slipped down the rabbit hole." He took another sip of the champagne and then gestured with his glass. "They don't do it up like this where I come from."

"Georgia, right? Atlanta?"

Ian shook his head. "No, a little town nobody's ever heard of, and for good reason. We had one stop light and the railroad tracks—that's about it." Ian had gotten out as soon as he could manage it, though his folks still lived in the same house he'd grown up in and he went back to visit every chance he got.

"There's charm to small town life as well," Stephen said, and Ian chuckled.

"Now you're just humoring me."

Stephen shook his head and angled his body toward Ian, making his breath quicken. It always did when Stephen was close. "No, I'm not. I spent a good portion of my life in a small town, too." He grinned. "Oh, the things you can get away with in a small

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town that you can't manage in a bigger one."

Ian couldn't imagine the beautifully put together man in front of him ever getting into any escapade more deviant than forgetting to return a library book. But the gleam in the other man's eyes told Ian that perhaps there was plenty beneath the fine surface he'd yet to discover. "I always figured it was the opposite—it was easier to get away with things when everybody in town didn't, at some point, used to baby-sit you. Now you're gonna have to share."

"I think I just might, Ian, I think I just might."

Ian was in the middle of trying to decipher the cryptic statement when Mike Hampton, one of the partners on Ian's floor, approached and clapped Stephen on the back.

"Caulfield, I was hoping you'd make it tonight!" Ian hid a smile at the bit of slur to Mike's overly loud words. He was tanked already. "Did your wife not make it down? Where is she again—Chicago? Grad school, right?"

Ian stiffened. *So it wasn't a rumor.* When he'd been hired a year ago, he'd been intrigued by Stephen enough to ask a few subtle questions. When one of the legal assistants had dropped the story that Stephen was married but his wife lived in another state, Ian had dismissed it. It was ridiculous. Plus Stephen didn't wear a wedding ring.

But Stephen nodded in reply to Mike, his smile a bit tight. "Yes, Chicago. And no, she couldn't make it down, unfortunately."

Ian blinked, feeling incredibly foolish. He'd been mistaking every signal he thought Stephen had been sending him. The man was fucking married, for God's sake. He set his glass down and glanced at the two briefly, forcing a smile. "Excuse me," he murmured, turning to slip through the crowd. He just needed to be alone for a minute to gather himself. He hadn't realized just how

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far ahead of himself his mind had gotten in the last ten minutes, and the snap back to reality was disconcerting.

Dipping past the bar, Ian slipped out one of the back exits and into the stairwell, jogging down a flight before pausing, disturbed to find his hands shaking as he raked them through his hair.

Ian leaned back against the wall of the stairwell, exhaling heavily around the lump in his throat. This was stupid. He felt like a teenage girl at a high school dance who had just found out her crush was dating the prom queen.

He just hadn't expected it, that's all. And it was stupid to be hurt because Stephen probably assumed Ian had already known. He probably hadn't intended to hide his marriage, and it was Ian's own fault for assuming all those warm smiles and looks that seemed to last longer than they needed to had meant anything. Lord, he really was still a small-town hillbilly sometimes.

\* \* \*

A dull pang struck Stephen's chest as Ian walked away. Well, the question that had been haunting him for months was now answered. Ian did want something more, and, instead of being relieved, Stephen had a new worry.

Ian was honest. In the last year, Stephen had come to understand that implicitly. Ian said what he meant. There was no artifice about him and he did it in such a way that it came across as integrity and not a sanctimonious, holier-than-thou attitude.

Stephen's stomach pitched. Ian wouldn't be able to accept the arrangement Stephen had with his wife. He should've just left it alone, not opened up doors tonight that were never supposed to open and now he'd embarrassed Ian, stung his pride, maybe even

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hurt him a little, and he hadn't intended on doing any of those things.

Stephen had been telling himself for months he should leave it alone. But then he'd get drawn into another easy conversation with Ian, he'd see the flash in those amazing eyes, warm up inside from Ian's grin and then he'd be thinking thoughts all over again he knew he shouldn't be.

And that was the kicker for Stephen. If Ian was just another gorgeous young man who caught his eye he'd be able to ignore it and put Ian in the off limits category, but there was so much more to his attraction than just the sexual spark he always had with him. Ian was more. That was the only way he could put it.

He scanned the crowd, looking over the fantastic costumes, knowing just what lay underneath all those masks. How most of these people, himself included, wore masks every day, every night. His heart twisted again when he didn't find Ian. "Excuse me, Mike."

Stephen hurried away before the other man could stop him. He had to find Ian, talk to him, maybe he could get him to see... *See what?* That he was living a lie? *Ask him what?* To join him in it? Stephen paused and almost turned back, then hurried on. Ian couldn't have left yet.

Stephen didn't find Ian anywhere on the ballroom floor and he wasn't at the bar either. The sea of masks should've been confusing, but Stephen would know him anywhere, mask or no mask. He'd studied Ian's walk, the set of his shoulders. And he wasn't here. Stephen headed for the stairwell, hoping to catch Ian in the parking lot, but paused when he spied Ian at the foot of the stairs, his back stiff before he turned to lift his gaze, tensing even more.

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The gold in Ian's mask brought out the lighter glints in the man's rich brown curls and framed the bluest eyes Stephen had ever seen. They reminded him of the waters in the South Seas and every time those crystalline eyes were on him, Stephen thought of laying him out on the sand, or sharing a hammock all tangled up together in the sun.

Ian averted his eyes as Stephen slowly came down to where Ian stood on the lower landing. Ian looked up at him again with a hollow laugh. "Hey, got turned around. This place is huge, huh?"

Stephen had hurt him. The realization made him ashamed and relieved all at once. He didn't want to hurt Ian, but, oh, that meant the other man cared. He cared deeply, and that warmed Stephen up inside. He'd meant to say so much, but now that he was here and Ian was looking at him with those eyes, the words died on his lips.

He reached up to remove Ian's simple mask. The younger man flinched back and Stephen let his hand fall. "Ian..." He paused, searching Ian's face, seeing the shadows and tension where before he'd only seen laughter and friendship.

"Don't." Ian grimaced. Stephen thought he meant to smile, but his lips merely tightened. "Just don't."

Stephen was a firm believer in kisses solving all manner of questions. Before he could censor his action, rethink what he meant to do, he caught Ian's face between his hands. The other man gasped; the vulnerable sound cut through Stephen's defenses and struck right at the center of his heart. Then he couldn't think about what that meant because his lips were covering Ian's. His hands were tenderly cradling him as Ian trembled and Stephen poured the kiss into him.

Ian didn't move, didn't touch him, but he didn't try to pull away from the long, lingering kiss either. Heat rushed through

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Stephen. He wasn't the best with words, not when it mattered, but he could show Ian how he felt.

So he kissed him, a slow, deliberate caress of his tongue against Ian's. Stephen couldn't breathe because every ounce of his consciousness focused on the details of the kiss, so he could remember it later. *Wet. Heat. Pure.* That was what sprang to mind. The half-realized connection, the heat that always seemed to simmer deep inside them whenever they came into contact together had now come to the surface. Stephen found it ironic that it took them wearing masks before they uncovered what they'd both been feeling. Ironic and somehow fitting.

When their lips began to break apart for more than a split second, Stephen realized Ian's hands were still at his side and the other man had made no move to touch him.

"What...what're you doing?" Ian whispered.

Stephen brushed his thumb over Ian's jaw, his fingertips caressed the nape of Ian's neck and his heart tumbled right down to Ian's feet at that hesitant, oh-so-vulnerable question. Stephen's mouth tugged in the briefest of smiles and his chest ached as he stepped closer to Ian. "Falling," he whispered back.

Then he kissed Ian again, because kissing him was unlike anything else Stephen had ever experienced. There was something so honest, so beautiful about kissing him that, as crazy as it sounded, Stephen didn't think he'd ever be the same again.

Ian's hands came up to grip Stephen's forearms, and for a moment he was afraid the other man would push him away. Stephen stroked his tongue against Ian's, silently encouraging him to kiss him back, to share this wonderful experience with him. When Ian did, Stephen fell even farther.

