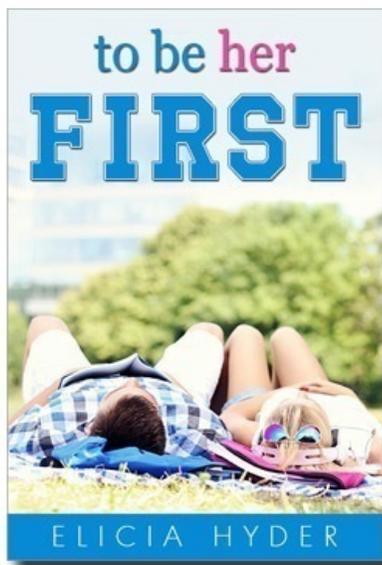


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For my husband, Chris...
the boy who *almost* got away.

And for my mom and dad...
who made my bed.

.1

THE PHOENIX

“PLEASE, BRANDON,” Marcus Garrett begged. “We’re not going to tell anyone.”

Brandon Stockport shook his head and pointed to the sign by the cash register. “Eighteen,” he grumbled again. Brandon pushed his thick, black rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose before leaning back over the skull he was etching on Marcus’s shoulder.

Kara Robertson smirked from where she sat with her long legs crossed on a bar stool. “Geez, Brandon, for a tattoo artist you sure are a goodie two shoes. Journey’s birthday is in, like, ten hours.”

“I’ve got the most successful tattoo shop in town. I’m not jeopardizing it by putting ink on a kid,” Brandon griped.

Journey Durant laughed. “You’ve got the only tattoo shop in town.”

Brandon stuck up his middle finger and wiped some oozing ink and blood from Marcus’s skin.

Stockport Tattooing was one of many surprising new businesses for the quaint but growing town of Emerson, Georgia. Situated on Main Street in the heart of downtown, if there was such a thing, the shop seemed to be a block from everything important: the city high school, the police department, the courthouse, and the town’s one and only bar, Barry’s Bar & Grill. In a town where the biggest news story of the year was the county’s ban on sagging pants, Brandon Stockport had every right to be worried about being put out of business.

Marcus looked over to where Journey was examining the tongue rings. “Do we have plans tomorrow?” he asked.

Kara’s brow crumpled, and she tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Oh, I don’t know. Just mine and Journey’s *graduation*.”

Journey raised her hand half-way into the air. “And my birthday.”

Marcus craned his neck to watch Brandon work. “I know that much. I mean, do we have plans for afterward? I know you guys don’t want to go to that lame party that the school throws.”

“We’re going to Journey’s lake house,” Kara said. “Her parents are leaving for London tomorrow morning.”

Marcus looked up with surprise. “London?”

Journey shrugged her shoulders and plopped down onto the barstool beside Kara. “Business,” she said.

By American Southern standards, Journey’s parents were perfect. They were staunch Republicans, successful small business owners, and devout Southern Baptists. Their busy schedules, combined with the increasing disconnection they had with their youngest daughter, allowed Journey freedoms that they didn’t necessarily want to give but were forced to. They deeply loved her, and she knew it, but their customers needed their attention and Journey didn’t want it. She hadn’t been the least bit surprised that they were missing one of the biggest days in her life, and truth be told, she didn’t really care.

She looked up to see Brandon and Marcus both looking at her with so much pity she wanted to run out of the shop. “Your parents are going to be in London on your eighteenth birthday and your graduation?” Marcus asked in disbelief.

She forced a laugh. “In their defense, they had a valid point when they said they weren’t even sure I would show up for my graduation.”

Marcus looked up at Brandon, his eyes begging for mercy. “C’mon, man. *Please?*”

Brandon let out a frustrated groan. He stared at her for a moment before throwing his hands up in defeat. “Oh, for Christ’s sake... fine! What tattoo do you want?”

Journey smiled. Something good might come out of her parental issues after all.

She had been planning her first tattoo since her Uncle Ray had come home from the Navy with a pin-up on his forearm when she was seven. She had drawn out the design she wanted when she was thirteen and had changed it more times than she could count. She flipped through her sketchpad and pulled out the final draft of a colorful phoenix. She proudly slid the drawing toward Brandon.

He looked up from Marcus’s arm. “You did this?” he asked.

“I did,” she replied.

