Behind Those Eyes

by BritBitch

Summary

What are behind those eyes? An up close and personal look at our ladies' thoughts, feelings, hopes, and fears. Starting at their meeting in the Ritz Tower, ending ... who knows? In their own words, they share their experiences of trying to overcome the distance they've spent apart, in all of its fluffy, angsty, smutty glory.

Notes

My first posting on this site, my first fanfic in a long, long time, and my first foray into writing a first person narrative ... please be kind!

I really wanted to know what Carol and Therese were thinking during their meeting at the Ritz Tower, and what might have happened afterwards. I can't claim this work to be fast-paced, or filled with endless twists and turns, but it is my attempt at delving into their minds and figuring out the meaning behind their words, pauses and actions.

Constructive criticism and feedback is always appreciated.
Three Little Words

There was so much that I wanted to say, but I couldn’t. Not only because we were in the middle of the Ritz Tower, but because I didn’t have the words. No. That’s a lie. I had the words, I had a million of them, all perched on the tip of my tongue, waiting to be given wings. I just … I didn’t know how to say them. To admit to Therese just how deeply I felt, to explain each of the countless ways she’d impacted on my life, to give words to the emotions that, for the most part, were still scary and new to me … I couldn’t fathom how to do it.

She looked so grown-up, with her new hairstyle and expensive clothes, even more so without the divide of a taxi window and a busy street between us, and I felt my pulse quicken with anxiety as I wondered what else had changed. Her feelings, perhaps? The thought made the nausea I’d felt all afternoon as I’d waited in terrified anticipation swell up again with a vengeance. I’d never, not once in my life, felt more vulnerable than I did right then. It was a feeling I detested, one I usually went to extreme lengths to avoid. I suppose this was yet another indicator of just how deeply I’d let Therese in.

I stared at her, painfully aware that this could be my last opportunity to do so. Why hadn’t I told her to wait? Why hadn’t I told her that this was all temporary? That of course I would be back, because she’d already made it so that I couldn’t keep away? That the time we had spent together, though fleeting, had changed me irreparably, in ways I could never have previously imagined? I’d always prided myself on my ability to remain detached from almost everything; it had saved me so many times in the past. But now, as I witnessed the wariness in Therese’s glorious green eyes? Now I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to look at myself in the mirror again. My heart constricted tightly.

I drank in those eyes, wariness and all, forcing myself to confront the distrust I had caused, knowing that I would repent for this sin until my dying day. I took care to note her beautiful, silky skin, unblemished and smooth, her high cheekbones, kissed lightly with blush. I took in her full lips, parted just by a fraction. And then I found myself gazing back into her eyes, my heart hammering a frantic beat as I tried desperately to etch every last detail of her face in my mind’s eye, an image frozen in time that I could draw upon whenever I needed. She was truly magnificent, stunning, and, for a short while at least, she had been mine. What a sorry fool I was.

“What?” she asked, breaking the silence between us, her voice soft and yet almost accusatory.

I tried to give all those words on the tip of my tongue another small nudge, but they didn’t come. “Nothing,” I replied, hating myself that little bit more.

I reached for my cigarette case, opening it and retrieving a cigarette as I told her about the house. If I couldn’t voice exactly how I felt, I could at least show her that things had changed, that the chaos of my life was finally settling down, that things would be different now. I tried not to feel hurt as she rejected my offer of a cigarette, realising that it was absurd, but I couldn’t help it. I felt so raw, so open and on display, that every indication of the distance between us cut me deeper than a knife. Still, I continued talking, telling her of my new apartment and job. I was surprised but bolstered when she asked about Rindy, though, when I started answering, the heavy sadness that seemed to press down on me whenever Therese wasn’t near started creeping in. I’d already lost Rindy, to some extent. I honestly didn’t know how I would cope if I lost Therese, too. That horrifying thought spurred me on.

“Anyway …” I started, watching her carefully, the hope I’d tried to dampen all afternoon now defying my orders and standing to attention. “The apartment’s a nice big one. It’s big enough for two.” I could have sworn I saw a flitting look of astonishment colour Therese’s face. I looked down
to the table, nausea rising further. It would be so much easier to not say anything else, to accept
defeat and avoid the pain I knew I might as well be waving a red flag at. But I couldn’t. I had to keep
going. “I was hoping you might like to come live with me, but I guess you won’t.” There. I’d said it.
I forced myself to look up again, trying to hide the fear on my face. The lack of reply only served to
unnerve me further, however, and I couldn’t help myself. “Would you?” I knew I must have
sounded pathetic, needy, but … well, I was, when it came to her. I silently pleaded for her to put me
out of my misery.

“No,” she said, her eyes never leaving mine, “I don’t think so.”

Five words. That’s all it took. Five words to smash every last vestige of hope I possessed into
smithereens. I’d failed. Again. I was making a habit of it. Had I honestly expected her to look at me
with a bright smile and ask when she could move in? No, not really. But, fuck, I had hoped, more
than I’d even admitted to myself. I felt my breathing getting shallower as I continued to watch her,
every expletive I knew running riot in the privacy of my mind, as self-loathing enveloped me in its
bleak grasp and I quickly tried to figure out another way.

Fully aware that humiliation would be my companion tonight, but too desperate to care, I told her of
my plans that evening at the Oak Room, begged her to join me in the guise of an invitation. I
sounded pitiful to my own ears, but I couldn’t just say nothing. I couldn’t let her get away from me,
knowing that, if I did, that really would be it. She looked almost embarrassed for me, and the panic
that I’d tried to keep at bay, forcing it down to the deepest recesses of my heart, suddenly burst free,
threatening to swallow me whole.

Why couldn’t I just say it? Why couldn’t I tell her that she was everything … everything … to me?
Why couldn’t I tell her that I couldn’t imagine a life without her? That, for about three seconds every
single morning, I felt happy, complete, until reality took those blinkers away and reminded me that
she was gone? Why couldn’t I tell her that I was completely, irreversibly, forever beguiled by her?
That I was certain I needed her more than I needed air? That I would do anything, anything at all, to
make things right? That, for as long as I could remember, I had shielded myself from the world
around me, and she’d been the one to dismantle that armour, piece by piece, until there was nothing
but her, but us?

The words screamed inside my head, those and so many more, but I remained paralysed. This was it;
I was going to lose her forever. Never again would I be able to touch her, kiss her, hold her, taste
her, wake up next to her … never again would we talk, or laugh, or share those unspoken
conversations that we both excelled in. Never again would my heart be complete. It was too much,
the pain was too harsh, too forceful … it was just too much. I could feel tears prick my eyes as I
stared at her, silently trying to convey everything I wanted to say, begging her to understand,
begging her to love me. She stared back at me, and the despair I felt within was so prominent, so
blinding, that I couldn’t even think properly as my mind abruptly grasped on to what was surely my
last hope, not even giving my subconscious time to resist before …

“I love you …”

The words tumbled out, just three of them. Not even the smallest fraction of what I wanted to say,
but contained within them was the sum of all I felt, of all I had to offer. I loved her, more than I ever
thought it possible to love anyone other than Rindy. I loved her with a passion that frightened me,
with a force that left me breathless and uncertain of just about everything except her. I loved her so
much that I knew, without doubt, that I would shatter into a million pieces if she didn’t stay. My love
for her was so profound, so visceral, that I knew my life simply wouldn’t be worth living if she
wasn’t a part of it.
I couldn’t take my eyes off her, my heart ricocheting around my chest frenetically, as I waited for a response, one last sliver of hope somehow having manifested itself deep within my soul. I wasn’t religious, not even a little, but I found myself trying to negotiate with God, praying that He would give me what I so desperately needed. I saw something in her eyes, but the terror of her possibly imminent departure meant that I couldn’t decipher it, though I could tell she was on the brink of saying something. My cigarette was long forgotten, hanging limply from between my fingers as my breathing hitched in my throat, my ears straining to ensure that I wouldn’t miss a word of what she had to say.

“Therese? Is that you?”

I looked up to the direction of the voice, confusion colouring my already dishevelled thoughts, and saw a young man start to approach, a smile on his face. It took me a second to deduce that they were apparently friends. I could have killed him. Instead, I took one last long drag of my cigarette, my emotions hurriedly trying to catch up to this latest development. Inwardly, my heart finally fully surrendered to the devastating ache that had been lurking, and I quickly blinked my tears away. Not here. Not now.

In actual fact, maybe this … this Jack (even now, I still feel a peculiar stab of resentment, just seeing his name written down in front of me, as ridiculous as that might sound) had saved me from even more humiliation. If Therese had replied to my raw declaration of love with nothing more than a verbalised shrug, it’s entirely possible that I would have had a breakdown right there in the middle of the Ritz Tower. As it was, the arrival of this stranger helped me to shove everything back down just below the surface, to the extent that, the next time I spoke, I almost sounded normal.

I called on the very last fragments of strength I had as I listened to Therese and Jack talk, resolutely ignoring the emotions threatening to overwhelm me. I reached for my bag, knowing that the moment had passed. I couldn’t focus on that thought for more than a split-second, knowing that I was on the brink of emotional collapse, aware that I needed to leave. There was one more thing I needed to do, though. And it was possibly the hardest thing I would ever do. I had to say goodbye. I took a deep breath, and willed myself on, Jack inadvertently providing me with a way to start.

“No, no,” I answered to his question of my attendance at the party they were going to. “I have to make a few calls before dinner, anyway.” The lie rolled easily from my tongue, having used this excuse many times before. “I really should run.” I kept stealing glances at Therese, even though I knew I was just punishing myself more. I wondered if she could see the agony hidden behind my eyes; if anyone could see beyond my façade, it would be her.

“Are you sure?” she asked me, her voice gentle, her voice making my soul weep.

“Oh course,” I replied, barely louder than a whisper, but still managing to fix a smile to my face. I rose and shrugged into my coat, and I cannot begin to explain how hard it was to prepare to leave her. With Rindy, I knew it wouldn’t be forever. I knew Harge would calm down, that he wouldn’t deprive our child of her mother. But Therese? I swallowed hard as I stepped forward, unable to stop myself from resting a hand on her shoulder as I wished her and Jack a pleasant evening. It took every ounce of determination within me to remove my hand and then walk away. I kept my head up, my shoulders raised, as I rounded the corner and descended the stairs that were putting more distance between Therese and I with every step.
The Talk of New York

Chapter Notes

First, thank you very much for such a lovely welcome! I'm so glad that people responded to the start of this work so well.

Though I do plan on continuing this story, it is dependent upon the reaction it receives, my schedule and whether I feel well-equipped enough to continue spinning this tale. In short, if you want more, let me know, and I will be trying to carve out some time to write further.

Thank you again, sincerely, and I hope you enjoy this chapter, too.

I don’t really remember much of the couple of hours following that crushing goodbye with Therese at the Ritz. I remember heading straight for the car, and how it took me four attempts to get the key to slide into the ignition, thanks to my shaking hands. I vaguely remember taking the short drive back to my apartment, and starting to weep as soon as I hit the first red light. By the time I’d parked, I was openly crying, my unsteady breathing echoing through the car until I was surrounded by the saddest cacophony I’d ever heard.

I don’t remember reaching the floor of my apartment, or letting myself in. But, as soon as the door closed behind me, I know I walked straight to my bed and fell upon it, still in my coat, still wearing my black hat, as I pressed my face hard into a pillow to try and stifle the sound of my devastation. I remember the pain, almost indescribable in its fervour, my stomach in knots, my heart hollow. I don’t know how long I lay there, wondering how I was going to get through the next second, the next minute, the next hour. It can’t have been too long, though. I had not completely forgotten my plans for that evening, and, although going for dinner with a couple of work colleagues was the very last thing I wanted to do, I knew that it was one way of keeping the night at bay for a little while longer.

Already, I could feel the agony close around me, my mind taunting me with my many failings, my soul splintering further with every second that passed. Maybe it was cowardly to want to run from it, to a place where, if only for a couple of hours, I couldn’t allow myself to fall apart, but I think it was the very last remnant of sanity I had left, trying to protect me for just a few more hours, until it would inevitably be drowned out by the final breaking of my heart.