Ian's hands slid from Stephen's forearms up and around his

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neck, one hand sinking into his hair and stripping away the mask at the same time. Stephen's fears began to ease as Ian moaned, an almost desperate sound. He wasn't the only one who felt this; Ian did to.

Stephen tugged away Ian's mask as well. Yes, that was what Stephen had been looking for, to have those masks stripped away, literally and figuratively. He wanted Ian to see him as just another man. Not as his boss. Not with all of those stupid social labels between them. Just Stephen, somebody who'd wanted to be this close to Ian ever since that first easy conversation in his office that had gone on for over an hour when Ian had come in just to clear out his outbox. This connection was so real. He wanted to drink Ian in until he never got the taste of him, the smell and feel of him, out from under his skin.

Stephen broke the kiss, his arms wrapping around Ian's waist and hauling him close. The other man trembled, his body hot through their suits, and Stephen couldn't help but respond to that reaction. He took Ian's hand, lacing it with his own, and swallowed hard against the electric tingles. The kind of tingles that went straight to the heart and soul.

He turned his face into Ian's throat, breathing in his scent. *Not here.* He wasn't about to have Ian blacklisted because he got caught fooling around in the stairwell. "Leave with me," he whispered into Ian's ear. He didn't care if Ian didn't want to do anything more than talk, or if he'd let Stephen make love to him until dawn stained the sky. He wanted to be alone with him, to try in some way to explain, to make Ian see this could work.

Ian made a soft distressed sound and Stephen could already see him pulling away, the questions, the regrets shadowing Ian's eyes. The other man shook his head sharply, his eyes closing when

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Stephen sighed, guilt warring with need warring with fear.

Ian pushed free, stumbling back against the wall and taking several deep, shaky breaths. He wouldn't look at Stephen, as if he were ashamed. "You're married," was all he said and it cut deep.

The fingers of Stephen's bare left hand flexed. He nodded, not denying it, and Ian's jaw tightened, though he wasn't looking directly at him. Stephen knew the other man's attention was wholly on him. "I am. It's complicated."

Ian snorted. "Yeah, right."

Stephen shook his head, sick to his stomach because, for the first time in a long damn time, he thought he might've found someone with whom he could be truly happy, somebody who made him want to take a risk and try, and there were all these roadblocks in the way saying it could never happen.

"I know you're better than this, Ian. I know this kind of thing isn't what you're about." Stephen glanced down, a self-mocking smile crossing his lips. "I should've left you alone, but I didn't because I'm not looking for a fling. I'm not looking for a quick fuck in a stairwell with both of us walking away sated and not looking back. I didn't leave it alone because I know I could have something more with you."

He took a step closer to Ian, and the other man tensed. "Let's go somewhere and talk...we've always been able to talk to each other. Let me try to explain." He could only imagine what was going through Ian's mind and none of it good. He could only imagine how he looked in Ian's eyes now. The stark disillusionment was clear in the other man's downturned lips and the lines of weariness around his eyes.

And yet Ian still hadn't walked away, and it gave Stephen hope. Ian finally met Stephen's eyes, and the naked hurt in his



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honest gaze made Stephen ache in return. “I was half in love with you before I walked out of my interview. You finished the job the day we stayed late to complete that brief, and you laughed at my stupid jokes at nearly midnight when we were running on fumes.”

Stephen’s heart jolted to a painful stop before picking back up again. He didn’t know what to say. For all of his eloquence in the courtroom, it left him now, and he felt more gangly and awkward than he ever had in high school. He wanted to give Ian the words to make him understand and didn’t know where to start.

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Stephen never should’ve pursued him. He’d known what kind of man Ian was, but the heart clouded things sometimes, and with Ian that was never more abundantly clear. But he’d started down this path, so Stephen owed him an explanation, and whether or not it was something Ian could accept was up to him. But, oh, what he wouldn’t give to soothe that hurt from Ian. Hurt he’d caused.

He leaned against the wall, steadily looking at Ian. “I fell for you that day you came into my office to get your work and we

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started talking, just about the game. Stupid office talk, but we didn't stop. Next thing we both knew, more than an hour had passed and the conversation had drifted into personal territory. I could talk to you with such ease. There's only one other person in my life who I've been able to talk to like that."

Crazily enough, it was his wife, but in such different ways. "I find myself coming up with excuses for you to come by my office in the hopes we'd fall into one of our conversations. The more we talk, the more I want you to know the whole truth about me. The truth only one other person really knows." Even then, Colleen didn't know everything. How could she understand? She was a woman, he was a man, and there were just some fundamental differences.

"If it was just sex I wanted, I'd never have come to you. I want more, so much more, and now I know you want it, too." Stephen pushed away from the wall and held out his hand to Ian. "Please, let's go find a quiet place, you and I."

Ian stared at Stephen's hand, teeth sinking into his lower lip as he frowned, looking as bewildered and frustrated as Stephen felt. He could practically hear Ian thinking and, as much as he was afraid of Ian's judgment, he kept his hand extended, hoping with every breath. He saw the decision in Ian's eyes before he spoke and cut him off.

"Just for a cup of coffee, Ian, please. Nothing questionable, nothing illicit, just a cup of coffee and a conversation between friends."

Stephen swallowed hard and glanced down, completely undone by the naked plea in Ian's eyes. The only way he knew to make it better was to give Ian the unvarnished truth as only he and his wife knew it. Whether or not he could accept it was entirely up to Ian,

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regardless of Stephen's wishes. Those wishes he didn't even dare voice to himself because he didn't know how he'd take it if Ian couldn't accept the relationship he'd formed with his wife.

There was so much history behind their marriage and why they'd done what they had. History like how isolated Stephen had been in high school, how it wasn't until after he'd become friends with Colleen in college that he began to feel secure enough to put himself out like that, create the mask that fit so well with his chosen career.

Ian met his eyes, hesitating for another long, agonizing moment before nodding, though he pointedly stuffed both hands into his pockets. "Coffee and conversation, not a damn thing more, Stephen."

"Point taken." Stephen drew out his keys and hesitated. He didn't think Ian would be interested in riding with him and having to rely on him to get back to his car. "The café is called The Blue Willow and it's on Prytania Street right off St. Charles as it exits the Garden District. You can't miss it." He steeled himself against the coldness in Ian's eyes. "I'll be waiting." And hoping and praying Ian would show. He was giving him a chance. Maybe it wasn't too late for them after all.

The disappointment in Ian's face stung badly because Stephen knew he'd caused it. Ian was disappointed in him as a man, as a friend, as a potential lover and, damn, Stephen hadn't expected it to cut like that. He hadn't realized how far he had fallen for Ian. Was there any turning back?

Stephen left before he did something else he regretted. He didn't pay any attention to the other guests as he made his way through the crowd. He ignored others calling his name. *Please, dear God, let him show.*

## CHAPTER 2

Ian continued down the stairs, figuring it'd look suspicious if he went the same way Stephen had. God, look at him, already acting like a man with something to hide. He slid out the door on the third floor down and took the elevator from there to the parking garage. His Toyota looked so out of place amidst the BMWs, Mercedes and Porsches. It made a clear statement about his place in this society. He had no business being here.

Yet, when he climbed into his car and left the parking garage, he didn't turn toward home, he turned toward Prytania street, like a besotted fool. He was.

When he'd pulled into the small lot of the little café, he didn't get out right away. Maybe part of him wanted to make Stephen wait, make him squirm, and that was petty. He wasn't angry as

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much as he was hurt and just...sad. He'd had so much hope. More than anything he'd wanted to be right just this once about a man.

This was not going to end well; he just knew it.

The disappointment crushed Ian. Not just that Stephen had become even more off-limits than before...but in Stephen. Ian had never thought Stephen was the type to be unfaithful. What would he say if Ian went with him? How his wife didn't understand him, how they weren't really in love anymore, how Ian was special?