He turned and leaned over the drawing of the magical bird. “It’s really good,” he said, unable to mask the surprise in his voice. “Where do you want to put it?”

“On my ankle, going down onto my foot,” she answered.

Brandon shook his head, still staring at the picture. “Damn, girl. I was expecting a butterfly or something.”

Kara sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t know her at all then.”

“You’re going to be here for a while,” Brandon said, turning back to finish Marcus’s skull. “And it’s not going to be cheap.”

“It’s on me,” Marcus announced.

Journey looked up.

“And me,” Kara added. “Happy Birthday, Journ.”

Forty-five minutes later, as the tattoo gun buzzed against her skin, Journey decided that getting a tattoo was like having a sunburn and being drawn on with an Exacto knife. As Brandon completed the outline of the bird, she wondered if she could tolerate the pain for the next few hours. To help keep her distracted, Kara made faces behind Marcus as he relentlessly admired his new ink in the mirror.

Journey wasn't what anyone would've called a popular student in high school. From her short, randomly colored hair down to her combat boots, everything about her was different from the other small town kids who valued their GPAs, the homecoming court, and football. However, despite her individuality—which usually didn't bode well for high school girls—her eighteenth birthday proved that she had some amazing friends.

It all began halfway through football season her sophomore year when she walked into Geometry class to find the quarterback slumped over his desk. He'd never actually spoken to Journey before, other than to borrow a pencil or ask to share her book, but necessity didn't constitute a friendship. He was a junior, and all she really knew about him was his name: David Britton.

On any other day, she wouldn't have given him a second thought as she took her seat behind him, but that day he looked so pitiful and friendless that it was heartbreaking. She wondered if maybe someone had died or if he was having big problems at home. As the teacher took attendance, Journey scribbled a note to him.

Are you OK?

He looked surprised when she slipped the note under his elbow, but he opened it and wrote a reply before passing it back to her.

Rebecca dumped me.

When she read it, she rolled her eyes to his back. *You've got to be freaking kidding me*, she thought. Nevertheless, she responded.

Then she doesn't deserve you. ☺

She knew he would probably assume that she was flirting with him. Most of the girls at West Emerson High flirted with David Britton. He was the star of the football team and looked like an over-sized Ken Doll with perfectly groomed brown hair, a chiseled face, and chocolate brown eyes. To her surprise, he simply looked back at her and smiled. It was an honest smile—a grateful one.

An hour later when the bell rang, Kara, who had been her best friend since the fourth

grade, was waiting for her at the locker they shared.

Kara was an individualist by genetics; she had reached six foot one by age eleven. Like Journey, she was a bit of a rebel. On the first day of high school, the basketball coach had called her ‘a natural talent’ upon meeting her in the hall and insisted that she join his team. With great offense, she fired back, “I will not be defined by a growth chart!” She never touched another basketball.

“Hey, do you want to come home with me after school?” Kara asked as Journey approached.

Journey gave a noncommittal shrug. “Maybe.”

“Journey, right?” a male voice asked behind her.

She spun around to see David Britton. “Yeahhh,” she said, drawing the word out till it sounded more like a question than an answer.

“Hi, Kara,” David said like he had known her for years.

“Hey there,” she replied with a polite nod before turning her wide, questioning eyes back to Journey.

Journey looked back at David. He rocked back and forth on his heels for a second and then lowered his voice so that only she could hear him. “I just wanted to say thanks for trying to cheer me up. No one has really said much since Rebecca and I split.”

She offered him a kind smile. “They probably just don’t know what to say,” she suggested. “I doubt they mean anything by it.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t think they really care.”

She thought for a second. “Then they aren’t very good friends.”

He let out a slight chuckle. “Most of them aren’t,” he agreed. “Are you looking for any new friends? You seem to be good at it.”

For a brief moment she wondered why he was standing there, in his letter jacket, talking to her. She didn’t think it was possible to make that big of an impression in just two scribbled sentences on a torn sheet of notebook paper.

She hugged her English book to her chest. “Sure. I’m always looking for new friends.” She smiled. “As long as you’re not always this big of a cry baby.”

He laughed and looked at her with pleasant surprise in his eyes. “Do I look that bad?”

She laughed. “I thought someone had died.”

He cast his eyes to her feet and laughed.

“Dave!” a voice boomed from down the crowded hallway.