As far as I remember, I spent the next hour walking around my apartment like something out of Revenge of the Zombies, reappling my smudged makeup, combing through my hair, all the while refusing to allow myself to think. The only time I almost fully succumbed to the darkness preying on me was when I walked into the living room and spotted ‘Easy Living’ perched on top of the record player, its jolly-looking record cover forcing me to confront everything I’d lost. I stood stock-still for a moment, closing my eyes in direct response to the memory of Therese’s earnest smile when she gave it to me, the recollection of her hand on mine, so strong that I could almost feel it.

I stumbled out of the living room, leaning against the hallway wall as I tried to regain whatever small scrap of equilibrium I still had left, before straightening up, grabbing my coat and leaving again. The drive to the Plaza Hotel was a less teary one, thankfully, as I somehow managed to keep myself together. I arrived a bit early, but, even though patience isn’t one of my virtues, I was glad to have to wait for my dining companions. I spent the time carefully reconstructing my mask, the face I showed...
everyone except those closest to me. By the time Xander, Malcolm and Nancy showed, I had a perfected smile in place.

For the life of me, I cannot remember what I ordered that night. Probably just a salad – I can never eat when I’m stressed, and ‘stressed’ didn’t quite cover the meltdown I was currently trying to stave off. I do recall being annoyed at myself for driving my car back over. I would have to limit myself to one glass of wine. At least I always kept a healthy supply of brandy in the apartment. Recently, a couple of glasses a night had become a ritual. I realised that tonight would probably call for a lot more self-medication than that.

I so deeply tried to keep up with the conversation happening around me. I hadn’t yet started working at the furniture house, and I had wanted to try and use this opportunity to get to know about the company I would be working for a bit better. I already knew Nancy, the head buyer, through my time running my own furniture store with Abby. She was the one who had told Abby about this job opening. I’d met Xander and Malcolm, the manager and assistant manager, respectively, during my interview the previous week, and they both seemed nice enough. However, for all of my good intentions regarding this gathering, I now found myself having to resort to tactics I usually reserved for Harge’s endless functions. For all intents and purposes, I was present and engaged in the lively discussions taking place around the table. A smile here, a murmur of assent there, even a light chuckle thrown in every now and then. In reality, I was somewhere else. Back in the Ritz Tower, to be precise.

I couldn’t help myself. I knew it was useless, I knew I was merely torturing myself, but I replayed my meeting with Therese over and over, pausing as I remembered a certain look she’d given me, or the parting of her lips, or those couple of seconds that felt like forever as she’d been about to reply to my words of love. What was she going to say? Considering how lukewarm the reception had been to my offer of moving in together, I guessed I was probably lucky not to find out. But that didn’t stop me wondering. The pain of that particular rebuttal didn’t escape my scrutiny either, as my insides withered in shame and failure as I remembered the calm way she’d turned me down.

As I sat there, I kept being engulfed in sheer panic, though it only lasted a few minutes at a time, as though it were the sea, repeatedly lapping at the sand before departing again. I wasn’t naïve, though. I knew that as soon as I closed my apartment door behind me for the night, the tide would come in and refuse to recede. I’d already been having more difficulty than usual trying to sleep in the past few months, usually only managing to when my tears had worn me out.

I do know, by the way, that I’m painting myself as a miserable, pathetic figure, but all I’ve said, all I will say, is true. It’s Therese. It’s the power she has over me. I’d never experienced anything like it in all of my life. With her, I felt like the best possible version of myself. Without her, I was lost, roaming aimlessly, unable to quell the yearning of my heart, powerless to keep my overbearing emotions in check. They really were overbearing, my emotions. They crippled me when I was alone, forcing memories to flash before me, of our first meeting, our trip, New Year’s, her face, her tartan hat, that little moan she emitted when we touched, the one that told me she was mine completely, her laugh, the way she would blush and become flustered whenever I openly stared at her. All that those memories served to do was remind me of the fuckup I’d made of it all. And then the tears would come, until I inevitably found myself curled up tightly on the edge of my large bed, hardly able to breathe, only being able to soothe myself with the knowledge that I would see her again, that I would do what it took to bring her back to me.

And now I had fucked that up, too. I’d left it too long; I’d choked on the words that she needed to hear. I don’t know if it would have made any difference, me somehow managing to overcome my ineptitude of speaking from the heart, given how things went during our meeting, but I still thoroughly hated myself for being so damn incompetent when it came to expressing myself.
Knowing that I was all out of chances, that my one opportunity to get her back had failed … well, it was hard enough now, in a room full of people. I was more scared than I would have admitted as I wondered how I would cope when I was alone.

I reached for a cigarette, momentarily winning the battle between heart and mind as I glanced around the table, vaguely relieved that no one seemed to notice anything afoot. I welcomed the feel of nicotine hitting the back of my throat, watched through vacant eyes as our dishes were taken away. Half-listening to what was being said, I forced another bright smile on my face as I heard my name mentioned, using this cue to add my own voice to the mix for a few minutes. I can’t remember exactly what I was talking about, but I remember feeling astonished, almost angry, as my companions laughed along with whatever superficial yet humorous story I was feeding them. How could they feel happiness at a time like this? How dare they? Ridiculous, of course. Forget furniture, my real profession was keeping the world at arm’s length, and I was at the top of my game after a lifetime of honing my gift.

Before Abby and I were together, back when Harge liked … well, liked is too strong a word … back when Harge tolerated her, I suppose, I would sometimes call her up and beg and plead for her to come to another of his mind-numbingly dull functions. More often than not, Harge and I had argued not long before his guests started arriving, and I’d pull Abby into a side-room, offloading my anger onto her, almost spitting with rage as I recounted the latest words we’d shared. And then? Then, I would go back out to the real world, a wide, welcoming smile on my face, where Harge would place my arm through his and introduce me to his latest business acquaintance, and I would stare adoringly at him, playing the doting wife.

Abby was, at first, amazed, and more than once I had to remind her to pick her jaw up off the floor as I walked back over to her, my duty to my husband over for another ten minutes or so. She’d shake her head, a smile pulling at her lips as she offered up some whispered sardonic comment or other about how Katharine Hepburn should watch her back. I’d always been a very private person, ever since I was a child, I’d never been one to talk about how I was feeling, or what I was feeling, or why I was feeling. I kept all of that locked inside, with the exception of Abby. But it was only when things worsened between Harge and I that I really had to work on fooling an entire roomful of people, presenting them all with the person I wanted them to see, not the person I really was.

That’s what I was doing tonight, at the Oak Room. I reminisced with Nancy over my old business, I smiled when Xander openly took note of the slight flirtation between Malcolm and Nancy, I told stories of the occasional scrapes Abby and I had found ourselves in when tracking down a chest of drawers, or an antique table, or a perfectly charming lamp, chuckling in all of the right places. I even managed to speak of Rindy when Nancy asked after her, without missing a beat. I don’t doubt that, had Therese or Abby been there, they would have noticed the faint grimace of my lips, the tightening around my eyes, but my current companions were oblivious, and all the while I felt like I was dying inside.

I felt despair, at a level previously unknown to me, as I sat there, realising that this was it, now. Four months ago, I had joint custody of Rindy, and I had Therese. In the space of 12 hours, I’d lost hope of ever having either again. I could feel myself unravelling more with every minute that passed, I didn’t know how much longer I could last before my mask slipped and I revealed the grotesque desperation that lay underneath. Smoking what must have been my sixth, maybe seventh, cigarette, I knew I would soon have to make my excuses, as much as I dreaded what was waiting for me back at my apartment. I decided I would wait for the current topic of discussion to fade, and then bid them farewell, blaming my sudden departure on a headache rather than the heartache that was intent on tearing me apart.

They were talking about a delivery that was to be arriving the following morning, a big one, by the
sounds of it. I wouldn’t know, I wasn’t due to start working there for another 10 days. I looked between them all, each deep in conversation, and I felt a stab of jealousy. How I wished my main concern was how much time a delivery of furniture was going to take to unload. I still smiled, though, when Nancy smiled at me. I ground my cigarette into the ashtray, hoping that this topic would wind down soon, so I could escape without appearing too rude and disinterested. My anxiety was becoming harder to ignore, and I picked up my cigarette case, fiddling with it as I turned my attention to Malcolm, giving a small dip of my head in response to what he was saying.

To this day, I don’t know why my eyes shifted a fraction to my left. The only conclusion I’ve been able to draw is that what I feel for Therese, what she feels for me, runs far deeper than on a merely emotional level. It’s physical, almost like we’re magnets, always drawn to each other no matter the circumstance. Does that sound too ridiculous? Too absurd? I would have thought so, too, before Therese.

Anyway, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that one moment I was truly convinced that I would never know the meaning of happiness again, my entire body heavy and aching as I prepared for the loneliest night I’d ever experienced, my mind on the very precipice of breaking point. The next … everything faded away. I couldn’t hear anything but the pounding of my heart. In that moment, it was just me and her in the world. Nothing else mattered. I stared at her, afraid to blink in case I’d already tipped fully into insanity without realising, and she was but a mirage that would disappear before my eyes.

She stared right back, her beautiful, entrancing green eyes boring into my own, and I quickly searched her face. I’d just been gripped between the teeth of endless misery, it took me a second to comprehend what it meant, to see her stood there … my angel, flung out of space. I saw the quirk of her lips as they lifted into a small smile, and I quickly released a breath I hadn’t even known I was holding. I could feel my own lips turn up in response, this smile taking no effort at all, my eyes on her the whole time. She was here. I so desperately wanted to walk to her, run to her, to wrap her in my arms, smother her with kisses, fall to my knees in apology, make her promise to never leave me, but the damn table was in my way. Looking back now, I suppose I’m grateful to that stupid piece of wood. I can’t imagine the patrons of the Oak Room getting over that in a hurry. Therese and I would have been the talk of New York within the hour.

In any case, I was momentarily rooted to my seat, my heart thundering, my pulse racing, my stomach erupting into pirouettes more energetic and joyful than would ever be witnessed in a viewing of Swan Lake, I’m sure. I was still lost in a world in which Therese and I were the sole inhabitants, still feeling somewhat dazed by her arrival, and it was only when I heard a distant cough, and Therese gave an amused, almost imperceptible, jerk of her head, that I could break free from my trance. Blinking a couple of times, I glanced around the table. Xander was trying to inconspicuously look between Therese and I, Malcolm had suddenly become very interested in his beer, and Nancy, the one who’d coughed, I deduced, looked at me with an expression that seemed half-amused and half-curious. The smile still hadn’t left my face.

“I do apologise,” I said, having to clear my throat before any words would come out, and I could hear the sudden warmth in my voice. “Therese, I’d like to introduce you to Nancy Wiltsey, Malcolm Elliott and Xander Avery. They’ve been kind enough to hire me as a buyer for their furniture store.”

I’m sure they all must have greeted Therese, but I don’t know for certain. I was too busy focusing on the vision in front of me to notice much of anything else. “Nancy, Malcolm, Xander … this is Therese Belivet. She’s a good friend of mine.”

The shy smile on Therese’s face honestly made my heart stop for a beat. I took a deep breath, and willed my composure to not abandon me completely. Mere moments before, I’d been pleading for the same thing, but for such different reasons. I rose to my feet, my bag in my hand. “I’m so sorry. I
forgot that I had made plans for after our meal,” I said as politely as I could, forcing myself to tear my
gaze away from Therese yet again. Thankfully, my companions didn’t seem bothered in the slightest,
and I was glad that I had made it through the meal and had shared a drink with them, at least. It was
worlds away from my thought process of just minutes before, when I had started sorely regretting
turning up for the gathering in the first place. “Would you mind if I excuse myself?”

Xander grinned. “Of course not. I should be getting home soon, anyway. I promised my wife I
would be back at a reasonable hour.” Malcolm and Nancy nodded in agreement, though I couldn’t
help but notice a quick look shared between them, which made me wonder if they hadn’t just been
waiting for us to leave all along, so they could spend some time alone.

I moved around the table then, saying my goodbyes and thanking them for their kindness, before
turning to Therese. Oh, there was so much I wanted to say, to do, but I knew that then and there
wasn’t the time or place. My heart ached in a sort of beautiful agony as I stepped towards her, and
she watched me wordlessly as I approached. It was so difficult to keep from touching her, to refrain
from brushing my fingertips across her cheek and pressing my lips to hers. I would have invited
Therese to join us for the last of our evening if I’d honestly believed that I could have kept my hands
to myself and my lips sealed. She was my undoing.