God, it was so cliché and it made him a little sick and more than a little disappointed. It was like finding out your grandmother kicked puppies for fun. Stephen was brilliant and beautiful, funny and clever. Kind and warm and all the things Ian had ever imagined he'd find in the man who'd be perfect for him. He'd thought maybe Stephen was that man, but this nixed it completely.

His perfect man wouldn't ask Ian to be his piece on the side. And it hurt like hell to know he'd been so, so wrong.

He didn't know why he was here. Maybe because he wanted Stephen to know what Ian had wanted to give him. Wanted somebody to know. As if, if it existed outside the vacuum of his mind, it was real for a little while before it had to die.

After shutting off the car, Ian slid out, hands shoved into his jacket against the chill, and stared at the café for a long moment. He almost got back in the car and went home. If he did, he knew they'd never talk about it again. Monday would come, and work would go on as usual, if far less pleasant.

Instead, Ian trudged to the door and yanked it open. His eyes lit on Stephen at a table in the far corner, and the other man's obvious relief sent a pang of hurt through Ian. He couldn't help but wonder if the relief was because he thought he was going to get what he was after, since Ian had showed.

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“Thank you for coming,” Stephen said, rising from his chair as Ian stopped. “Please, sit.”

It made Ian sadder than he could express that instead of the joy he always felt when he saw Stephen, he now felt trepidation. He wished fervently that he’d never gone to the ball at all. Then things would be the same...he might not have Stephen the way he wanted, but he’d still have his friendship, the pleasure of his company. That was all ruined now.

Ian shook his head when the waitress came over, swallowing hard when she disappeared again. He finally met the other man’s eyes. “I don’t know why I’m here. There’s nothing to say, really. You’re married, I was mistaken and that’s that. It...it happens.” He tried very hard to sound as calm and casual as he could. “The kiss was... Well, let’s just call it the champagne and leave it at that, all right?”

Stephen took a sip of his coffee, as if gathering himself. “Just hear me out, Ian, and if afterward you still want to do that, then we can.” He paused, his gaze searching. “If only to give me the opportunity to earn your respect again, if nothing else.”

His respect. Ian didn’t know what Stephen could possibly say that would piece back together the rift that had appeared the moment Ian had realized the other man was married. Still, Ian pressed his lips together, insides knotting, and nodded.

Stephen visibly relaxed and sat back, taking another sip of coffee. He didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Ian was just about to come out of his skin when the other man began to speak.

“My wife and I have a marriage of convenience.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “Give me another line, it’s 2009.”

“Yes, it is, and there are still arranged marriages as well. There are all kinds of variations on marriage, despite how people want

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you to believe it's always one man, one woman who are deliriously happy, who will go on to live together forever without a hitch. Will you listen, please, Ian? I know what you must think, so just give me fifteen minutes."

Ian exhaled. He was being rude and childish. He'd come, and the least he could do was give the man the conversation he'd asked for. Finally, Ian nodded. "I'm sorry. Go ahead. I'm listening."

What he wanted to say was, Stop talking, don't tell me about her, don't tell me some sob story about how your marriage doesn't count and how we can still be together on the side. Don't tell me any of that and let me keep some of my illusions, please. But he didn't. He sat back in his seat and prepared to have all his previous beliefs about this beautiful man crushed right to dust. What was left of them, anyway.

"I'm not the kind of person who opens up easily to other people. I'm good with surface conversation, with little easy camaraderies that don't let anyone close at all. In my life there have been two exceptions, Colleen and you."

Ian flinched. She had a name now. She was real and had a name, and even if he could somehow abandon his morals before, now there was a person behind the wedding band Stephen saw fit not to wear. He made himself say her name in his head. *Colleen. Stephen's wife, Colleen.* It was painful in a way he'd never anticipated a simple name could be.

"She knew I was gay. She was the first to know. It's not the kind of secret you share with just anyone when you figure out that you're the one who's different. But she listened, and she was there for me. She was—is—my best friend."

That confused Ian. She knew he was gay? He wanted to ask, but he kept his word and stayed silent as Stephen continued.

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“When I was just finishing up law school she found herself pregnant and the dad didn’t want anything to do with her anymore. After all, he was already in college, had scholarships, and he wanted to go into pre-med. A baby would just weigh down his style.”

Ian felt sick. *A baby.* Who wasn’t a baby anymore, he imagined. If he’d had any thought of ignoring what he knew was right and having an affair with Stephen, the fact there was a child quashed it. He swallowed and nodded, looking down.

“I loved her, as much as I could love a woman, in every way but one, and with a baby coming... I don’t even really remember how the conversation started, but by the end of the week we were announcing our engagement and a week after I finished law school, we were married.”

Stephen sighed and fiddled with his cup. “It seemed the perfect situation at the time. I had this job already lined up, she’d have medical benefits as my wife, security, and we understood each other. We were happy, honestly. Still are. Colleen miscarried a month later, and we both mourned the loss, but in the end... Well, it was probably for the best. Colleen decided to stay in Chicago, get her Master’s, and I came here.”

Ian stared at the other man, stunned. “So you stayed married to hide your orientation from the firm?”

“That was part of it. I could get away with being a gay lawyer in San Francisco, maybe DC and New York, but not in New Orleans and I love it here. Colleen and I had made a promise to each other. If we ever found someone and wanted out we’d let each other go. I always assumed it would be her.”

Ian couldn’t imagine such a thing and he struggled against the hope that wanted to rise up. A man who could live a lie had deep



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reasons, didn't he? Would he be willing to expose the lie? Ian had his doubts.

Stephen continued on, as if he knew if he didn't get it all out now, he never would. "I suck at relationships, I always have. I'm not cut out for casual affairs because I want something deeper, but I'm also not the guy who easily lets anybody close. I'm usually not even tempted to risk it." He paused and fiddled with his coffee cup some more. "Until you."

He sighed. "I never sought a divorce because I was comfortable where I was. My relationship with Colleen gives me security at work. An unmarried lawyer is seen as a potential harasser by the higher-ups. It's crazy, but they'd be eying me and every unattached secretary there, every lonely client I had a late dinner with." He shook his head. "And I'd always believed Colleen would ask for it when she was done with graduate school. She's got so much more going for her than being her gay best friend's beard."

Ian wasn't sure whether to be relieved or incredulous. He settled for something in between, afraid to hope. Stephen had said Ian was different but...how far did that go?

"So what do you want from me? Is there some sort of trial period before you decide I'm worth divorcing for? Either way...how flattering that's going to look for me—you divorce and we're together suddenly? I'll be pinned as the other man regardless."

Ian slumped in his seat, feeling helpless and frustrated. "I don't know whether the fact you have a fake marriage is a good thing or not. I'm leaning toward not." He looked up and met Stephen's eyes, sighing heavily. "I don't know what to say, let alone what to do. I've never... This is bizarre and not exactly something I've ever thought about."

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One didn't sit around planning how they'd react to their dream man giving them a story like this. Hell, he didn't even know if it was true. Maybe Stephen was just trying to get into his pants...but no. Ian couldn't believe that, despite his disappointment in what he'd considered a flawless character. What did Stephen want to happen now? Ian to date him, sleep with him, start a relationship and maybe somewhere down the road Stephen would divorce and they could really be together?

"I've handled this whole thing rather badly. As brilliant as I may be in the court room, it doesn't really extend into my personal life."

He certainly wasn't going to get any argument from Ian on that point. He had no idea what his response was supposed to be, what Stephen wanted him to say.

"You're worth more than a trial period. As for what people say, Ian, if we have a relationship and the relationship works enough for people to know there's going to be talk whether I'm married or single. According to the firm, we wouldn't be allowed to have a relationship anyway. You're my secretary. If I leave my wife for you, I'm going to look like just another cheating bastard and a gay one on top of it."

Stephen shook his head, swallowing visibly before lifting his eyes to meet Ian's. God help him, they were such beautiful eyes, Ian wanted to make the worry and hurt in them disappear. Ian, though, couldn't help but begin to feel sick inside. He was getting the distinct impression Stephen didn't plan to tell anyone anything.