The three of them looked up to see a pair of flailing arms in the air. Girls regularly blushed at the sight of Marcus Garrett, David’s best friend. He was the football team’s wide receiver and, like David, one of the most popular guys in school. He wasn’t very tall, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in build. The rumor was that he had some Latino mix in his genes, so he was dark with a year-round tan and jet-black hair. However, he had the brightest green eyes Journey had ever seen. The year before, an infamous list had appeared in all the girls’ bathrooms around school. Marcus was listed as

‘Cutest Butt’ and ‘Most Beautiful Eyes’.

Until that day, Journey had never seen those bright green eyes up close, but there they were, taking a close inventory of her. He turned toward David and slapped him on the chest. “Coach Smith wants to see us before the end of the day. I told him I would let you know.”

Journey wondered if she merited a proper introduction from one member of the jock squad to another. She was surprised when it seemed she did. David pointed at her. “Marcus, you know Journey, right?”

Marcus nodded his head. “Yeah, I’ve seen you around. Nice shirt.”

She shifted awkwardly on her feet and wondered if he was serious or making fun of her black, vintage Metallica t-shirt. “Uh, thanks.”

David nudged her with his elbow. “Are you coming to the game tonight?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

He flashed her a genuine smile. Marcus hooked his arm around David’s neck and began pulling him backward down the hall. “Cool. I’ll look for you!” he called out.

Journey and Kara stared after him for a moment before Kara peered down at her. “What was that all about?”

Journey shook her head. “I have no idea.”

Brandon finally turned off the buzzing tattoo gun. “That’s it. You’re all done.” He wiped a cool cloth over her throbbing leg and foot.

Marcus stepped over beside her and nodded with approval. “Wow.”

Kara walked back inside from her fifth smoke break since they had arrived and joined them at Marcus’s side. “Are you done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Journey said, wincing with pain as she stood. She stepped in front of the mirror on the wall and turned her leg in different directions to admire the work. “Oh Brandon, it’s awesome!” She took a step closer to get a better look. It was exactly what she wanted.

Kara clapped her hands together. “It’s beautiful!”

Journey spun around and wrapped her arms around Brandon’s neck. “Thank you so much!”

He squirmed uncomfortably until she released him. “Fan-fucking-tastic. Now pay me and get the hell out of here before someone asks questions.”

Journey laughed and Marcus pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. “You guys go outside. I’ll be there in a second,” Marcus said.

Obediently, Journey and Kara walked out into the bright Southern sunlight. Journey looked up at her friend. “Do you really like it?”

“I seriously love it,” Kara replied. “I’m a little jealous. When are you going to draw one for me?”

“Whenever you want.”

Marcus walked out the door and slipped on his sunglasses. Journey grasped his arm

and planted a loud smacking kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Marcus,” she sang in his ear.

He sighed and shook his head. “You’d better be thankful. I’ve never spent money like that on a chick before.”

She tugged on his arm. “I love you. You know that right?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Journey was no longer awkward around Marcus. That all ended the day he broke down and confessed that he regularly visited the tanning salon, and he wore green contacts. She had laughed until he got up and left the room. The truth was, even Marcus was as insecure as the rest of them.

“Too bad Dave couldn’t be here for my first tattoo,” Journey said as they walked to Marcus’s black truck.

“Is he coming to your birthday party?” Kara asked.

“Yeah, he’ll be there,” Journey answered. She slid into the middle seat between her friends and propped her throbbing leg up on the dashboard.

“Sore?” Marcus asked with a grin as he started the truck.

“Not unless I touch it.” Journey laughed and squeezed his shoulder. “How’s that arm?”

He yelped with pain. “Son of a...!” he shouted, shoving her into Kara.

She laughed as he threw the truck into reverse and pulled out onto the highway in the direction of Journey’s house.

Her parents were having a barbecue in honor of her birthday and graduation the night before to ease the guilt they felt about their departing flight the next morning. Journey knew it had the potential to become a ‘war of the worlds’ type of event between Journey’s motley crew and half of the First Baptist Church that her mother had no doubt invited. Sure enough, when they pulled in she saw that Steven Drake was waiting in his rebuilt, 1970s black Chevelle. Her pot-head boyfriend was parked right next to the preacher.

Marcus shook his head and put the truck in park. “I can’t believe you’re still with him.”