When I finally reached her, I paused. She still didn’t say anything. Maybe she was suffering the same
doubt of self-control as me. We were inches apart, but it still felt too far. I gazed at her for a long
moment, my eyes trying to satiate my thirst and failing miserably. I would never get enough; my
thirst for her would never be fully quenched. I shook my head faintly, a small movement that only
Therese could see, and I’m sure there was a sense of wonder in my eyes.

“You came,” I said quietly, still finding it difficult to understand the words even as they spilled from
my lips.

“Yes,” she murmured, and my heart soared at the sound of her sweet voice.

I smiled again, and clutched my bag tighter, trying to stop my hands from moving of their own
volition. A waiter behind me cleared his throat, and I moved forward, giving him a quick apology.
The interruption was what I needed, and I looked around the room. “Shall we go?” I asked, my
voice slightly stronger now.

“Yes.”
Naïve

Chapter Notes

Thank you, again, for your lovely words. They encourage and motivate me greatly, and so here I am with another offering.

I hope you enjoy.

The walk from the Oak Room to the street outside was not a long one, but it felt like it lasted forever as Carol and I walked through the hotel’s grand reception in silence, only stopping to pick up her coat. I could feel her eyes on me, as they had been since she’d first seen me turn up unexpectedly, and the blood in my veins was on fire. I resolutely stared forward, my heart threatening to pound right out of my chest, as I wondered for the hundredth time just how another person could cause such a deep physical reaction within me. We hadn’t even touched, and I was already struggling to keep my breathing regular.

I’d been so scared when I’d first walked into the Oak Room, my stomach churning with nausea as my first scan of the room had proved fruitless. I wondered if she’d already left, I wondered if I would be left resorting to prowling Madison Avenue in my search of her. I have no doubt in my mind I would have done just that, too. Maybe not that night, but at some point. I couldn’t keep away from her. God knows, I’d tried.

It almost strikes me as comical now, when I think back to how I was when I received her hand-delivered letter while stood in the middle of the Times. I was still so naïve, so hopelessly living in denial, that I spent two hours that afternoon trying to convince myself that I was over her. Who was I fooling? The second I’d seen her in Frankenberg’s, I knew I’d never be over her. Of course, I didn’t then realise just quite what that entailed, just what highs and lows our relationship would go through. But I knew I’d never forget her, all elegant and sophisticated, almost otherworldly, awakening something within me that I’d never known existed until that moment.

By the time I received her invitation, I’d tried so hard to change, to become a different person. My very first paycheck was spent on clothes I could never have dreamt of affording, on a hairstyle that I’d never thought I, plain old Therese Belivet, could ever pull off. I suppose that when you get hurt that badly, what you thought was and wasn’t possible shifts. For example, I’d never ever thought that another person would have the power to single-handedly leave my life in tatters, could leave me so bereft of anything even remotely associated to happiness. I’d never thought I’d find myself huddled in a ball in the corner of my bedroom, because I simply couldn’t move from the sheer weight of the pain that pressed down on me.

It had taken six weeks to even agree to meeting Dannie’s friend, to even try to envisage something other than misery in my life. I knew that he thought I was taking it all too hard, perhaps he even thought I was over-exaggerating. I didn’t blame him for it, though. How could he have understood? My world had been so dreary, so mundane, so … empty … before Carol had walked into my life, and I’d just accepted it. I’d believed that that was how it was going to be, for the rest of my days. I’d been living in a dark room, and she’d walked in and turned on the light I hadn’t even known was there. She’d changed everything, and I had fallen hard, harder than I could have ever thought possible. That was the problem, I guess. Had our paths never crossed that day, I would never have
known how good life could be. But they had, and I did, and, when she left, all of that went with her.

It almost felt like I’d regressed back to being a baby. I had to learn everything again. Just over eight weeks after she’d disappeared from my life, the day I received that phone call telling me I had been taken on as a clerk at the New York Times, was the first time I’d smiled. I couldn’t get over how foreign it felt, how unfamiliar. Those three months were the worst I’d ever lived. I think that was why I was so fiercely reluctant to admit that I wasn’t over her. I’d just reached the stage where waking up in the morning wasn’t physically painful for me; my survival instinct told me that I couldn’t live through that again.

Still, a part of me knew. Deep down, deeper than my conscious, even my subconscious, I knew, as soon as I saw Carol’s wide, attractive (is it odd that I found even her handwriting attractive?) scrawl spelling out my name on that envelope, that I would give her whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it. I think that might have fuelled my panicked inner voice more, screaming at me that Carol was in the past, that I was better off without her, pleading with me to understand that I was different now, I wasn’t that naïve little girl, anymore, the one that Carol believed to be too young to understand how the real world worked. You can’t see me, of course, but I’m shaking my head as I reread those words. I’ve finally reached the stage where I can admit that I’m still a bit naïve, now. I always will be. It’s a part of who I am, it’s one of the reasons Carol fell in love with me in the first place.

I didn’t know that at the time, though. Especially her falling in love with me. Our time apart had done a very good job in persuading me that I had been nothing but a mere pastime to her, someone to while away a couple of weeks with, while her life was coming apart at the seams. My sadness had turned to anger by the time I received that invitation, and I do believe that part of the reason I went to meet her that day was to try and show her that I was okay without her, that I was more than okay. I had a job that had people nodding in approval about instead of forcing an interested smile, I had clothes that even she might have worn, I had a fancy haircut. That in-denial part of me thought I could show up and prove to her that she hadn’t broken me.

In retrospect, I’m glad I had that anger. Without it, fear might have completely overwhelmed me, caused me to run in the opposite direction. As it was, I clearly remember sitting at that table in the Ritz Tower, telling myself that this would be the last time I would ever see her again, trying to assure myself that this was what I wanted. Oh, the mind is a fickle thing. I felt her presence before I saw her, and, as soon as I turned to her, I knew I’d been a fool. She was more beautiful, more perfect, than I’d remembered, and every promise of being a different person, of somehow becoming immune to her charm, evaporated in the space of a millisecond as I heard her voice.

It took every ounce of dignity I had to keep from crumbling the very instant our eyes met. I could tell, straightaway, that she was more vulnerable than I’d ever seen her before. The sight caused my heart to ache so deeply that I was sure that any of the wounds that had started to heal had torn themselves apart again in that moment. I’d seen her in many different lights. I’d seen her confident, in both herself and everyone around her. I’d seen her stressed. Happy. Excited. I’d seen her face as she made love … I swallowed hard as I thought of that. I’d seen her so mad that she had practically put a gun to a man’s head. But I had never seen her like this, her movements cautious, her words careful, her blue eyes brimming with despair and sadness.

I fought to retain my own carefully-fought for aloofness, as I listened to her tell me about the house, the new apartment, the new job. It seemed that she had changed just as much as I. Except … she hadn’t. I hadn’t. Sure, the circumstances had changed. But she was still Carol, still the woman I had fallen head over heels for. And I was still me. Still helplessly drawn to her, still wanting her, needing her, despite all of my attempts to remove myself from that state of mind. I tried to keep the conversation flowing, afraid of what might happen if it stopped, if there was just silence between us.
I asked about Rindy, though wished I hadn’t when I saw the pain upon her face. The yearning within me was deep, almost primal, as I longed to hold her, to press her close to me and tell her that everything would be all right.

The only thing that stopped me was my lingering belief that I had been nothing but a plaything to her. I repeated this in my mind, again and again like a mantra, as I tried to stifle the urges within me. I cannot tell you how hard it was, to hear her ask me to move in with her. Oh, how I desperately wanted to accept. How I wished I could lean forward and ask her, beg her, to wait for me as I ran home and packed a bag. I don’t know how I didn’t do just that, the need within me was so strong. I remember being vaguely proud of myself for not taking the bait, for being grown-up enough to resist the near unbearable temptation set out in front of me. But how my heart wept as I heard the pleading in her voice. I was sure that it was all I would hear as I climbed into bed that night, forcing me back into a place I’d thought I was free from.

Stupidly, I’d thought that that would be the worst of it. As my silence echoed as loudly as an orchestra between us, I believed that I had survived the worst. I should have known, really. Carol was adeptly skilled at surprising me; she had been from the very start. That said, I still, to this day, take no responsibility for not expecting her next words. “I love you.” I think my entire being shut down for a long, confounding moment after hearing that. My brain took a while to compute the words … well, it felt like a while. In reality, I think it was only a couple of seconds.

I could have pretended that she was just grasping at straws, saying whatever she could, regardless of whether she meant it or not, to keep me trapped in the spell she had woven. But even I wasn’t that dense. I could see it in her eyes, in her mouth, in her voice … and I was completely stupefied. Given that I’d spent the past three months coming to terms with the fact that I had been part of a severe case of unrequited love, my thought process had a lot of rearranging to do as I stared at her, unable to form words, unable to even think them.

What did I want to say? For one long second, as my entire body was left in utter shock, I didn’t know, but then it became obvious. I wanted, I needed, to tell her that I loved her, too, more than I could ever describe. That I forgave her. That I understood why she had did what she did. That the world could be torn in two and I would still be right here, waiting, loving her. That it didn’t matter what I tried to tell myself, what I tried to tell her, I would always be hers, as long as there was breath in my body. That I’d thought about her, longed for her, every single day. That every night I dreamt of her, her smile, her beautiful, timeless eyes, her laugh, her smell. That I was so sorry for almost giving up on her, on us, and I would never, for as long as I lived, make the same mistake again.

I wanted to tell her that she had changed my life, opened my eyes to things I’d been blind to before. That my love for her burned so strongly that it left me physically terrified. That I needed her like a camera needed film, like a piano needed notes, like she needed … me. I could have delivered her a soliloquy that left Shakespeare feeling unworthy, and I was prepared to. The denial part of me had been trampled into everlasting silence as I looked at her, every part of me aching for her. Her teary eyes looked so nervous, so desperately vulnerable, that I thought I might cry along with her. I thought about what I was going to say, the order in which I was going to say it.

And then there was Jack. I couldn’t believe it. Never in my life have I been prone to violence. In fact, when I’ve accidentally bore witness to it in the past, it’s left me sick to my stomach. However, right then, in that moment, I could have throttled him with my bare hands. How dare he take this moment away from me? From Carol? My manners prevented me from ignoring him, however much I wanted to, and, by the time I was able to turn back to Carol, I could tell the moment had passed. The face she put on whenever in the company of people she didn’t really know was back in place, and I thought I might literally break in the middle of the Ritz as she got ready to leave. There was nothing I could say, not in the presence of Jack, to make her stay, and so I had to watch her leave.
Again.

That had led to this. Us outside, the chilly April air swirling around us lazily. I’d practised so many words in the cab over here, perfected the speech I knew would make everything right, but now they were lost on me. I glanced up and down the street before turning to Carol, feeling a blush rise in my cheeks as I saw her exquisite blue eyes scrutinising my face. I thought of the party, of Genevieve, how clearly interested in me she had been, and I couldn’t have been more glad to be where I was now, with the person who I loved so passionately, so dearly, and who I knew, now, loved me.
I had intended to state this right at the start, but my memory is terrible. Anyway, I have no beta, and so any mistakes are my own. I do try and catch them all, but apologies for any that you might happen to stumble across.

I couldn’t keep myself from staring at her as we stood out in the street. There was still a small part of me that was convinced I was going to wake up at some point, and Therese would be gone, but, as I looked into her eyes, trying to identify the plethora of emotions that were contained within them, the fear receded. I watched carefully as her eyes studied mine for a moment and then quickly travelled across my face, pausing every now and then to further inspect whichever part of me she was momentarily fixated on. I stayed still. I would have stood there all night, every night, if it meant that we weren’t apart. My lips burned as her eyes lingered on them for a couple of seconds. The moment shared probably only lasted for about 30 seconds, but it felt like we lived through a whole, glorious lifetime as she stared at me, and I stared at her, a conversation without words being spoken.