"I know you're not the kind of man who goes for something like this. And Lord knows you deserve someone wholly committed to you and you alone. It's a real shitty thing to ask of you, but I'd love to see what could develop between us and if it's half as

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amazing as I suspect it could be, then I'm willing to risk putting the rest of my life in shambles for the chance at it."

Stephen reached out, covered Ian's hand with his own, and Ian looked down, blinking hard. God, he really was a fool. He'd let hope spring up again and there it was, yet another slap right to the face. He slowly pulled his hand out from under Stephen's, pressing his lips together and trying his best to contain his emotions. Finally, he looked up, shaking his head.

"You're right. It *is* a shitty thing to ask me. You want to hedge your bets...I get it. Jesus, I'm such a fucking idiot. Is that how relationships work for you?" He pushed away from the table abruptly, lowering his voice to a furious whisper. "If you think for one fucking second that I'm going to let you have a test fucking run to see if I'm worth leaving your fake wife for, you can think again. You're out of your goddamn mind."

His jaw clenched and if he didn't get out of there soon he was going to lose it in front of the whole place and Stephen in particular. He shook his head, taking a step back when Stephen rose, his eyes imploring.

"Save it. Just save it. I was clearly, ridiculously wrong about you and I'm the idiot here. You just...enjoy your coffee and your unreal marriage and have a nice life." He spun on his heel and strode for the door.

*A test run. The asshole wanted to...* Ian didn't even know exactly what Stephen wanted — to fuck around, get some and then they'd "see what develops." Jesus, he'd had some insulting offers in his time, more than a handful, but this one had to take the cake. Ian offered Stephen his love, his fucking heart on a silver platter when he'd admitted he'd fallen in love with him in the stairwell, and now Stephen wanted a taste test before deciding if it was worth

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accepting?

Ian had just reached his car when he heard Stephen's voice.

"Ian! Ian, wait."

"Just leave me the fuck alone," Ian snarled, jamming his key into the lock.

"Ian, I'm sorry I'm not the man you thought I was. Look, it came out all wrong. I'm not asking you to be my fuck buddy. I'm not asking you to be my dirty little secret lover at work. I'm asking for us to be friends outside of work, to really get a chance to know each other. Before we say, 'Hey, I'm ready to quit my job over this.'"

Ian ignored him, cursing as the key seemed to be in line with the enemy and thwarting his attempts to jiggle it into the opening. Finally, it gave way, and Ian jerked the door open, only to have Stephen reach out to catch the top.

"What do you want, Ian. Tell me what do you want?"

Ian jerked the door free of Stephen's grip and slammed it shut again, spinning around to face Stephen. He threw his hands up with a harsh laugh. "What do I want? I want to go back to two hours ago and keep driving instead of going to that stupid fucking party, that's what I want."

He raked both hands through his hair and glared at the other man, chest heaving with angry breaths and the effort not to lose it completely. "Jesus, you really don't get how fucking demeaning your little offer is, do you? You want *me* to throw myself on the line, while you hedge your bets and decide whether I'm good enough for you. Good enough to be with. You get to keep your wife and your lie of a life and don't have to risk a goddamn thing, but you want *me* to risk my heart for you?"

Risk, nothing. His heart had been lost a long time ago and now

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it was broken. Whether Stephen wanted sex or not didn't matter. He wanted something more important—he wanted Ian's heart, his love, and he didn't want to give up anything to get it. Maybe he'd decide Ian was worth leaving his wife for, maybe he wouldn't. But who would lose the most in the deal if the answer was no? Ian, that's who. Because he didn't have the big city mentality to test run a relationship and play it safe. He loved and that was it; he couldn't do it halfway. He wouldn't do it at all for a man who wasn't willing to give the same in return until he decided it was safe to.

Stephen shook his head emphatically. "Ian, I know you're good enough for me. I've known that for a long time. You're smart, you're loyal, honest..." Stephen jammed his hands in his pockets and looked up at the sky, then met Ian's gaze again. "Hell, you're the man of my dreams, someone I wish I'd met years ago. No, you being good enough was never the question for me."

Ian had nothing to say to that. He didn't know how it worked in Stephen's world of fake marriages and lives of lies, but in Ian's world, you didn't meet the man of your dreams and treat him like a two-dollar whore.

"I'm sorry. You're right that the whole way I went about this is demeaning for you and it's unfair and cruel. I..." Stephen stopped, silent for a moment before he shook his head. "You were attracted to a mask," he said, taking a step back away from Ian. "You don't know me. You know what I let others see. Tonight, you're beginning to know me, and you don't like what you see. See why I'm hesitant to risk everything? Because whatever feelings you have are for a man who doesn't exist. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I never should've put you in this kind of a position."

And then he was gone, turning and walking away without a

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look back. Just like that.

Ian had never felt more foolish in his life. Ian had fallen for a man who'd been nothing more than a façade. As fake as his fake marriage. The unspoken was crystal clear: that Ian was a fucking idiot for it. He hated his own naiveté with a passion at that moment. His momma had always said his innate trust in people was part of his charm, a good part of him. She'd been so fucking wrong.

Eyes burning, he jerked his car door open and slid behind the wheel, slamming it shut behind him and jamming the key into the ignition. He didn't turn it, though, sucking in rapid, sharp breaths as the reality of his own stupidity crushed in on him.

Why did this always happen? What the hell was the matter with him that he was good enough to fuck, maybe even good enough to date, but anything more than that and he got shot down like an F-16 over Baghdad? Hell, now he didn't even rank higher than fake marriages, for God's sake.

Scrubbing his eyes, Ian shook his head and reached down to start the car. He just wanted to go home. He had to start looking for a new job in the morning.

## CHAPTER 3

“Stephen, for somebody as intelligent and articulate as I know you are, sometimes you can be a real jackass. Please tell me you didn’t really say that.”

Colleen sounded both exasperated and sympathetic. Stephen knew that tone.

“I’m afraid I did.” And now, having said it out loud again, this time in the light of day, he realized just how humiliating it must have been for Ian to hear.

“Oh, for the love of God.”

Stephen raked a hand through his hair. God, he was even worse at this relationship stuff than he thought he was. Twice in one night, in the space of less than two hours, he’d seriously wounded Ian when he hadn’t meant to. He should’ve left it alone from the

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beginning. He never should've opened up all his emotions that way, never should've let someone in. He just hadn't been able to stop himself.

"I know, Colleen, I was an absolute prig. It didn't come out at all the way I meant it. It got all confused and muddled, and what I thought I was saying didn't come out of my mouth." Stephen stared down at the pint of Hawaiian honey ice cream and dug his spoon in again. It was already half-gone.

"What are you doing now?"

"Sniveling to you and making my ass bigger." Though, for the first time, Stephen's favorite treat wasn't doing a damn thing to soothe him.

"I don't understand why half the office doesn't know your 'oh-so-dirty little secret.' You're such a drama queen diva."

"People see what they expect to see." Stephen set the carton back on his coffee table and stretched back out on the couch. He was exhausted, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw Ian's face and the absolute hurt on it and it was driving him crazy. He wanted to find him, apologize and hold Ian until that expression was gone. At the same time, the thought of exposing himself again and having Ian reject him a second time had panic gripping his insides with ice-cold fingers.

"What are you going to do to fix this?"

Stephen sighed and rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes. "I don't know. I don't know how to fix it."

How many more times was he going to try to apologize, instead of just letting it go and giving the man some pride? How could he fix it when every time he opened his mouth he shoved his leg down his throat and hurt Ian again and again?

Stephen had made himself stop last night before he made it



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worse, before he said what he'd been hedging on and ruined himself forever in Ian's eyes. It's too late, his mind kept whispering, far too late.

Ian thought Stephen was just another socialite who didn't give a damn about anything beyond his own desires. He'd all but proven it to him when he'd kissed him in the stairwell. And oh, God, that kiss. It was everything Stephen had dreamed about and more. Kissing Ian was like kissing the promise of forever.