Journey pointed toward Steven. “Look at him. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Steven’s black hair was still wet from the shower and it was pulled into a short ponytail. He was wearing her favorite dark blue jeans and a 50’s style, navy mechanic’s work shirt with the sleeves rolled to display his heavily tattooed arms. Journey’s stomach still fluttered every time she looked at him.

Marcus rolled his eyes and yanked the key from the ignition.

Steven greeted her with a kiss when she slid out of the truck. The smell of his cologne nearly made her dizzy. The scent was the same one she had bought David for his birthday the year before. *I wonder if he knows that*, she thought.

Steven tugged on her belt loop with questioning eyes. “Did you get it?”

She smiled up at him and proudly propped her leg up on the fender of Marcus’s truck. “Sure did,” she said. Gently, she lifted the edge of the bandage. “My friends bought it for

me for my birthday.”

After examining it carefully for a moment, Steven tipped her chin up and lowered his lips to meet hers again. “It’s sexy,” he growled. He pulled back smiling. “Do you like it?”

“Oh yeah,” she replied as she covered it back up.

“Journey, you’re late for your own party!” she heard her mother call from the porch on the side of the house.

“We’re coming, Mom!” she yelled back.

Randall and Carol Durant belonged on the cover of a Hallmark card—or maybe a Christian Life magazine. Carol’s frosted blonde hair was perfectly in place, and she wore an angel pin tacked to the front of her Sunday morning skirt suit. Randall matched his wife in pressed khakis and a summer sweater vest over a plaid button-up. There they were, stuffy and conservative, with smiles cemented in place, when Journey and her friends made it around to the back of the country house.

Randall’s smile diminished momentarily at the sight of the questionable-at-best boyfriend whose finger was hooked in the waistband of his little girl’s blue jeans. However, in true Durant patriarch style, he extended a hand to Steven, though Journey knew he was silently contemplating throwing the boy over the deck railing.

Carol stepped forward and embraced her daughter. “I’m glad you finally made it, dear,” she said with a slight twinge of annoyance in her voice. She smelled of discount department store perfume and peppermints.

Journey wiggled free from her mother’s arms and backed up into Steven. “Hi, Mom,” she said.

“Everyone, this is the birthday girl!” Carol announced. “And this is her handsome boyfriend, David...”

“Steven,” he corrected her.

Feigning embarrassment, she put a hand to her forehead and quickly laughed to cover her error. “I’m sorry, Steven. I lost my head for a second.”

Journey gave an awkward wave to the crowd and then led her friends to the furthest point on the deck possible. “Sorry about that,” she told Steven, dropping her head onto his shoulder and hiding her eyes.

He turned his head to playfully bite the bend of her neck. “I don’t mind as long as it’s not you saying it.”

Steven Drake had attended their high school—when he bothered to show up. He was older than the rest of them, and he worked as a mechanic behind Barry’s Bar & Grill where Journey was a part-time waitress. She had been crushing on him since her freshman year, and they had dated on and off after he dropped out. Since she started at the restaurant, he had made a regular habit of seeing her. She knew her friends didn’t care much for him, but he was attractive, fun, and old enough to buy alcohol. He was able to get pot from his brother, and he had his own apartment. She found the element of rebellion he emanated to be intoxicating. And best of all, her parents hated him.

Journey looked up at Kara as she and Marcus joined them. “When is Justin coming?” Journey asked.

“He’s supposed to be on his way,” she replied.

Kara had begun dating Justin Kruse at the beginning of the school year, and their budding romance left a lot of holes in Journey’s social schedule. She filled those gaps with Steven, Marcus, and mostly with David.

Much to the dismay of his parents, David hadn’t made use of any of the scholarship money he had been offered and decided to work at the local hardware store after graduation in lieu of going to college or joining the military. Journey was happy about it though. She looked forward to spending the summer with him even more so than with her own boyfriend.

Steven didn’t understand her close friendship with another guy, despite her attempts at forcing the two of them to be friends. However, he didn’t usually complain much about it. Either he wasn’t the jealous type or he just didn’t care. Her friends suspected that he didn’t care—about her—and it was a driving cause of tension between all of them.

“How ya doin’, *Dave*?” Marcus teased, nudging Steven with his elbow.

Steven took a sip of his drink. “Kiss my ass, Marcus,” he said with a smile.