The sound of a car engine starting up made Therese look away, and the guilty look emblazoned on her face meant that, for one heady moment, I almost started laughing. She reminded me of Rindy, of the expression she would wear when declaring her innocence after being caught red-handed doing something or another. When she looked back at me, her green eyes wide, I smiled, and my heart constricted almost painfully. God, she was so beautiful. How could I ever live without her? I swallowed, knowing with all of my soul that I needed to be alone with her, away from the eyes and ears of the outside world.

“Would you like to go somewhere?” I asked, trying hard to inject some sort of normality into my voice, failing miserably as I detected a slight hoarseness underscoring my words. I saw a small smile pull at her lips and exhaled slowly. I didn’t know, still don’t, if I’m being honest, how she did it. One look, one knowing smile, could make me weak at the knees, could transform me from the self-respecting woman I was into a giddy teenager, my nerves jangling, my heart racing, my every fibre completely focused on her. I reached into my bag for a cigarette, just so I’d have something to do. “My car is just around the corner.” I glanced up beneath my lashes, feeling horribly unsure of myself.

“We could go to my apartment? Or yours, if you’d like? A hotel, perhaps?” I would have stowed us away on a ship bound for Australia, if that’s what she’d wanted.

Therese was silent for a few seconds, and I suddenly needed that cigarette more than ever. In all of the songs I’d heard, only the positive attributes of love were mentioned, of which, I freely admit, there are many. What people didn’t warn you about, however, was everything else that came along with it. Before Therese, I hadn’t realised that I could romantically love someone so deeply, so thoroughly, that one pause could send my heart leaping to my throat, that along with the joy and happiness and pure euphoria that enveloped me in their warm, tender embrace, I would also feel a terror so dark, so frighteningly pronounced, that it would leave me unable to breathe, unable to think, as the fear of living without her threatened to devour me completely.

I’ve already admitted that patience is not high up in my list of qualities, but I didn’t push for an answer. I knew what it must have taken for her to come to me, both earlier at the Ritz and now. I had been so selfish at times in the past; I needed her to reach her own decisions, without any pressure.
from me. I needed to know that, wherever we went, if we went anywhere at all, we did so because she wanted to, not because she wanted to please me. I think that’s the true definition of love, you know, when someone else’s happiness means so much to you, that you’re willing to send your own to the depths of hell. I busied myself with lighting my cigarette, my eyes closing of their own accord as the grey, acrid smoke hit the back of my throat.

“Mine,” she finally said, and I could have wept with relief. I wasn’t used to walking on this fragile tightrope of emotion, but I knew the highs would always, always, outweigh the lows, even though the lows could very well leave me irreparably broken, unable to feel anything ever again.

I couldn’t verbalise all of that, though, not then. Not there. I simply nodded, fervently hoping my eyes displayed the joy I felt ricocheting through me. I was glad she’d chosen her apartment; I couldn’t imagine anything more soothing for me right now than to be surrounded by all things Therese, to be back in the apartment that I thought of so often, with such yearning. For her, I assume, she needed that security; she needed to have some semblance of control, for this to take place on her territory. I was only too willing to provide that.

As one, we turned and fell into step, and I rummaged through my bag to root for my keys, finding myself almost delirious with happiness. My car was merely yards away, and I hurried forward and opened my door, sliding into my seat and reaching over to unlock hers by the time she had reached me. As soon as we were both inside, tension seemed to crackle between us, my stomach undertaking some particularly acrobatic somersaults. I couldn’t look at her just then, quite sure that my self-restraint wouldn’t stretch that far, instead sliding the key into the ignition and trying to distract myself with the road ahead.

I honestly don’t know how I drove us to Therese’s apartment that night. Emotionally and physically I was a wreck, filled to bursting with everything I wanted to tell her, everything I wanted to do to her, with her. The confined space was not helping in the slightest. The road trip we had taken, that fateful road trip, I’d spent a lot of time in the car with her, feeling my need to claim her heart and body as my own grow with each passing second. It had been torturous, and magnificent, and everything in between. But it didn’t compare to this.

Maybe it was knowing how close I’d been to losing her forever. Maybe it was because of the agony each day apart had caused. Maybe it was because I now knew, with every piece of me, that I loved her, needed her, in every which way. Maybe it was a culmination of all of those things. I still don’t know to this day. I just know that I’ve never had to concentrate more while driving than I did on that night. I was so attuned to her, too, which made it all the harder. I still couldn’t look at her, but each of my other senses were on high alert, and I could hear her breathing, sense when she’d move her leg slightly, or her arm. God, that short journey felt like it was never going to end.

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I almost felt nauseous with nervous anticipation as we drove through the streets that night. The streets were quiet, luckily, so we were in the car for no more than 15 minutes, but it felt like so much longer. My thoughts were becoming more and more muddled, the longer I was in Carol’s car, the energy charging between us leaving me on the brink of dizziness. I looked out of the window, hoping that would help, but it was hopeless. Her perfume filled my nostrils, and I closed my eyes, unable to stop myself from releasing a small sigh.

I’d missed this so much, her so much. Sitting there, only inches from her, I truly realised what an idiot I had been. How could I have almost turned my back on her? On us? How could I have seriously thought that my life would be better without her in it? I honestly didn’t know. I still don’t, even now. I wanted to look at her, I could have stared at her for hours, her pale skin, those blue eyes
that seemed to know me so much better than I knew myself, those beautiful, inviting lips that had taught me so much. I didn’t move, though. I’m not sure I could have if I’d tried, the weight of emotion in that car rendering me motionless. I opened my eyes, stared at the houses whizzing past us, at the people going about their lives on a Friday night. Everything looked so... normal, and it was kind of jarring, I suppose. It felt like my whole existence rested on this night, and yet, to everyone else, it was just another Friday, no different from the last, nothing more than a glimpse into the next.

I wondered what would happen when we reached my apartment. Muscles deep in my stomach clenched, hard, and I swallowed, my heart breaking out into a sprint. I took a deep breath and tried to retain whatever fragment of decorum I had left. I distracted myself with the thought of my living room, wondering if Carol would like its new colour. I was glad she hadn’t minded coming back to mine. It felt safer there, somehow. Going to her new apartment would have felt... too much, I think. The events of the day were already close to overwhelming me; so much had happened in such a short amount of time that I needed to take comfort wherever I could get it. I was still finding it difficult to comprehend that, this morning, I couldn't have even imagined that I would be where I was right now.

The car slowed, and I peered up to my window for a second, waiting for us to come to a standstill. As soon as the engine cut out, I opened the door, gulping in lungfuls of air. I needed to get a grip on myself; my emotions were going through freefall, leaving me feeling dazed and weak. Within moments, she was in front of me, her eyes burning as she patiently waited for me to stand. We walked upstairs in silence, me ahead and her two steps behind. I remember distantly wishing that I had thought to write down the speech I had come up with in the cab over to the Oak Room, I should have known that I would have struggled to string two words together while in her company.

My hand shook slightly as I tried to put the key in my front door, but if she noticed she didn’t say. I felt my cheeks flush. Thankfully, I managed to open the door on my second attempt, and led us inside. My mouth was dry, such was my anxiety, as I walked into my bedroom, slipping off my shoes and throwing my coat on the bed, before heading into the kitchen, Carol right behind me. I turned to her, watching her as she moved around the tiny space, her eyes taking in everything around her, the smallest of smiles touching her lips.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked, willing my voice to sound more confident than I felt. “I have... I have beer in the icebox.” Oh, brilliant. No hint of nerves, at all. I inwardly rolled my eyes at myself.

Carol paused, looking over from the archway leading to the living room. I felt faint. I’d never thought she’d be here again, in my apartment. I was so glad that I was, by nature, a tidy person. Except for the prints hanging from my makeshift drying line, the place was in order. “Please,” she said, before turning back to the photographs pinned up on the wall. My heart sank a fraction as I opened the icebox door, watching out of the corner of my eye as she scanned over the pictures. Apart from the one of me as a child, I had replaced them all with more recent ones I had taken. There were none of Carol.

“These are really something,” she said, her voice kind as she looked at me again, catching me in the act of watching her with bated breath. I gave her a quick smile and busied myself with retrieving two beers. By the time I’d closed the door, she was in the living room, taking off her luxurious coat and placing it over the back of the armchair. I wrestled the lids from the beers and followed her in. For all I felt, all I wanted to say, all of the unspoken promises in the car, I suddenly found I couldn’t talk. I handed her one of the drinks, and she perched on the edge of the chair, eyes on me as I sank down into the couch.

She brought the bottle to her lips and took a small sip. I stared at her throat, watching the muscles
contract and relax as she swallowed, my breath catching slightly. This woman made me so nervous, like I was on top of the world but could crash and burn in seconds. I blinked a couple of times, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering wildly. I think she could sense my anxiety, or maybe the terror was evident on my face, and she made a point of looking around the room.

“You repainted,” she stated, and I instinctively leaned a bit closer, suddenly realising that I very much wanted her to like it. She continued to eye my handiwork for a moment, and then smiled as she turned to me. “I like it, it makes the room look bigger. It suits you.”

I grinned, feeling relief course through me. The silence between us returned, and I looked down at my beer, racking my brains for something to say. I could feel her watching me, and I felt such a rush of gratitude towards her for not rushing me, for not expecting anything from me, but me. I knew that she must have been itching to get past the small talk, to move into deeper terrain, but she was waiting, as she had waited for me numerous times this evening. I felt my love for her swell up inside me, so powerful that I quickly looked back up at her, convinced that she must have somehow felt it.

Her eyes were filled with such tenderness that I felt an abrupt need to cry, but I bit the tears back, holding her gaze all the while. “Thank you,” I said, when I was sure that my voice wouldn’t break.

Her brow furrowed slightly. “What for?”

“For being patient with me. I know that’s not always easy for you.”

Understanding dawned on her beautiful face and she smiled. “It’s the least I can do, don’t you think?” Her head tilted slightly to the left, her glossy blonde hair brushing against her shoulder. “You take all the time you need, Therese. I’m just …” She glanced down, before raising her eyes again less than a second later, clearly displaying the vulnerability that made my heart ache. “I’m happy to be here. With you.”
The Perils of Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I can’t explain to you how I felt, sitting on the edge of that armchair, waiting for Therese to seal my fate. It’s not that I don’t want to, you understand, I’m actually finding this writing business to be strangely rewarding, but there simply aren’t enough words in the dictionary to adequately convey the myriad of thoughts and emotions that raced through me.

I wanted to go to her, throw myself at her feet, tell her that, though she must have thought me cruel and thoughtless when I left her that morning at the Drake, I’d never meant to hurt her. I needed her to believe that, if nothing else. I wanted to kiss her, devour her with my mouth, make her understand how much I needed her, wanted her, craved her, show her with my body what words would never be able to fully explain. I wanted to hold her while promising I would never be so foolish again, I wanted her to hold me, so close that I could feel the beat of her heart against my cheek.

She thanked me, me, and I felt unworthy. Surely it was the other way around? Surely I should be the one voicing my eternal gratitude. She’d come back. She’d waited for me for far longer than I was forcing myself to wait tonight. She’d saved me. Again. I would always owe her everything. I would always, for as long as I lived, be indebted to her. I would always be hers, whether she wanted me to be or not. I told her how happy I was just being here with her. It was true. I hadn’t felt this content since New Year’s, before that Tucker bastard, before I’d made quite possibly the stupidest decision of my life. I didn’t know what tonight would bring, but, for now, while I was here with her, it didn’t matter.

I studied her for a moment, applying the same level of care and attention that an artist would bestow upon their ultimate muse. When I realised that it was entirely possible that I would lose any remaining shred of self-control, that I was perilously close to giving into my deep need and throwing myself at her, I rose to my feet, walking over to the bookcase—a different one than had been there last time I’d visited—and hoping the desire in my eyes hadn’t been too prominent. It had never been like this. Not with anyone. I couldn’t concentrate while I was near her, she’d awoken something primal in me, something bewildering and addictive, and I knew, with a certainty that unnerved me, that she was my drug, my own personal opium, a habit I would never be able to break, one I’d never even be able to want to break.