He'd thought he'd done such a good job at keeping his heart locked away, holding love at a distance. He'd been so wrong and now he was sure he'd ruined any chance of a relationship with Ian for good and, damn, that hurt.

The dead silence on the other end told him just how exasperated Colleen was getting with him.

"Stephen, for the last six months I've heard nothing but Ian this...Ian that... You're crazy about him, but you just won't admit it. That's your problem."

"What good would admitting it do?" That old familiar panic gripped him again, something he hadn't felt in a long time because he had inured himself not to care. Somehow, Ian had slipped right past those defenses and snuck up on him.

"You'd be amazed. I'm not even going to bother explaining it to you because you've got yourself so worked up you won't get it."

"Gee, thanks."

"Truth hurts, babe," Colleen continued. "Look, I know you're afraid. I get that, but if he's the guy you think he is and he cares for you like it sounds like he does, he'll listen, whether he wants to or not."

Would Ian listen? The other man had given him two chances to talk and both times Stephen had only dug the knife in deeper. His

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brows furrowed. Didn't the very fact Ian did try to hear him out and that he was so hurt by Stephen's words mean that maybe he did care? Hope, both beautiful and terrible, started to bloom in Stephen's chest.

"The guy Ian cares about doesn't exist." Stephen gnawed on his lip as the ache returned, heavier than it was moments before.

Colleen laughed, and Stephen sat straight up, aghast she was laughing now, when he felt like this. "Colleen, it's not funny."

"No, you're right, it's not. I think you often confuse being a private person with wearing a mask. You are who you are, babe, and it shines through. Just because your past and your private life aren't things you bandy about doesn't mean Ian doesn't know what kind of man you are. Maybe first instincts aren't always right, but they often are."

"What would I do without you?" Stephen asked, and it brought with it a whole new set of guilt. He'd made a commitment to Colleen, however impetuous and misguided it had been at the time. Just thinking about ending it made him feel like an irresponsible jerk. *So sorry, I know I promised I'd take care of you but...* How could he do that to her?

"I think you'll do just fine without me."

"Colleen..."

"Hey, we've both known this was coming for a long time. Don't get morose on me now. We should've ended it when you left for New Orleans and I started grad school."

"You needed health insurance." Stephen started picking at the lint on his sweatpants, making a neat little pile on his knee.

"I could've gotten health insurance through the school."

"It's not as good." Why he was even arguing he didn't know, only that it seemed like everyone he cared about was slipping out

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of his reach.

“I’m a big girl now, Stephen, and you don’t have to watch over me anymore. I never should’ve let you in the first place. It was selfish of me and a little crazy.” She laughed and Stephen could picture her lying back on her bed, toying with the charm she wore around her neck. “We both were afraid of the big, bad world and used each other as security blankets. It’s a whole new start, babe, not an ending, so think of it that way.”

Stephen’s throat ached. Was that how marriages ended? With a phone call? “You’re still my best friend.”

“Ditto, babe, and that’s not going to change. Next time you call me, it had better be to say you’ve crawled over broken glass on your hands and knees if you had to and made it all up to him. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Another low ripple of laughter. “I love you, you big idiot.”

“I love you, too.”

## CHAPTER 4

Stephen was sweating. It might not show on the outside, but he was. His heart was hammering and his stomach churned as he climbed out of his car outside Ian's apartment building. He had meant to pull Ian aside first thing this morning and fix things before they had a chance to fester all day. He even went into work early, but then a floater secretary appeared at Ian's desk and Stephen knew the man wasn't going to show, maybe ever.

And now he was here, outside Ian's building knowing this was his last chance to make it better. He'd apologize. He'd tell Ian how he really felt and that was all he could do. Either Ian would forgive him or...

The claws sank a little bit deeper into his guts. Okay, yes, best not to think of the other way it could go.

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Stephen got out of his car before he lost his nerve and walked to Ian's door with a confidence he certainly didn't feel. At his door, he hesitated once again, his heart jumping into his throat before he knocked. And knocked.

Just when Stephen thought he was going to have to start calling through the door and making a fool out of himself, it opened. The apology died on his lips as soon as he saw Ian framed in the light. His hair was tousled, curls all awry in a way that had Stephen thinking thoughts he shouldn't be thinking at the moment, even more than Ian half-bare in only pajama bottoms did. His mouth went dry and it took him a second to recover his wits and notice the shadows in Ian's eyes instead of the usual sparkle.

"I know I don't deserve it, but I'm just asking for five minutes."

Ian hesitated and before he no could come out, Stephen gave him a look of entreaty. "Please."

"Fine."

Ian opened the door and stepped back, his shoulders tightening as if Stephen was going to start hitting him. Stephen hated that, after all their time together, it'd taken one huge misjudgment on his part to have Ian associating him with pain.

"I'm such an idiot," Ian muttered under his breath.

"No, you're not. I am," Stephen said, not willing to wait another second to try to make things better. "Look, I treated you horribly. The things I said, the way I said them, weren't fair to you. They were mean and cowardly."

Ian was looking at him with eyes so huge Stephen thought he could get swallowed up in him. He wanted to pull Ian into his arms and run his hands over his back until they both stopped aching. "I panicked when I saw you were hurt when you found out about

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Colleen and I don't think very well when I panic."

Stephen paused, his heartbeat almost painful as he got to the part that scared him to death. He took a deep breath and plunged on. "You mean so much to me. I've come to value your opinion, your companionship."

Goddamn it, he was hedging again. Stephen closed his eyes and gathered his thoughts before he fucked this all up again. When he opened them again, he felt a little steadier.

"What I'm trying to say is I love you." His heart gave a great lurch. That had to sound so damn lame. "I think you're worth risking everything for. I just didn't think you'd think *I* was worth it in the long run."

Ian took a slight step backward and shook his head. "No, you don't. If you did, you'd have said so last night, not treated me like I was some trick you met at a club." He strode around the couch to drop down on it, back to the door. "Just go back to the office. I'm sure there's any number of guys, and girls, in the secretary pool who'd jump at the chance to bend over for you."

Okay, what did Stephen expect after the way he'd acted last night? He deserved to get shot down. At least Ian hadn't kicked him out yet. But the way his back was turned on him made him so very unapproachable. Stephen took a deep breath and thought about what he was going to say before he said it or else he'd just end up screwing it all up again as he always did when he tried to talk when his emotions were in a tangle.

"I didn't say it last night because it's not an easy thing for me to say." Ian's shoulders stiffened and another spurt of panic hit Stephen's stomach. *Please, do not let me get it all wrong again.* He stuck his hand in his pocket and fiddled with his keys. "It's not something I say, hell, ever. I'm not good at taking risks like that,

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putting myself out there.”

He had to tell him. Even if Ian shot him down again he wouldn't regret telling him.

“And I've told you several times that I'm not nor have I ever have been into casual sex. I didn't come over here to get into your pants.” Not that he'd say no if Ian wanted to get into his... God, he was getting off the track. “It's not that I'm not attracted to you because I am, don't get me wrong there...” Stephen trailed off and scrubbed a hand over his face. “See how much I suck at explaining myself?”

At least Ian was listening. Stephen could tell by the way his head tilted slightly to the side and he hadn't booted him out yet. Then Ian turned and glared at him. “What I see is you not sure which lie is gonna get you what you want.”

“What is it you think I want, Ian? A fuck?” Stephen's brows lifted. “Do you honestly think I'd go to all this trouble for a pretty ass?”

Ian threw his hands up. “I don't know! I don't know what you want and I'm starting to not care.”

Stephen's stomach churned at that statement and panic clawed at his guts.

Ian leaned back against the couch, head dropping back, and scrubbed his hands over his face. “I just wanted to be right for once.”

That last tired plaintive statement brought Stephen up short and gave him a spark of hope. He came around the couch and sat down on the edge of the coffee table so he could face Ian. “I'm sorry if you've been hurt in the past and I'm not sure what kind of guy you thought I was. Last night I proved I can be a real ass, but it wasn't because I was trying to demean you. When someone matters to

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me—really matters—I freeze up inside and speak before I think, and it comes out wrong.”