“Where is David?” Kara asked, scanning her eyes around the crowded deck.

Journey shrugged. “I thought he would be here by now. He wasn’t working today, but he said he had to run some errands with his parents.”

“That’s weird,” she said.

“I thought so too. He’ll be here sometime though,” Journey said. “He’d better be anyway.”

Steven discretely tipped a flask over Journey’s glass of soda and winked at her. She giggled silently and sucked on her straw.

“I saw that,” Journey’s Uncle Ray said as he walked toward them. He was her mother’s older brother, a retired Navy officer, and a fellow black sheep of the family.

She laughed. “Are you going to tell on me?”

He smiled and held out his glass. “Not if you share.”

Steven laughed and passed him his flask. When Uncle Ray handed it back to him, Steven stood up. “Journ, do you want some food?” he asked.

“I’ll fix it,” she told him.

He shook his head. “It’s your birthday. I’ll get it.”

She gave him a long kiss on the lips. “OK.”

When Steven had gone, Uncle Ray bent and pulled Journey in for a hug. “Happy birthday, sweetie,” he said as he slipped something into her hand.

She looked down at the \$100 bill. “Thanks Uncle Ray.”

“I know your parents are really sore about missing tomorrow,” he said.

Journey just nodded politely, making it clear she had no interest in talking about her parents.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Your aunt and I will be at your graduation. It’s at five o’clock right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“OK. Well, I’m going to go and get some of that pig before it’s all gone,” he told her as he turned to leave.

She stuffed the money into her pocket, and Kara smiled at her. “It might not be such a bad thing that your parents are going out of the country. I wish my relatives would slip me some pity cash like that.”

Journey smirked. “Ha, ha.”

Marcus surveyed the older group gathered on the far end of the porch. “Do you know any of these people?” he asked. “It looks like a tent revival out here.”

Journey looked around. “I recognize a few people from when I was a kid, and that woman in the polyester jacket always pats my hand and says ‘I’m praying for you, honey’ whenever she drops Christian tracts off at the bar. Other than that, no.” She paused and grinned at Marcus. “I’m sorry there’s not anyone worth flirting with.”

“You think I’m that shallow?” he asked.

Kara and Journey answered together. “Yes.”

“Did I miss much?” a voice asked from behind them.

They turned to see David smiling, dressed in a neatly pressed, dark brown button-up shirt and blue jeans. He had a fresh haircut, much shorter than Journey had ever seen on him before. It complemented him though and made him look much older than his nineteen years.

“Your hair is finally shorter than mine,” Journey said with a smile.

He laughed and pulled her into a tight hug, lifting her off her feet. He pressed a kiss to her temple before returning her feet to the floor. “Happy birthday,” he said.

“I’m glad you finally made it.” She let her arm linger around his shoulders.

“Hey, hey!” another voice called from the steps.

Justin was taking the steps two at a time up to the deck. He was the only other person in their group that matched Kara in height. He was thin and lanky with blonde hair that always fell down into his eyes. Though he had been a running back for the football team and was attending one of the most elite motorcycle mechanic schools in the country, Justin could only be described as *adorable*; he looked like the lost member of a boy band.

Kara ran to greet him and exchanged the present he was carrying for her full plate of barbecue. She kissed him on the lips before he stepped over to give Journey a side-arm hug. “Happy birthday,” he said. “Sorry I’m late.”

Journey beamed up at him. “Thanks for coming.”

Steven returned carrying two plates of food with napkins and two forks held in his mouth. “Need some help?” Journey asked, taking a plate and the forks from between his teeth.

“Thank you,” he replied.

“Let’s sit,” Kara suggested.

David pulled a bottled water out of the cooler and sat down next to Journey.

She looked at him with questioning eyes. “Are you not going to eat?” she asked.

“No. I ate with Mom and Dad just a little while ago.” He patted his flat stomach. “I’m still stuffed.”

“Where have you been all day?”

“Just taking care of some stuff. Where have you been all day?” he redirected her question.

“Oh!” She squealed and turned around in her seat. She slung her leg over David’s knees and reached down to uncover her tattoo.

David bent over her leg, resting a hand on her thigh as he inspected the artwork. He squeezed her knee. “It’s beautiful.”

She was beaming. “Thank you. Marcus had his shoulder done, too.”