I’d known lust before. Abby had introduced me to that. But it was only with the arrival of Therese in my life that I realised I’d never loved Abby, not in that way. I thought I had, for a long time, but, while I would always love her deeply in a platonic sense, it had become clear to me that that was all it was. We’d got together at a time when my marriage was well and truly over, when arguments and recriminations had taken over any feelings of respect and care that Harge and I had once had for each other. I will always be grateful to her for opening my eyes, releasing the part of myself that I had been so reluctant to acknowledge, and things had been wonderful between us for a while. I just wish I had been more aware of my feelings at that time, that I had been able to prevent her from getting hurt.

With Therese, though, it was completely different. At first, I had thought it was mere infatuation, and not just on her part. I could feel the pull she had over me; I just couldn’t yet know how deep it went. But the things I felt for her … they were on another level completely. I think Therese saw me as someone wise, someone who was immune to the perils of love. I think I had thought of myself as that person, too. As it turned out, we were both very much wrong. If I’m completely honest, I think I
was just as naïve as Therese was, in that aspect at least.

I browsed a shelf of the bookcase, a finger trailing over the spines, as I tried to keep my conflicting emotions in check. Happiness, arousal, excitement, fear, confusion, anxiety … all vying for my attention, all fighting for prime position. I took another sip of my beer, smiling softly as I recognised the title of one of my favourite books, A Room of One’s Own. The tip of my finger lingered on it for a moment, as I somehow had the wherewithal to make a mental note to dig out my own copy and reread it. About to move onto the next, I paused as I heard a noise behind me.

By the time I had turned around, Therese was stood in front of me, her glorious face serious as our eyes met. My pulse spiked as I watched her, my fingers tightening around my beer bottle as I waited for whatever was going to happen next.

“I’m sorry about Jack,” she said, the annoyance of that particular interruption clear in her expression for a fleeting second. “That was … spectacularly bad timing.”

I shook my head as I continued to regard her, blindly resting my drink atop the bookcase. “It’s fine. He seemed nice.” She didn’t say a word, her green eyes boring into mine, her breathing shallow. “How was the party?”

“Fine,” she said dismissively, a hint of a frown touching her brow. “It was …” She looked away, over to the window, and then back again, suddenly looking determined. “Did you mean what you said?” The question left me momentarily bewildered. It must have been clear on my face. “At the Ritz Tower?”

My heart constricted painfully as I finally understood, and, for a second, all I could do was nod. “Of course,” I answered, my voice low, my words so very sincere. I brought a hand up, gently cupping her chin, watching with wonder as she released a sigh, her eyes closing of their own volition. My breath caught in my throat as I waited for her to open her eyes again. I smiled weakly when she did. “I love you, Therese.”

Her green eyes glistened, and I was about to take her in my arms, hold her as tightly as I was physically able to, when she caught me completely by surprise. With no warning, she reached up, bringing her hands behind my neck and pulling me hard, our bodies pressing together as her lips crashed against mine. It took me less than a split-second to reciprocate, my desire finally unleashed as I grabbed her face between my hands, my tongue slipping between her parted lips, searching, exploring, tasting. Oh, god. I needed her more than I’d ever needed anything. My body cried out to her, yearning for what only she could give, as I poured into that kiss all of the passion, all of the emotion, that I’d ever felt for her.

She moaned, and I felt every nerve within me catch fire. I was losing all sense of thought, purely operating on instinct as I pushed against her, causing her to walk backwards until her back was flush against the wall. We broke apart then, our lungs crying out for relief, our gasps piercing the otherwise silent air. I wasted no time, kicking off my shoes and taking a step back, just taking in the beautiful sight before me. Therese’s green eyes were wild, her lips already looking redder than usual, her chest heaving. I needed more. My hands trembled as I started undoing the buttons of her suit jacket, working quickly from top to bottom, searching out what was beneath. She let me, my darling Therese, though her expression told me she wanted nothing more than to reach for me, claim my mouth as hers again. She must have known that I was going to combust if I didn’t have her then, my patience having finally run out.

As soon as I was able, I pulled her jacket apart, my hands wasting no time in yanking her blouse from her skirt and feeling the soft, toned skin of her stomach. Her shuddering intake of breath caused moisture to pool between my thighs, my stomach to twist and flip in delicious anticipation, and I
reached an arm around her, pulling her away from the wall and deftly tugging the jacket from her arms. She took this opportunity to press her face against my neck, her lips searing my throat. I groaned, stepping out of her reach to pull at her blouse, my eyes fixated on the skin being revealed inch by magnificent inch as I peeled it up her arms, throwing it across the room as soon as it became free.

My hands immediately went to her exposed skin, greedily trying to cover every millimetre, as my gaze travelled from her chest to her face. Arousal darkened her eyes, a flush stained her cheeks, her lips were parted to allow for her heavy breathing. I couldn’t resist … I could never resist … as I moved forward and left rough, wanting kisses at the corner of her mouth, along her jawline, my hands coming up and holding the back of her head, her hair becoming caught around my fingers as my lips moved behind her ear, to that sensitive part I knew would elicit a low moan. Every noise she made spurred me on further, driving me to the brink of insanity as I pressed against her, wanting to consume her, devour her, make her mine completely.

She clung to me, her hands gripping onto my shoulders, every ragged breath blowing warm air across my ear, threatening to overwhelm my senses. My desperation was spiralling. I needed to see her, all of her, feast my eyes on what I’d been deprived of for so long. I tore myself away from her, staring at her hungrily. “Bed,” I said hoarsely, and she nodded frantically, grabbing my hand and all but dragging me out of the living room, up the hallway and into her bedroom. I went to move to her again, but she stepped back. I took another step. So did she.

“Let me see you,” she whispered.

I didn’t hesitate, some part of me still with it enough to know that the longer I took, the longer it would be until I could touch her again. It took me less than a minute to get fully undressed, and, one by one, my clothes landed around my feet. Her eyes were all over me, her jaw slack, and I would have felt embarrassed, my body not being what it once was, if it wasn’t for the fact that my need was currently overriding everything else. She swallowed hard, her hands reaching up behind her to remove her bra, then moving down to her skirt, her eyes flitting over me as she did so, and my mouth was dry as I watched it fall to her feet.

That was it. I was done for. I couldn’t stop myself from taking two quick steps forward, lest she try to evade me again, and wrapping my arms around her, my blood singing as skin met skin. I shivered with pleasure, taking a long moment to savour the feeling, before I turned us and moved forward until her knees hit the edge of the bed. She fell back and, had I had any scrap of self-restraint left, I would have looked at her for hours. Alas, my impatience was my weakness, my want too strong and overpowering, and I dove forward, hooking my fingers under the waistband of her panties and dragging them down. She was only too eager to oblige, lifting her hips for me, kicking them off when they reached her ankles.

I could smell her, and my eyes closed involuntarily as I breathed in deeply, her sweet, musky scent causing my body to ache. The fire within me burned hotter, and my inner muscles tightened. Climbing onto the bed, I crawled between her thighs, my eyes taking in her gorgeously firm breasts, her pink nipples already hardened and ready, her smooth stomach, the thatch of fine brown curls leading to her sex. I inhaled sharply, wanting to drink in everything, not having the willpower required to study her body to my satisfaction.

She was watching me, I could feel it, and she squirmed beneath my gaze. I leaned forward, one arm pressed into the mattress, and took a nipple into my mouth, my liquefied arousal leaving slick traces on my inner thighs as her resulting gasp filled the room. I wanted to make this last forever, tease her and taste her and claim her for hours, but my own desire was too strong to ignore. I worried her nipple with my lips, grazing my teeth gently against it, my free hand coming up to roll her other
nipple between my fingers. Her back arched, taut as a bow as I felt a hand grab blindly at my hair. I sucked again and again, feeling her body respond each time, her moans and pants creating the most beautiful symphony I had ever heard.

Moving down slowly, I planted kisses along her ribcage, the thin layer of perspiration clinging to her skin now coating my lips. Her fingers tugged lightly at my hair. I smiled into her stomach before pulling back. She looked stunning, her eyes closed, mouth open, a hand gripping onto the blanket, the other now resting limply across her stomach. I paused, just to try and etch this moment in my memory, and she looked at me. All thoughts of savouring the sight of her abruptly vanished as I saw the urgent want in her eyes.

I shifted down the bed, heady excitement silencing every thought as I knelt over her, her legs parted wide, waiting for me. Carefully, I parted her lips with my fingers, a guttural moan tearing itself from the back of my throat as I found her delicate folds, pink and drenched in her creamy desire. Fuck. She was perfect. She was everything. Her aroma assaulted my nostrils, and my mouth started to water as I continued to stare.

“Carol, please,” she said, her voice strained. I looked at her, my fingers still gently holding her lips apart. “Please.”

Who could have resisted that? I leaned down further, and traced my tongue lightly up and down. She jumped, releasing a whimper that connected directly to my own sex. I exhaled shakily, causing her to writhe as my warm breath drifted over her most sensitive area. Unable to stop myself, I placed gentle kisses along her centre, feeling her jerk with each contact. The smell of her, the taste of her on my tongue was sending me delirious, my eyes now closed as I allowed my tongue to explore further, through her velvety folds until I reached her very core. I couldn’t stop myself from thrusting my tongue inside, my taste buds in heaven as her sweet and tangy wetness coated the inside of my mouth.

Her hips shot up, a cry spilling from her lips as her hand flew down to grab at the back of my head. Her inner walls clutched at my tongue as I drove myself harder, faster, exploring as deeply as I possibly could.

“Oh, god,” she whispered, her words hanging in the air as she pressed my face into her further. “Oh … Carol.”

My name on her lips almost pushed me over the brink, my own sex clenching, a trail of my want running down my thigh. I moaned, and it reverberated through her body, causing her to emit another whimper. I pulled my tongue out and she bucked her hips at me, her hand twisting in my hair. A second later, I found her pulsing clit, already rock hard and in desperate need of attention. I was only too happy to help. I swirled my tongue around and around her precious pearl, slow and then fast, gentle and then rough, and her pelvis started rocking, starting up a steady rhythm as her moans merged into one continuous nonsensical word.

She was close, I could feel it, her core contracting and relaxing with an increasing frequency. I needed this. I needed to feel her let go for me, surrender herself to me. I needed to taste all she had to give, as though it were an elixir paramount to my survival. I loved her so much, I needed her so much, and nothing else mattered. I urged her on with my tongue, teasing and caressing, flicking and sucking, on and on, faster and faster, until I could feel her legs start to quiver around me, her whole body trembling as she forced my face deeper into her folds and exploded around me again and again, incoherent with pleasure. The waves seemed relentless at first, her body bucking wildly, and still I stayed put, gently lapping up all she had, prolonging her orgasm for as long as I could.

Slowly pulling back, I smiled as I felt her juices clinging to my chin, my lips, my nose. She tasted
divine, better than I could have ever remembered. I stared at her, taking in her dishevelled hair, her slack mouth, her closed eyes, but she must have sensed it, her eyes opening with what seemed like effort. She looked at me for a long moment, her gaze travelling from my eyes to my lips and back again, and then her mouth quirked up into a lazy grin.

“You,” she started slowly, “are very good at that.”

“Well, I’m glad you still approve,” I replied, my heart still pounding as I extricated myself from between her legs and started to move up the bed.

“Carol?”

I paused.

“I love you, too. So much. I always will.”

Chapter End Notes

Well ... I hope that that was worth the wait!

I've previously mentioned that this is my first attempt at writing in the first person, and so, obviously, this was my first ever first person sex scene, and this chapter has probably been the one I have been most nervous about posting. While I've found myself largely enjoying writing in this style, more so than I thought I would, it can sometimes be far more restrictive (for me, at least) than writing in third person would be, and I found that to be the case while writing this particular chapter. I hope it didn't show too much.

That said, I won't be able to improve without constructive criticism, and so, if you have any, hit me with it!
A Perfect Fit

It was early when I woke that next morning. I kept my eyes closed for a few seconds, wondering if I would be able to get back to sleep, when I suddenly realised how warm I was. I wasn’t just warm, I was toasty. The memory of last night slammed into me, doing a marvellous job of immediately erasing any thoughts of getting some more sleep from my mind, and my eyes shot open. Carol.

She was wrapped around me, her legs entwined with mine, one arm laying across my waist, her hand resting against my back. The only part of her I could see was her collarbone. Oh, her collarbone was beautiful. I stared at it, I don’t recall how long for, but I remember being too scared to move, almost too scared to breathe, in case I woke her. Her breathing was slow, deep, and I found it so soothing, laying there in her arms, feeling so content, so safe, surrounded by her.