Ian was watching him, his blue eyes shadowed, yet he was still listening.

“You’ve seen me at my worst, but how many hours have we spent together? You think all of that was an act? What for? If I’m the kind of guy who chases after tail all over the firm you would’ve heard about it from the other secretaries.” There was nothing that got by them as a group.

“Yeah, all that time we spent together and never once did you tell me you were married. That’s a big part of your life you conveniently left out. What other secrets are you hiding? Damn, Stephen, it’s like I didn’t know you at all.”

“My marriage was something I didn’t talk about with anyone unless pressed. What was there to say? It was nobody’s business and after I’d been there a year, nobody asked. Then it became something I didn’t really think of.” Which was sad in its own right and further proof it was long past time to file the paperwork to end it. “We don’t even live in the same state. Besides, it’s over now.”

Stephen shook his head when Ian’s eyes widened. “And before you say something, it’s not because of you. I mean you’re not a home wrecker or something. It was long overdue, and she agrees.” He bit back a sigh. He was muddling it again, he was sure. “What kind of a man did you think I was twenty-four hours ago? Before the party and the fiasco that followed.” As soon as the words were out he almost wished he hadn’t said them. He was afraid to know how far he’d fallen.

Ian let out a sigh. “Perfect. Brilliant. Funny. Incredibly sexy and completely out of reach.”

“I’m not perfect, Ian. I’m so far from it, but I’m not what you



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think now either. Isn't it possible I'm something in between, just human?"

Ian's lips curved in a weary smile, then shook his head. "I don't know what to think, Stephen."

Stephen nodded. "I know. And I didn't help with sticking my foot in my mouth and twisting things up in your head so you were thinking I wanted something I didn't. I don't want an affair, or a piece on the side, or anything like that. That's not who I am anymore than it is you. I just..." He paused and struggled with the words as Ian watched. "I'm scared to death, Ian. You were right. I wanted to hedge my bets, but not because I wanted to get something for nothing. Because you scare the hell out of me."

Stephen clamped his lips shut, his heart pounding. That was probably the most honest thing he'd said, and he certainly hadn't meant to say it. That he loved Ian was one thing, and enough of an admission for one day, but his fear had poured out before he could censor himself and now he was laid bare before someone who may have been looking for a fantasy more than a relationship. Maybe he'd assumed about Ian as much as Ian had assumed about him.

The kicker was that Stephen still wanted him, by his side and as part of his life. He wasn't ready to give up yet, but maybe he'd said enough for now. All he could do at this moment was give Ian some space and not overwhelm him with arguments like he wanted to. Or jump him and kiss him, thereby proving to Ian that he was only looking for one thing.

Stephen rose and stuck his hand in his pocket again, clutching his keys. "Just think about what I've said, okay? You know how to reach me." He swallowed past the hard lump in his throat. He was risking everything by going and leaving Ian to think. But some things were worth risking everything for and Ian was at the top of

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that list.

Ian's brows furrowed in confusion, and Stephen headed for the door before Ian could say the words ending any hope. He glanced back at him once. "I hope I hear from you."

Then he left, the door shutting behind him on the dream he'd only started to dare to have.

\* \* \*

Seether railed in the background, the sun beat in through the windows and sweat rolled in sticky beads down Ian's chest and stomach to disappear into the waistband of his shorts. He wasn't sure how long he'd been beating the shit out of the heavy bag, but it was long enough for curls to be plastered to his temples and the tops and sides of his feet ached from kicking the bag over and over at full strength, not to mention his knuckles.

Still he hadn't made up his mind what to do. The inner romantic, however, had made up his mind right about the time Stephen had shown up at the door. The hopeless romantic in him had begun jumping up and down inside, squeaking that Stephen was here to fix everything. *It can't be fixed*, Ian told that little voice firmly. *Stephen isn't who we thought he was*. Sadly, the inner romantic didn't care very much.

That was the biggest problem. Ian wanted so badly to believe Stephen's story, believe he was different, and the mere fact he wanted it so badly was what made him most wary of doing it at all.

Ian had always had shitty luck with men. Though, to be fair to the other guys, it was less about luck and more about Ian believing the best about people, especially those who didn't deserve it. His momma had always told him, "People will show you who they are."

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Believe them.” He thought it might have been from a movie or book or something, but regardless where she got it, it was truer than anything else.

Trouble was, Ian mused as he swept his face with a towel and started practicing his spinning back kick, he never wanted to believe what he was shown. Happy ever after, romance, love—he’d build it all up in his head like a goddamn teenager and when the poor sap looked at him like he was stupid for expecting more than a fuck or two, it never failed to be a complete surprise. It really shouldn’t be by now.

But Stephen...oh, Ian had been sure, more sure with him than he had ever been before. Determined not to jump the gun again, partly because they worked together and partly because Ian couldn’t remember feeling for anyone else what he felt for Stephen, Ian had done his best to move slowly, to prevent his stupid heart from running away with him.

Easier said than done for the last year, when Stephen would smile at him every time Ian was anywhere near, when Stephen would seek him out and ask his opinion or for his help on projects, when Stephen would breathe and Ian swore there was nothing more beautiful.

They talked and they joked and they razzed each other...and all the time Stephen had had this secret other life. And had never thought for a second that Ian ought to know. But why would he? Ian was his secretary, not a damn thing more. *And did you tell him your secret? Did you ever trust him enough to tell him you were gay?*

His angry, sweaty blows to the bag picked up speed, Ian’s lip curling as he slammed the hapless, duct-taped leather. “Son of a bitch.” He grunted, each syllable preceded by a punch or a kick.

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*Why now?* If he'd been in love with Ian all the time, why did he care enough to change his life now? Because Ian had told him he expected him to? That was no reason. Stephen had to do it because it was what he wanted, what he needed. If Ian had never gone to that ball, would Stephen be doing this now?

*No.* He knew the answer to that as well as he knew his own name. *No, he wouldn't.*

Stopping, Ian panted, forehead pressed to the bag as sweat trailed down his back and he shook his head. *Fuck.* He reached for his cell phone on the floor beside the wall and dialed Stephen's number, one hand on his back as he tried to catch his breath.

"Hello?" Stephen must not check his caller ID before answering because he sounded way too casual to know it was Ian.

"Why now?" Ian panted softly, swiping a hand across his forehead. "If I hadn't gone to that stupid ball, you wouldn't be divorcing your wife or admitting it was all a farce or saying you love me, would you? Just answer me that...tell me why you're doing this now?"

There was a long pause, long enough Ian began to wonder if he might have been hung up on, actually going so far as to pull the cell away from his ear and glance at it to make sure it was still connected. It was, and his brows lifted, waiting.

"I didn't realize I loved you until I saw that look flash across your face when you heard I was married." Stephen's voice was quiet, precise, as if he was thinking about every word as he said them. "I didn't realize it until I was on the slope down to losing you for good. I had hopes, but I never let myself look too far into the future, never let myself really build on them."

There was another pause, as if Stephen thought Ian might have something to say to that. Ian didn't, because he could tell Stephen

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wasn't done. Please, please, he thought, please say what I need to hear.

"When I realized you felt something too. Damn it, Ian, I couldn't think straight, especially when you were walking away and you were so hurt. Yeah, I probably wouldn't be divorcing Colleen right now or admitting to myself I wasn't living life, just kinda bumbling along with it, until you woke me up."

Another pause, but this one Ian didn't think Stephen was waiting for him, and then a moment later the other man continued.

"That moment, Ian, the look on your face was why now. Realizing I was in love with you and I was going to lose you because you weren't the type of man to put up with being second or living a lie. And I'd been living a lie for years."

Ian didn't have any words. He turned and stared out of the window to the parking lot below, still panting from his workout...and, jeez, he smelled like a gym locker room. His gaze fell on his car in the parking lot and for the first time since he'd met Stephen, Ian let his inner romantic have full rein.

"That was all I needed to hear," he said quietly and hung up, shutting the phone off so Stephen couldn't call him back, and striding for his bedroom. He didn't have time to waste on a shower. The sun was going down, but if he knew Stephen he was still at the office and would be for at least another couple of hours, if not more.