Marcus rolled his sleeve to show off his skull.

David nodded his head. “I think I’m going to get one next.”

“What are you going to get?” Kara asked.

“Maybe an armband,” he said.

Journey shook her head. “No. You have a great chest. A tattoo would look so good right here,” she said, placing her palm over his heart.

Steven cleared his throat. “I’m still here.”

She laughed and kissed his nose. “You have a nice chest too, baby.”

Journey’s mother was handing out glasses of sweet tea with neatly sliced lemons perched on each rim. She paused to laugh politely at something the preacher’s wife said.

Justin pointed his fork at her. “Journey, are you sure you’re not adopted?”

Journey took in the sight of her 46-year-old mother whose maroon skirt suit was a size too big, six inches too long, and ten years too old. Then she glanced down at her own tie-dyed tank top, cut-off jean shorts, and worn out flip-flops. That day, Journey’s hair was platinum blonde, with pink streaks in the front. She rolled her eyes and scooped up a heap of mashed potatoes. “I ask the same thing all the time.”

As if on cue, Carol looked in their direction. “David!” Her mother nearly squealed with delight as she quickly crossed the porch, clapping her hands joyfully. “I was afraid you weren’t going to make it!”

David stood and gave her a welcoming hug. “You know I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Every mother’s dream, Journey thought. She knew it wasn’t by mistake that her mother had messed up Steven’s name during the introduction earlier. Carol had chosen David for her future son-in-law the very first time he had dropped Journey off after school. No amount of arguing would ever convince Carol Durant that they were just friends.

“I like your new haircut. You look very handsome tonight.” She placed her hand on

his chest. "Journey, don't you think David looks very handsome?"

David flashed her a straight-from-the-dentist smile and batted his eyelashes dramatically.

Journey laughed. "Just dashing."

"Mrs. Durant, what do you think of Journey's new tattoo?" David asked.

Carol looked at her daughter with the same expression she had when Bill Clinton beat George Bush in the '92 presidential election.

"Oh yeah," Journey said to her mother. She stood and grasped David's arm for support as she held up her leg to remove the bandage.

Her mother looked at the tattoo sideways. "Why do you have a rainbow chicken on your leg?"

David choked back a chuckle.

Journey rolled her eyes and replaced the bandage. "It's not a chicken. It's a phoenix."

"A phoenix?"

"It's a bird that burns up and then is reborn from its own ashes," Journey explained.

Her mother stared at her like she had grown a third eye. "A what?"

Journey glanced up at David and sadly shook her head. "I'm definitely adopted."

Carol dismissed the conversation entirely. "Well, you just help yourself to anything you want, David. Our home is your home, you know." She turned on her heel and floated off to continue playing hostess-superior.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Justin's signature snorting laugh triggered the rest of her friends into hysterics.

An hour later, Journey suffered through the obligatory 'Happy Birthday' song as Carol carried a chocolate cake to her table.

What to wish for? she thought.

She looked around the table at her friends and wondered what more she could want. She closed her eyes and blew out the candles.

I wish for everything to stay just the way it is.

When the party ended, most everyone went home. Her father retired to his recliner, David helped her mom clean up, and Steven sat on the porch playing with the new cell phone he had gotten Journey for her birthday. It seemed to Journey that Steven and David were trying to outlast each other as the night wore on. Finally, her parents went to bed, and David resigned himself to defeat.

He got up off the couch and pulled his truck keys from his pocket. "Well, I guess I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Journey stood up with him. "Are we still on for lunch with your parents?" she asked.

"Yeah, absolutely. Just come over whenever you drag yourself out of bed," he teased.

She hugged him. "Thanks for coming."

"I wouldn't miss this," he said. They heard chimes coming from the grandfather clock. He smiled down at her. "It's midnight. Happy birthday."

She giggled. “Thank you.”

“Night Steve,” he called.

“Bye Dave,” Steven replied, not getting up from the couch or even looking away from the television.

Journey walked him to the front door. “Be careful driving home,” she said.

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek that made her stomach tingle. “Bye girl,” he whispered in her ear.

When he was gone, Steven met her at the door and hooked his arms around her waist from behind. “Wanna *smoke* with me before I go too, birthday girl?” He dangled a joint in front of her.

“Please!” She laughed and stumbled out of the front door with him.

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