I didn’t even know how to begin processing all that had transpired in the previous 24 hours, and so, for a while, I didn’t. I simply savoured the fact that she was here, that she loved me, that we were together. I scrutinised her collarbone further, taking in every millimetre of creamy, pale skin that I could see. I inhaled deeply, the smell of her, of sex, lingering in the air to create a heady combination. At one point, I spent far longer than I’m willing to admit just carefully angling my head so that I could lean forward and brush my lips against her skin.

My mind drifted after a while, and a stupid grin planted itself on my lips as I recalled the previous evening. My body tingled at the memory. There was no way she was human, she couldn’t be. It was not normal for someone to be that good. I remembered the way she’d looked at me, that fiery passion in her eyes, because of me. I grinned again. I may not have understood what exactly it was she saw in me, but I’d never felt so special before, so wanted, so cherished. I sighed as I thought back to her expression when I told her I loved her.

I couldn’t imagine that she hadn’t already known that; I thought my default expression around her was one of goofy adoration. Her face when I told her, though. She’d looked at me with such fervour, her blue eyes suddenly swimming with unshed tears, that vulnerability back again. I didn’t know if it was a new thing, something that had been born out of everything she’d gone through in the past few months, or if it had been there all along and, because I’d placed her on such a high pedestal, I’d simply missed it. I had a sudden urge to hold her tightly, but I didn’t. This was the first time we were waking up together; I wanted to enjoy it for as long as possible. I would have stayed in that moment forever, if I could.

My thoughts again returned to the previous night. Once I’d managed to regain function of my limbs and motor skills after that mind-blowing orgasm—it hadn’t taken long; after just a couple of minutes of lying next to her, kissing her, I’d been unable to keep my hands to myself—it had been my turn. It says something about just how exquisite she is that I genuinely couldn’t decide if I’d loved giving to her or taking from her more. The way she responded to my touch, the way she uttered my name like it was a prayer, the pure beauty of her, laid out on my bed … it was intoxicating; it made me want to keep going again and again, with a stamina I hadn’t thought possible. And we had. I could have hugged myself with delight, my stomach flipping lazily as my fingertips lightly pressed into the silky skin of her hip. I didn’t know how I could want her again, but I did. She’d awoken something voracious in me, and I would always need more.

I idly wondered what the day would bring, suddenly feeling beyond thankful that it was a Saturday, that a lowly clerk at the Times need not work over the weekends. I didn’t know if she had any plans … I felt a sharp sting of disappointment at the very thought, vehemently hoping that she didn’t. We’d both been through so much, and I needed her. I needed to see her, to be with her, to talk, to laugh, to
touch … I needed it all so badly that my chest felt tight with anxiety. I was so afraid that, if she left, the time we’d spent together would feel like a dream, like one of the many dreams I’d had of her since January. I closed my eyes and breathed in as deeply as I could. I shouldn’t have been surprised at the insecurity I felt flaring up in my stomach, but I was.

As much as last night had been … utterly magnificent, as much as I would never change it for anything in the world, as much as I’d needed it so desperately … it hadn’t solved anything. Not really. A while ago, before Drake, I would have believed, I did believe, that love, specifically the love I had for Carol, would be enough. That’s what all of the songs and books and movies alluded to, didn’t they? That love would always come out the victor. That it could, would, conquer all. I’d not understood that before Carol. I had thought it fanciful, ridiculous even, because all I’d known was Richard, and it felt like even a slight breeze blowing in the wrong direction could have sent us falling.

And then … there was Carol, and, for a handful of beautiful, dizzying weeks, it was like I’d suddenly become privy to what the world already knew. Love was powerful, so much more powerful than anyone could have ever described, it transcended everything and everyone else. As long as I loved her, and her me, as long as we were together, not even a tornado could have touched us. I’d felt invincible. I’d paid severely for my naivety. So had she. I didn’t know if either of us could afford to be so blinded again.

She shifted slightly, her arm moving up my waist a fraction before she relaxed again, and I felt hot unwelcome tears prick the back of my eyelids. I knew we had to talk, figure out where we were going from here, but I so desperately wanted to stay in this precious bubble of ours, Carol and I in our own little world.

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To this day, I don’t know how I woke up knowing that Therese was in my arms. I’m usually a zombie in the mornings, only a hot cup of coffee can set me on the right track, but the instant my mind reached consciousness that morning, a smile pulled at my lips. I just knew. She felt so warm, pressed up against me, her hand on my hip, mine on her back, and I remember drowsily thinking that we really were a perfect fit, as though we had been sculpted specifically to come together like this.

I sighed contentedly, filled with a sense of peace that had been missing from my life for so long. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so rested; I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept through the night. I stayed still for a long minute, savouring the moment, allowing the delicious memories of the previous night to permeate my thoughts and cause my heart to soar. The smell of her hair filled my nostrils and, reactively, I softly trailed my fingertips along her back, unable to stop myself. I usually prided myself on my self-control, always striving to be in control of every aspect of my life. Therese provided me with a sense of abandon that served to both thrill and frighten me. I’d never felt so out of control of my life, of myself, as I did when I was with her, and it scared me that I wasn’t more bothered by it. Quite the opposite, in fact. I wanted to lose myself in her in every way I could.

I felt her stiffen beneath my touch, reminding me of when I’d put my hands on her shoulders while she was playing at the piano … the first time I’d been forced to relinquish my self-control, physically at least. Surprised that she was awake, I pulled back slightly, waiting for her to do the same. She raised her head, her green eyes gentle as they sought out mine. She looked beautiful with her hair mussed and her cheeks a delicate pink.

“Good morning,” I said, unable to hide my widening smile.

She didn’t respond, her eyes searching my face for a second before shuffling up the bed and placing a sweet, lingering kiss on my lips. I brought my hand up to rest against the back of her head as our
kiss deepened, my tongue tracing her upper lip until she granted me access with a sigh that made my stomach flip. We parted breathlessly, and she shifted until her head was resting on her hand, her elbow on her pillow. I followed suit.

I watched her study me, her eyes intent as they scrutinised my forehead, my eyes, my nose, my lips, my chin, my jaw. They moved lower, taking in my shoulders, pausing at my throat, appearing fascinated when I swallowed, and then travelling back to my face. My heart picked up pace as I noted her hungry expression, but I remained motionless, allowing her to watch me for as long as she wanted. I silently marvelled, I still do, at how she managed to evoke the deepest, most visceral reaction from me without having to lift a finger. After a few minutes, when I was just about to enter a state of madness, her gaze moved from my lips up to my eyes.

“You … are exquisite,” she breathed, lifting her free hand and pushing a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I love you.”

I’d never tire of those words. They filled me with joy, made my soul want to weep with happiness. I smiled, leaning forward to plant a kiss on her forehead. “I love you, too, my darling.”

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“Do you have any plans for today?” I asked, as casually as I could manage, playing with her fine brown hair as her head rested in my lap. I was sitting on her bed, my back resting against the wall, my legs stretched out. The day was still young; I’d only left to use the bathroom, and I’d returned to find a cup of coffee waiting for me. She obviously remembered my ineptitude in the morning without it.

“No,” she said quickly, her finger pausing in its effort to trace a pattern into the robe she had lent me. She rolled onto her back, looking up at me. “Do you?”

I smiled, my fingers leaving her hair and concentrating on trailing down the side of her cheek. “Not really. I have to call Abby at some point. We’ve been calling each other every day, ever since I left Harge’s parents house.”

She frowned. “When were you there?”

I felt my eyes widen. I’d forgotten how much she still didn’t know. I sighed. I didn’t want anything to ruin this morning, but we couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened during our time apart. I thought back to the previous day, at the Ritz Tower, when I’d cursed my inadequacy in saying the things that needed to be said. Therese deserved to know the truth. All of it. “It wasn’t for long,” I tried to reassure. “As soon as …” And I stopped, panic and regret suddenly gripping me as I looked down at her. “Not long after I flew back from Chicago.”

I saw it, the almost imperceptible tightening around her eyes, the pain resided within them, and I felt a stab of sorrow pierce my heart. We stared at each other for what felt like an age, but what must have only been a handful of seconds. “I’m sorry,” I said, my voice raw. I saw tears well up in her eyes, a single one falling onto her cheek, and I gently wiped it away with the tip of my thumb. “I’m so sorry, my love.”

She didn’t move, didn’t blink, for a long moment, and I felt my own eyes start to sting. Any happiness I had felt just minutes before was now doused in anguish, but I knew it was my own fault. I had to face up to the damage I had caused; I had to repent for my sin. “I know,” she finally replied, her voice no more than a whisper. She reached for my hand where it rested on the bed and lifted it, bringing it to her chest and placing it there, covering it with one of her own. “I know.” She looked back up at me. “I mean … I didn’t know. Not until yesterday. But … I do now.”
“I thought … I thought I was doing the best thing for you. Protecting you. I … Harge … it was getting ugly. I didn’t want you dragged into that. I didn’t want you to be used as a pawn in his game, no more than you already had been.” I shook my head, wishing I could go back to that night, tell myself what I knew now. “I should have …” I took a deep breath, finally voicing the words that had haunted me for months. “I should have told you to wait. I should have told you …”

She brought a finger up to my lips, her eyes so loving, and tender, and kind, that my vision became obscured by tears. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “Look at us. We’re here. I did wait, even if I didn’t realise it at the time.”

“But … you thought I’d abandoned you,” I replied, the horror evident in my voice, shame and self-loathing swirling in my stomach. I wanted to look away, but I wouldn’t let myself. Of all the things I did, the leaving, the letter, the silence … the fact I didn’t tell her that I would come back, that’s what gutted me the most.

“Yes,” she answered, her eyes wide and honest. That single word almost broke me, but I was so grateful for her honesty. I don’t think I would have been able to cope if she’d tried to protect my feelings. I didn’t deserve such courtesy.

“I would never,” I said fiercely, needing her to believe me. “I wasn’t … thinking straight when I wrote you that letter. But even then … I knew it wasn’t goodbye. I just … I thought I was doing the right thing, for you and for Rindy. I can’t tell you how hard it was to leave you, my darling. I spent so long watching you sleep, trying to think of another way to try and make everything okay, but I couldn’t. I …” My eyes closed then, and I started to weep, caving into all of the regret and misery and guilt that had consumed my every waking thought over the previous months. I felt her head lift from my lap and, a second later, her arms were around my neck, her face pressed against my shoulder. I held her tightly, hoping that she knew how much I loved her, how sorry I was.

We stayed like that for a few minutes, clutching each other as though we were drowning. In a way, I suppose we were, from the regret, and the hurt, and the sadness that we’d both been submerged in, the pain we needed to remember, to account for and explore, before we could break through the surface. It was a necessity, I knew, and yet it felt like agony to relive. I concentrated on the feel of her in my arms, just for a moment, in an effort to calm myself down. This conversation was long from over, and I needed to be strong, not for me, but for her.

When I finally pulled away, I waited for her to look at me, my heart aching as I saw her tear-stained cheeks. Cupping her face gently in my hands, I stared deep into her eyes. “I would never, will never, abandon you, Therese,” I promised, and I meant it more than I’d ever meant anything. I couldn’t have left her again, not after having a taste of what my life without her would be like. I didn’t know what obstacles might be thrown our way in the future, and I didn’t care. I was stronger, more capable, when I was with her. I knew, with every fibre of my being, that I would never cause her such pain again.
I closed my eyes, letting Carol’s words wash over me, like her voice was salve on my open wounds. Her words were filled with such certainty, such assurance, that I could feel hope begin to bloom, her promises going some way in soothing my fears. I felt her lips at my temple and leaned into them. I loved her so much that it felt almost unbearable, sometimes, like my heart would combust or simply give in, unable to contain what I felt for her. Was it like this for everyone? I couldn’t imagine that it was. I had no prior experience of love, and yet some part of me knew that this was unique, almost magical in its strength, in its magnitude. We stayed like that for a while, her lips pressed to my skin, my hand resting lightly on her leg, until something she’d said earlier niggled at me, and I moved to look at her.