Nope, just enough time to throw on some jeans and a T-shirt and haul ass downtown. Goddamn it, his happily-ever-after was waiting and, for once, he was really sure this was it. This was the one. He grinned. Stephen was stewing and it was probably kind of mean to let him, but Ian knew he'd be forgiven in about two-point-five seconds when he walked through that office door.

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He gave it another two-point-five before clothes started hitting the floor.

## CHAPTER 5

Stephen buried himself in his work. At least writing a case brief made logical sense. It followed a set pattern and teasing out the precedent cases soothed his confusion and hurt over Ian's last cryptic statement and refusal to take his return phone call. Working gave him some clarity, and maybe that would extend into his personal life. Ian hanging up on him had to be a bad sign, but Stephen wasn't ready to give up yet. He just needed to figure out his next move.

His door opened without a knock first and a surly snarl leapt to his lips before he even turned to face the intruder. Then the door shut again, and his heart froze. There was only one person who walked into his office just like that and most everyone else was long since gone. His heart leapt back to life.

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Stephen swiveled around and stared, unable to believe Ian was there, with a small smile on his lips and his blue eyes lit up. He was disheveled and weary and a wet dream made real. "Ian."

Ian lifted his brows. "Is that all?" The man grinned, and Stephen heated up inside at the blatant challenge. Ian stripped his T-shirt off over his head and dropped it to the floor. "I love you, too, and I've been fantasizing about you, me and that desk for the past year. Gonna make me wait any longer?"

Stephen willed his heart to start beating again as his eyes narrowed and he pushed to his feet and strode toward Ian. The other man's breath caught as Stephen slid an arm around his waist and pulled him flush up against him. "Not a chance," he murmured, and in the next instant his lips were covering Ian's, warm and firm.

Ian kissed him back like nothing Stephen had ever experienced, though he was sure that had more to do with the fact it was Ian, whom he'd craved for so long, than any exceptional skill he might possess. The heat of Ian's bare chest scorched through Stephen's shirt, and Ian wedged his hands between them, struggling to undo the buttons.

Then Ian's hands stopped tugging at his shirt and moved on to his tie as he muffled impatient curses against Stephen's mouth. He was as impatient as Ian to feel skin against skin. He slid his hands over Ian's back, feeling what he'd only gotten a glimpse of before they'd kissed. It had been potent. He would have the first image of Ian shirtless burned into his mind for the rest of his life and soon he'd have the image of him naked as well.

Ian's flesh burned his hands and, when Ian finally managed to get his hands inside Stephen's shirt, his fingertips burned there, too, as if Ian was leaving his mark on him. His scent was strong



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and all male and heated up Stephen's blood.

Ian loved him, too. Stephen still couldn't figure out how that had happened, but he could taste it in his kiss. He pulled back with a rough little nip on Ian's lower lip and shrugged out of the shirt and tie still half hanging off him, then tossed it blindly onto the desk. "I hope to God you brought something with you."

Ian laughed and dug in his jeans pocket, dropping the condoms and bottle of lube into Stephen's waiting hand. "I've been ready for you for the last twelve months. I sure wouldn't fuck it up at the last minute," he teased, and gasped when Stephen slid his hands around to Ian's ass and lifted him to set him on the desk.

Oh, fuck, if he got any harder he just might come in his pants.

"You're not the only one who's had fantasies, Ian. It's going to take a lifetime to play them all out on you." Stephen leaned over him as Ian lay back on the once-pristine desk, arms sliding around Stephen's neck and lifting up to nip his upper lip.

"Promises, promises," Ian murmured, then grinned a wide, genuine smile. "Keep making them."

"Oh, I will," Stephen said on a breath, cupping Ian's hard cock in his hand and giving it a light squeeze through his jeans.

Ian groaned and lifted his hips up into Stephen's touch.

Screwing Ian on his desk was not how Stephen had imagined their first time, but he couldn't deny he'd imagined it. More than once and in vivid detail. Reality beat his fantasy to hell.

Stephen set the condoms and lube down and unbuttoned Ian's jeans, easing the zipper down. He groaned as Ian's cock sprang free, then leaned over him to drag his tongue over the flushed head. Ian tasted of salt and musk. Craving more, Stephen sank his mouth over him as he dragged Ian's jeans down off his hips and stripped him bare.

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With one last lick, Stephen straightened and took in the vision of Ian Dennison sprawled naked on his desk, thighs spread on either side of Stephen's legs. "Damn, that's a sight."

Ian nodded, hands reaching down to curl in the waistband of Stephen's pants and jerking him closer. "How about giving me a sight of my own? You're wearing too many clothes."

Ian sat up on the edge of the desk, head bent, tugging open the belt and button, glancing up at Stephen with a slow smile as he slid his hands down the back of the open pants and pushed them down. He hooked his legs around Stephen's hips and leaned slightly up to drag his tongue across the other man's lips.

"We've got our whole lives to make love, Stephen...fuck me."

"Argument heard loud and clear." Stephen wasn't entirely sure he could slow down regardless, not with the fever in his blood.

He kissed Ian again, their tongues tangling, mating, as Stephen fumbled across the desk until he found what he was searching for. He pressed the condom into Ian's hand and grabbed the lube, getting too much on his fingers in his haste. For once, he didn't care about a mess just as long as it got him to his goal quicker.

"Hurry," Ian urged, pushing up to roll the condom over Stephen's cock before lying back again.

Stephen looked down as his fingers pressed into Ian, and they both groaned, the sounds mingling together. He had to be inside Ian, wanted it so bad it was an ache, and not just in his cock either.

Ian's eyes closed, arching his back as Stephen's fingers pushed inside that perfect grasping heat, two at first, and an expression of pure pleasure crossed the other man's face.

"Oh, fuck," Ian whispered, and Stephen chuckled, his mouth moving close against Ian's ear now.

"Soon, my love. Relax for me."

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"I love you," Ian whispered, turning his face to Stephen's and their lips brushing. "I'm yours."

Those whispered words hit Stephen with a powerful punch and he vowed to himself that he'd cherish Ian's surrender and faith. He'd do anything for Ian. He'd managed somehow over the last year to not fall at Ian's feet, but now that things were what they were, he couldn't help himself. "Yes, mine, and you won't ever regret it."

"How could I?"

Stephen felt the ripple run through Ian as his fingers found the little bundle of nerves deep inside him. He smiled, trailing his lips along Ian's throat, feeling the rough scrape of his unshaven jaw against his lips as his mouth moved higher and tasting the salt as if Ian had spent the day running. He'd have to ask him later. He kissed Ian, savoring the heat and the ache kissing him brought.

He pushed in another finger, sensing Ian's impatience and having it feed his own until Ian broke his mouth away. "I think you're trying to kill me. Now, Stephen."

Stephen chuckled and kissed him again, a nipping, hungry kiss. "I want you as crazy as you've got me."

Ian laughed, hips lifting impatiently. "Babe, I was there the second you touched me." He hooked his leg higher on Stephen's side. Stephen caught that strongly muscled leg, lifting it higher over his shoulder as Ian's breath caught. The move left Ian spread wide for him, helpless and with such a needy, turned-on look in his eyes that Stephen thought he might come on the spot when he finally thrust inside.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble we'd be in if we get found?" Stephen asked, his eyes sparkling.

Ian grinned and clenched around his fingers, making his cock

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throb and ache against his lower belly, slick and flushed with desire. “I think you don’t give a shit, do you, Mr. Proper? Where’s your moral outrage?”

Stephen gave him a wicked grin in return. “It gave up the ghost when you walked in here looking like a wet fucking dream.”

“Fucking. Good idea. Now would be good,” Ian teased, reaching down to give Stephen’s cock a firm squeeze.

Stephen groaned and slid his fingers out, rubbing the head of his cock against Ian’s entrance.

“Such a damn tease,” Ian said, giving him another squeeze. “How come I never realized that side of you?”

“We have a long time to figure out every little bit about each other,” Stephen promised.