“Why were you at Harge’s parents?” I asked, still feeling confused at that little snippet of information. I’d assumed that she’d been at her house the whole time, and had spent more than a few unbearable days having to convince myself that jumping on a train to New Jersey and walking the distance to her house was the exact opposite of what I needed to do.

She sighed and shook her head, and I waited. I knew it didn’t come naturally to Carol to bear her soul, I knew she was constantly having to fight her natural instinct to keep it all locked away, and so I bestowed upon her the same kindness that she had given me the night before. She studied the hem of my robe for a long moment before her heavenly blue eyes found mine. They looked sad and, without thinking, I reached for her hand again.

“It was part of the … deal, if that’s what you want to call it. It was only for a few days, as soon as I arrived from Chicago,” she said, pulling a disgusted face. “But if I ever wanted a hope in hell of seeing Rindy again, let alone a chance of joint custody, I had to stay with Harge and his parents, until I agreed to fully commit to the terms of my ‘convalescence’.”

“Convalescence?” I asked, a frown on my face. I watched the grimace tugging at her lips, saw her eyes flash with anger, and a nauseating understanding dawned. “Oh … god,” I breathed, my own eyes now wide. Dreading the answer, I still made myself ask the question. “What … what were the terms?”

“Oh, the terms,” she responded wryly, though her hurt shone through bleakly as she broke eye-contact and looked out of the window. “I had to visit a psychotherapist every weekday, to talk about my …” Her eyes narrowed in fury. “To talk about my perversion.” She turned back to me then, and I realised her anger stemmed from a place of deep pain. It was written all over her face. My heart ached, my mind still trying to process what she was saying. “Have you ever heard of the Saddlebrook Institute?” I shook my head mutely. “Good. It’s a miserable place.” She reached out to the small, ancient bedside table and picked up her cigarette case, retrieving one for herself and offering me another. I’d been smoking less over the past month or so, but I suddenly realised I would need one to get through this part of our conversation.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what she must have gone through, alone in a house with people who hated her, forced, every day, into a position where she was thought of as defective, where she had to play along with their games. I still feel white-hot anger heat my blood, grip my heart, whenever I think about her life during that time. I watched her light her cigarette and take a long, needful drag of it, before lighting my own and doing the same.

I’d thought that she had been simply getting on with her life. I’d imagined a heated conversation with Harge, of course, but … nothing that she was telling me had crossed my mind for one second. I’d imagined her taking lunch with Abby, drinking wine, forgetting all about me. Towards the end, I’d
envisioned her laughing about me, about what a young, foolish idiot I was, to think I was anything more than a passing hobby to her. My stomach twisted unpleasantly as I realised how thoroughly wrong I’d been. I felt selfish, ashamed even, hating myself for spending so long trying to hate her. I felt heat rise in my cheeks as I recalled the numerous times I’d laid in this very bed and cursed her for ever entering my life. I’d been so wrapped up in my belief of her betrayal, in my own pain and misery, that I hadn’t ever truly considered hers. I swallowed to ward off the tears that were starting to burn in my throat.

“How … how long did you have to stay there for?”

“Longer than I actually did,” she said, with a brief small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. I wanted to throw myself at her, cover her perfect face in kisses, crush her in my arms and promise that it was over. I didn’t. It must have been so painful for her; I didn’t want to make it last any longer than necessary. I settled on resting a hand on her knee. “Initially, they wanted me to stay at John and Jennifer’s for two weeks, until Rindy was back from her vacation with Harge’s sister,” she continued, only pausing to take another drag on her cigarette. “I lasted for two and a half days, and then told Harge I was on the brink of insanity, and that I needed to be allowed to leave. It took another three days, and involved him issuing quite a few threats, but he finally agreed, on the condition that I carried on attending my psychotherapy sessions, and that I would regularly attend his parents’ house for ‘family time’, where I may or may not be lucky enough to spend time with my daughter, depending on his mood.”

Do you recall me telling you of how my aversion to violence was severely compromised when Jack Taft showed up at the Ritz Tower? This was worse. I’m not a fighter in the least, but, for a few seconds, I seriously considered the merits of tracking Harge down and giving him a piece of my mind, with the very possible addition of my fists. Carol had never really said a bad word about him in our time together, but I couldn’t imagine how he could be anything other than an intolerable sonofabitch if he thought that entrapping Carol, taking her daughter away from her and forcing her to act like how she felt was not only wrong, but sick and in need of curing, was the right thing to do. The worst that Richard had done when he realised that I had feelings for another woman was throw a sulk and refuse to give me the Christmas present his mother had bought me, a present I hadn’t even wanted. Carol hadn’t been so lucky.

“Have you …” I started, about to ask if she’d seen Harge recently, when another thought struck me cold. “Do you still have to go to these psychotherapy meetings?”

She shook her head, and a lock of silky blonde hair fell across her cheek. “I finished last week,” she said as I reached forward and tucked it behind her ear. She leaned into my hand briefly, closing her eyes as she did so, before reaching for another cigarette. “It’s safe to say my acting skills paid off.” She did smile then, I think to try and stop me from worrying, but it was swiftly replaced with a frown. “Until yesterday, at least.”

I didn’t know if she was talking about me, or us, or the psychotherapist, or what, and so I looked at her questioningly. “Yesterday?”

“Harge and I met with our lawyers,” she replied. “It was only supposed to be to cross the t’s and dot the i’s. I was going to be allowed to see Rindy twice a week for three months, and then have overnights with her, and then, eventually, joint custody.” She shook her head, that sorrow back in her eyes. I squeezed her knee, feeling helpless. She opened her mouth to continue and then stopped, suddenly focusing on me for a long moment before shaking her head. “I saw you yesterday.”

My brow furrowed, and I had a very fleeting yet alarming thought that Carol was having some sort of breakdown. “I know,” I said softly.
She smiled again, genuinely this time, and the skin around her eyes crinkled in faint amusement.
“No. I mean, while I was in a cab on my way to Fred’s office. You were on your way to work. You looked so … striking.”

I frowned. “You did?”

“Yes. And thank god I did.” She ground her cigarette into the small old tin box I used as an ashtray, and then looked up at me. “You gave me the push I needed to stand up to them. Though, I don’t know that I wouldn’t have done it anyway, after having to sit through what they were saying.”

I watched her, nonplussed, as her brow furrowed. “What happened?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There was talk of my ‘past transgressions’, and Fred and Jerry, Harge’s lawyer, started arguing about whether I had ‘recovered’ or not. Fred tried his best, dear of him, but I just … I just knew that something had to change. If it didn’t, the court case would continue, everything would get uglier, and, in the midst of everything, is Rindy. She doesn’t deserve any of this, she doesn’t understand what’s going on, and …” She stopped and looked back over to the window, tears filling her eyes, and I honestly thought my heart might break at the sight of her. “She’s just a child. She needs …” She paused again, taking a deep breath. “I told them I wouldn’t contest Harge having full custody.”

I watched her carefully, trying to understand what she’d just said. I have to be honest, I hadn’t been expecting it. I’d assumed that Rindy living with Harge continued to be a temporary thing until a court hearing was set. I’d seen with my own eyes how much Carol loved Rindy, how much Rindy loved her, and I couldn’t comprehend why she’d given up an opportunity of joint custody. The reasons she had given were clear enough, but I suppose I had expected her to fight to the end. She turned back to me, her eyes searching my face, and I think she was trying to gauge my reaction. I was silent for a moment, trying to think of the right thing to say. “Are you sure you made the right decision?”

She didn’t even hesitate before she nodded. “Yes,” she replied, sounding certain, her voice stronger than it had been since we’d started back on this topic. “I don’t like it. I don’t like that my daughter can be, has been, taken away from me because of who I am. But, yes. It was the right thing to do.”

She must have seen a trace of doubt in my eyes, because she brought my hand up to her lips and kissed it gently. “If I hadn’t conceded custody, I would have forever been under Harge’s thumb. I would have been always looking over my shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I would have had to live a lie, and kept you and I a secret, and pretend, for the rest of my life, that everything was fine.” She smiled softly. “I couldn’t even do that while in that room with them.” I was transfixed as she continued, in absolute awe of her as I hung on every word.

“Rindy deserves the very best of me, whether she sees me every month, or every week, or every day. She deserves a happy mommy, one that can love her, and be honest with her, and isn’t forced to live a life of secrets and regrets. That’s what she needs, and I could never provide her with that if I gave myself up, if I bowed to their will. How can I tell her to always follow her heart, to never turn her back on her chances of happiness, if I can’t even do that, myself?” Her thumb traced circles into my hand. “I need to be free to be the best mother I can.”

Any doubt I’d felt had vanished as she spoke, and I stared at her in wonder. “You’re amazing,” I murmured, my heart fit to bursting with my love for her. “You’re the strongest woman I know.”

She properly smiled then, that megawatt smile of hers that could have even left Mrs Walls, my old manager at Frankenberg’s, thoroughly dazzled and dumbstruck. “Well, aren’t you a charmer,” she teased, blue eyes twinkling, and I couldn’t help but laugh, embracing the suddenly light atmosphere fully, as I marvelled at the woman she was and bathed in the glow of our love.
An Innate Gift of Timing

I don’t know how I’d imagined Carol’s apartment to be … but it wasn’t like this. I suppose I’d thought it would have the same grand feeling that her house had had, where everything, everywhere, screamed decadence and money. I could hear her on the phone with Abby in one of the bedrooms; by the sounds of it, she was trying to talk Abby down from a worried lecture she was on the receiving end of. I tried not to listen as I looked around the kitchen.

On the car ride over, she’d told me how worried Abby had been about her since Chicago. One of the rules Carol had been forced to abide by when staying with Harge and his parents had been no contact with Abby. It had been merely another display of cruelty, closing her off entirely from the outside world, from the one person who could have provided her with something other than rejection and disgust. I didn’t know what to make of Abby … she didn’t seem to like me very much, and I was under the impression that she thought of me as little more than a child, but I did know that she loved Carol, that she was the one person who’d been there for her since childhood.

I can’t lie to you, there was a part of me that continued to worry about the love shared between them both, even after Abby had told me herself that it wasn’t like that anymore, even after Carol had told me that she loved me. I didn’t really like to focus on how it made me feel, because I wasn’t overly comfortable with the jealousy and possessiveness that roared up inside me whenever I recalled the fact they had once been together. I couldn’t have summoned up an ounce of jealousy even if I’d tried, had Richard ever introduced me to someone he had previously dated, but, I suppose, this was just something else that Carol had drawn out of me, among the many emotions that I hadn’t realised were lurking within me, locked away beyond my reach, until she had come along with the key.

Still, I couldn’t bring myself to begrudge Carol her friendship with Abby. Even if I had, I never would have told her. It was clear to me how much they both valued each other, how deeply their friendship ran, and, when it came down to it, I would be eternally grateful to Abby for looking after Carol, making sure she’d been okay, when I hadn’t been able to. Besides, I fully intended to be a part of Carol’s life, and Abby was a part of that package. Surely she couldn’t view me with complete disdain forever.

Leaving the kitchen, I walked down the hallway, taking the next left, which led me into an empty room, probably almost twice the size of my bedroom. I looked around, took in the high ceiling, walked over to the window and looked down upon the bustling streets of Manhattan. I felt my confusion deepen as I stood there for a moment, staring absently at the windowsill. Carol had told me that she’d moved into this apartment over a month ago, and yet the place was almost bare. I didn’t understand why, and, for some reason, it suddenly made me feel unbearably sad to think of her coming back to this stark, empty place every day and calling it home.

I exhaled slowly. One of the reasons I hadn’t wanted to come here last night was because I’d been frightened to. I needed the safety my apartment could bring to see what would happen between Carol
and I, I needed to feel like it was, in some part at least, on my terms. I often felt so out of control around her, swept up in her and her life, that I needed our reunion to be on my territory, so to speak. Right from the start, she had been a whirlwind, and I’d been willingly sucked in. It had resulted in the worst pain I’d ever experienced, and so I’d used my apartment as a layer of protection, I suppose. I needed just her, I needed to know that she really did love me as much as I loved her, before I could let myself become a part of her life again, before I could be surrounded by her.