Their eyes locked and Stephen pushed inside Ian, desire flashing through him at the welcoming heat. Now this felt right. This was where he belonged. There was such power in the moment of claiming and at the same moment, Ian laying his own claim as well.

\* \* \*

Ian’s heart tripped as Stephen turned his head and kissed the inside of his leg, leaning over him so they had as much skin-to-skin contact as possible. “Oh, God.” Ian panted as he rocked his hips up. “Hard, Stephen. I ain’t gonna break. I want you to fuck me hard.”

There was a brief pause as their eyes met, and Ian saw in Stephen’s the effect his demand had. Pure, undiluted lust and Ian trembled in anticipation. The first hard thrust nearly drove him right out of his skin.

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“Is that how you want it, Ian? Just like that?”

Ian trembled and nodded, fingers curling against Stephen's back and shifting his leg so it hooked over Stephen's arm, allowing them to press closer together. “Yes,” he whispered, clenching hard. “Exactly like that.”

Stephen kissed him then, and Ian decided if he could, he'd happily spend the rest of his life doing nothing but kissing this man. He tasted good, felt good, lips firm and warm against his own. But it was the way he kissed, with complete authority and confidence...like he knew exactly how good he was and exactly how much Ian wanted him.

When the kiss broke, Ian sank his fingers into the other man's hair and gave him a narrow-eyed determined look. He could drive Stephen crazy, too, and lifted his head to slant his mouth across his lover's, kissing him with all the confidence he had in him.

Stephen wasn't the only one who knew how to kiss like the devil, and Ian showed him that in vivid detail. His tongue swept into Stephen's mouth, moaning at the taste of him, vaguely coffee and mint. The pleasure of each thrust sent a shuddering gasp into the other man's mouth, met with a low groan in reply.

Ian could feel the shudders rippling through Stephen, the muscles in the other man's arms trembling where they braced on the desk. When Stephen levered up enough he could slide his hand between their bodies and start to stroke him, Ian broke the kiss with a sharp cry of pleasure.

“So damn hot,” Stephen whispered.

“Not enough,” Ian moaned and nipped Stephen's jaw. “More.”

Stephen nodded, panting. “Yes, baby. More.”

Ian lifted his hips to meet each thrust, shuddering as Stephen's cock filled him up, brushing past his prostate each time and

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sending wild shivers of pleasure zipping along his nerves. He was no virgin; he'd had his share of partners, but this... The difference had to be because it was Stephen. There was no other explanation for how intense he felt, how completely consumed by the man fucking him.

And even still, despite the hard, near-brutal pounding his ass was taking, Ian felt the love. Saw it. How he had missed it before, he'd never know. Maybe he hadn't missed it; he'd always thought there was more between them. Just now he knew what it was.

Stephen half-closed his eyes as Ian's hand slipped up to cup the nape of his neck. There was a single frozen moment of understanding, as Ian saw—and Stephen let him see—the love that flowed between them, amidst the roiling fury of their heated fucking. Then Stephen groaned, burying his face against Ian's throat before shifting and taking his lips again. They kissed as if they were pouring their hearts into each other and what they said through the kiss drowned out the sound of their moans and the sound of rough sex.

When Stephen broke the kiss, he drew in a shuddering breath. His stroking hand moved easier now, precum slicking the way as Ian's body surrendered to the pleasure tearing him apart. Stephen squeezed him and Ian's eyes slammed shut with a cry.

*Oh, fuck, that felt good.* Any better and this would be over in no time. He had a feeling it was going to be anyway.

Ian's hands came up above his head to clutch the edge of the desk, his eyes locked with Stephen's as the pleasure spiraled up and up, out of control. He wasn't going to last very much longer and there was a flash of regret before Ian remembered—he had a lifetime to make love to this man.

His lips curved suddenly and as his orgasm rolled toward him,

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he gasped. “Hey, Stephen.” Ian’s eyes fluttered as he fought to keep them open against the waves of ecstasy.

“Hey, Ian,” Stephen murmured in return, never looking away.

“You’re stuck with me forever now.” Stephen was going to marry him, whether he knew it then or not. Ian knew. And as he came, arching hard and staring up into his lover’s dark eyes, he got the feeling Stephen did know. He also realized suddenly that whatever mask Stephen had worn for so long, it was gone now. There were no shades of hidden secrets, no little lines of worry between his brows.

Ian lost the ability to think at all then, and lost the battle to keep his eyes open as Stephen’s cock hit his spot and Ian saw stars.

All Ian could think as Stephen joined him, the other man crying out as he came, was that Stephen would never be able to work at this desk again without thinking of this, of them, and the scent of sex and leather bound legal tomes mingling in the air.

“I love you.”

Ian’s eyes focused on Stephen again, and the other man smiled, his eyes open as he brushed a kiss over Ian’s lips.

“I love you,” Stephen said again. “And I’ll never get tired of saying it or showing it. Not to you.”

Ian was having trouble catching his breath, so his laugh was slightly broken as he reached up and wrapped his arms around Stephen’s neck, pulling him down so they lay chest to chest across the desk. Messy and sticky, and God knew whatever papers were currently crumpled under Ian’s hips were ruined for good, but he didn’t care and knew Stephen didn’t either.

“I’m never going to get tired of hearing it.”

Stephen withdrew after a minute, and Ian propped up on his elbows, peering down at his chest and stomach and then up at

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Stephen as his lover tossed the condom in the trash. "I'm a mess," he announced.

Stephen nodded, his eyes raking over Ian with a heated glance. "You are, indeed. Here." He handed Ian a box of tissues. "Do the best you can with those and then get dressed, hotshot. We're going home."

Ian's heart tripped in his chest as he sat up awkwardly, grabbing a handful of tissues. "My place or yours?"

"That depends," Stephen said, beginning to pull his own clothes back on.

Ian tipped his head to one side. "On what?"

"How attached are you to your apartment?"

"I can live with giving it up." Warmth flooded him. "I snore."

Stephen laughed. "I hog the covers. We'll adjust."

Ian tossed the tissues in the trash, taking Stephen's hand when he held it out with a smile, and rising from the desk.

Ian wasn't completely naïve, despite his inner romantic currently turning backflips in glee. There was work to consider, Stephen's marriage still needed to be dissolved, and there were their families to consider as well. It wasn't going to be all sunshine and daisies from here on out.

But it was a start. The beginning of something wonderful, and Ian found that the promise of that was enough. Just the chance. Now he had it and he wasn't going to blow it, not for anything. He gave Stephen a tight squeeze.

"Alright then, let's go." Stephen gave him a seductive look. "If you had any idea how many times I've imagined having you in my shower..."

Ian grinned. "I'm feelin' more than a little dirty...wanna wash my back?"



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His answer was a low growl from Stephen and then Stephen let him go, tossing him his clothes.

“You have half a minute to get your clothes back on, Ian. And it’ll be more than your back I’m washing.”

Ian shivered as he hurried to dress. It turned out Stephen *was* his perfect guy after all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fae Sutherland has always dreamed of being a published author, starting off her writing career at age 11 with a horrific “Monkees” fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age 34, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, but though she is multi-published both solo and jointly, she truly does prefer writing with her co-author Marguerite Labbe best. When she’s not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on website and graphic design, being with her closest friends and playing The Sims 2 until the wee hours of the morning.

Marguerite Labbe has been accused of being eccentric and a shade neurotic, both of which she freely admits to, but her muse has OCD tendencies, so who can blame her? Her husband and son do an excellent job keeping her toeing the line, though.

Together with her co-author Fae Sutherland, Marguerite has found a shared passion for beautiful men with smart mouths. When she’s not working hard on writing new material and editing completed work, she spends her time reading novels of all genres, enjoying role-playing games with her equally nutty friends, and trying to plot practical jokes against her son and husband. Her son is

learning the tricks too quickly and likes to retaliate. You'd think she'd learn.

Find out more about Fae and Marguerite at their website:  
[www.chasethedream.net](http://www.chasethedream.net)

\* \* \*

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