Last night, and our conversation that morning, had given me the courage to take that step, and when Carol had regretfully informed that, no matter how much she loved me, she could not wear the same clothes and undergarments two days in a row, that she would have to go back to her apartment to get some more (and ring Abby, given that we thought it unwise for her to use my telephone, my landlady known for her inquisitive nature), I’d not hesitated in telling her I would come along. That vulnerability had come back to her beautifully sculptured face as she’d asked if I would go with her, the vulnerability that caused my heart to constrict and my arms to ache through the need to hold her, and I realised she didn’t want to burst our temporary bubble any more than I did. Real life was waiting around the corner, but for now it could wait. I’d watched her as a grin formed on those perfect lips, and replied with one of my own. It would take me a while to merge the reality of her love with the fabrication of the lack of it that I’d convinced myself of.

I moved over to one of the tables, picked up the picture of Rindy and studied it. She really did look like her mother as she smiled brightly into the camera, and I felt a crushing blow as I realised again what Carol had lost. When she’d first told me, I’d started to blame myself, wondering if this would have been the same outcome if our paths had never crossed. I’d wondered if, at some point down the line, she would feel resentment towards me for all that happened, because her love for me was one of the things that was keeping her and Rindy apart. And then she’d explained, and I’d been left utterly blown away by her strength, her logic, her bravery.

I put the photo back, and went to go and see if Carol was finally off the phone yet, when something else caught my eye. I stared, transfixed for a long moment, and then walked towards it. The record I had given her for Christmas rested atop the player, its blue cover calling to me. I picked it up carefully, as though afraid it might break, and studied it, the memory of when I’d given it to her flashing through my mind. My heart swelled violently. There was one picture of Rindy, and there was one reminder of me. She really had never given up. I brought it closer, checking inside the cover. It was empty. I didn’t know whether to smile or cry as I stood there, my warring emotions leaving me rooted to the spot.

She was, indeed, the strongest woman I had met, but, my god, she didn’t exactly shy away from putting herself through some punishment. It had taken all of six weeks for me to buckle under the strain and stow every last memory I had of her away. Here she’d been, apparently listening to the song I’d first played for her, the record I had given her at a time when our journey was really only just beginning. Three or four weeks previously, I’d walked into a department store, and Easy Living had been playing. I’d lasted maybe 20 seconds before hurriedly leaving, trying to convince myself it was because I didn’t really need to buy anything, after all, all the while trying to block out all memories of us in our pyjamas, her doing my makeup. I couldn’t decide if she was a martyr or a hopeless romantic. After a brief, though thorough, analysis of the situation, I settled on both. Shaking my head in adoring exasperation, I set the cover down gently and padded out of the room, abruptly needing to see her face more than ever.

I passed a bathroom and the smaller of the two bedrooms on my way, before reaching the master bedroom and stepping inside. “I noticed you …” I started, but the words died a quick death on my lips as I was suddenly rendered speechless. In retrospect, I realise I possess an innate gift of timing, but in that moment I couldn’t think at all, my eyes glued to the naked form across the room from me, a bra hanging from her hand and a dress waiting for her on the bed. At first, a mixture of surprise and
mild embarrassment coloured her features, her blue eyes wide as she stared at me. I have no idea what expression I was wearing, lust infused with awe and longing, most probably, but whatever it was caused her eyes to narrow, until there was almost a challenge on her face.

She was just breathtaking, stood there completely bare, every inch of beauty available for my wanting, searching eyes. I stared at her throat for a moment, looking so delectable, and then at her collarbone. I began to feel that familiar surge of pure need tear through me, stealing my breath, causing an ache deep within. My gaze darted up to her face, and I saw fire in her eyes. I swallowed. My eyes wandered, pausing at her lips, her jaw, her shoulder, until they stopped completely at her breasts. I took a shaky breath. They were so full, they looked so soft, so perfect, her dusty pink nipples making me lick my lips involuntarily.

It never failed to surprise me how much I wanted her. No, not want. It doesn’t do my feelings justice. Every instinct within me needed her, cried out for her. I couldn’t think, my brain shutting down as primitive desire took over. I wanted, desperately, to touch her, feel her beneath my hands, my lips, my tongue, take over her, possess her, make her surrender all control. I needed to hear her moan, gasp, cry out for my love. I needed to feel her body writhe, jerk, convulse around me. I craved her taste, her smell, the feel of her hands in my hair. She was intoxicating, spellbinding, and I knew I would simply die if I didn’t have her. I could faintly hear my own breathing becoming ragged as my unrelenting thirst overwhelmed me entirely and propelled me forward.

It took me maybe four steps to reach her, and in that time I’d ridded myself of all but my stockings and panties. I stared at her face, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling with a frequency that matched her shallow breaths. The look she wore was so passionate, so carnal, that I felt my core muscles clench, a shiver run down my spine. I don’t know how she did it, how she managed to have such an effect on me with one look, but I launched myself at her, reaching up and pulling her face to mine, kissing her with all of the force I could muster. She hummed into my mouth and it drove me to the brink of insanity.

I wrenched myself away, needing more, so much more, and tugged on her hand, throwing the dress from the bed and clambering atop it, impatiently waiting as she followed, before attacking her lips again. She gave as good as she got, holding my face in her hands and barely waiting for an invitation before thrusting her tongue deep in my mouth, making me moan. She was a fucking goddess. I pulled away again, my underwear becoming wetter with every second as she watched me, breathless. I moved down the bed and leaned forward, my lips brushing against her jaw, down the side of her neck. I licked and sucked at the skin on her shoulder before continuing my descent. I paused when I reached her breasts.

They were beautiful, hypnotic, as I stared at them for a long minute, finally being unable to stop myself from bringing my mouth down onto one of her elongated nipples, sucking and flicking at it for a few moments before moving over to the other. She pushed herself against me, the air filling with her lustful moans, and I felt my clit start to ache. I covered her other breast with my hand, feeling her hard, wet nipple press into the palm of my hand, and then caught it between my index finger and thumb, addicted to the noises I was eliciting from her. I teased her breasts for a couple of minutes longer, but I still needed more.

My heart in my mouth in excitement, I moved further down the bed, climbing between her legs and kissing her stomach. She shuddered as I traced a trail from her belly button to the top of her waiting lips, bucking her hips at me impatiently as her fingers reached my hair and grabbed a handful. The smell of her need invaded my nostrils, the back of my throat, I could almost taste her on my tongue, and I inhaled sharply. I can’t describe how good her scent was, no words will suffice, but it was so overwhelming, so exquisite that I could have cried. I outlined her sex with my fingertips, watching her face intently as she jumped at the touch.
“Therese,” she growled huskily, and it sent a thrill rushing through me.

I couldn’t deny her, for to do so would have been to deny myself, and I hadn’t quite mastered that particular skill, so I parted her lips and stared at the beauty contained within. She was perfect. Honestly. Her pink folds glistened, her clit straining for attention, her muscles tightening every few seconds. I couldn’t hold back, I didn’t have the willpower, and so I leaned even closer to her centre and probed her gently with my tongue, shivering again at the indelible taste. She hissed in response, making my head spin in delight, and I continued my pursuit. I circled her clit and her back arched completely, thrusting herself further onto my face.

If I can’t adequately describe her scent, then I’m going to be useless at trying to explain her taste. It was the perfect balance between sweetness and salt, musky yet fresh, subtle but indescribably delicious, and, seriously, if I could have just lived off of her creamy arousal for the rest of my life, I would have. It caused my taste buds to explode in ecstasy, my eyes to snap shut, my own liquefied need to soak through my underwear … it was beautiful, glorious, a nectar sent from the gods themselves, and I greedily took it all as I lowered my tongue to her entrance and lapped up all that was there.

Her fingernails grazed my scalp as she grabbed another handful of my hair, using all of her strength to drive me in deeper. I was only too happy to oblige as I explored every millimetre, every crevice, every fold. Her throaty moans permeated the air until all I could hear, taste, smell, feel was her. It was magical, sublime … almost unbearably pleasurable, and I wanted to stay there forever. I turned my attention back to her clit, softly sucking at it, feeling her pelvis rock, her body submitting to my touch. I caressed it, slowly at first, and then harder, focusing on one spot and then another as she bucked her hips, her legs beginning to shake. “Oh, fuck,” she gasped as I rolled my tongue, increasing the tempo, the pressure, needing, more than I’d ever needed anything, to make her come for me. “Therese … Oh, god … Therese,” she whispered hoarsely, her voice strangled as she climbed higher and higher. I put everything I had, everything I felt, into my actions, lapping and sucking and pressing and flicking with my tongue. She was close, so close, I could feel her whole body trembling, on the very precipice of coming undone completely, and a second later she succumbed, a loud whimper ripping itself from her lips as her body descended into helpless spasms, her fingers pulling at my hair, her head thrown back into the pillow.

I moved my mouth down, placing my tongue at her very core, in paradise as her arousal flowed over my tongue, her inner walls contracting over and over. It was heavenly, awe-inspiring … divine, and I was panting with desire when I finally pulled myself away, straightening up and feeling a sense of wonder as I watched her. Her chest was heaving, her face flushed, her limbs relaxed as she opened her eyes and looked at me, stunning blue eyes shining with love. We stared at each other for a couple of minutes, both trying to steady our breathing, before I reluctantly extricated myself from between her thighs and crawled up the bed.

As soon as I was close enough, she reached for me, a hand at the back of my head, pulling me in and giving me a single kiss. My lips were slick from her nectar, and, when I moved back a couple of inches, I saw that her mouth was now coated with the same. She watched me intently as she licked her lips, a knowing grin adorning her face as my eyes widened and I bit back a moan. I had been so focused on that teasing, maddening, erotic display that I hadn’t noticed her hand moving, and I jumped violently as I felt her fingers skim over my abdomen, before sliding beneath the band of my underwear. I emitted a small yelp as they came into contact with my sex, and she raised an eyebrow as her hand stilled, lightly cupping my mound.

“Oh, darling. You’re drenched,” she murmured approvingly, voice throaty as her eyes darkened
further in lust.

“I … I …” I gasped, helplessly trying to grasp for some words.

“You?” she prompted, a wicked gleam in her eye that caused my mind to muddle further, caused my hips to rock in desperation.

“I …” God, this was hopeless. I didn’t stand a chance of trying to be articulate right now.

“Yes, my love?”

I closed my eyes, my heart hammering a frenetic beat, my pulse running riot. She knew full well what she was doing, I had no doubt of that, and I bit down on my lip, utterly incapable of doing anything other than yielding to her completely. I forced my eyes to open, exhaling shakily as I saw the wild, sensual look on her face. Only two words came to me, repeating themselves over and over in my mind like a mantra, until I temporarily regained control of my vocal cords. “Take me,” I begged, earnestly trying to rock against her hand again. “Take me.”

And she did.
“Hungry?” I teased as I watched Therese tuck into her meal with gusto. After that rather unexpected, though thoroughly wonderful, derailment while at my apartment, we’d laid on the bed together, her in my arms, resting her head on my chest, until I’d heard a clear rumbling of her stomach. A shower each and 90 minutes later, here we were, back at Scotty’s, only three tables down from where we were seated for our first lunch date. We were in the very last booth, tucked away in the corner, though it wouldn’t have mattered if we had been slap bang in the middle of the room. The place was almost empty; I think it’s safe to say we had missed the usual lunch rush hour.

She looked up from her plate, eyes twinkling, and waited until she had finished her mouthful to talk. “Yes. For some strange unknown reason, I’m starving.”

Her sarcasm made me smile, and I ate a forkful of my halibut. The food here was great, and had been for years; we’d have to come back more often. “Good,” I said to her when I’d swallowed. “You’ve lost weight. You need to eat.”

Her eyebrows raised a fraction as she took a sip of her wine. “So have you,” she replied succinctly.

I went to open my mouth in response and stopped, watching as she turned her attention back to her steak. My lips turned up in spite of myself. For all of the times Therese seemed nervous, or uncertain, or just, for a second, particularly young, she also sometimes knew exactly what to say to put me in my place. I found it to be an oddly attractive quality, and it made me love her all the more. I don’t know if it was because of my name, my class within society or the detached way in which I carried myself, but, in general, people didn’t tend to stand up to me. Abby was, of course, the exception, to the extent that I frequently wished she would contract laryngitis, for a few hours at least. With Therese, however, the fact that she could and did stand her ground at times was incredibly appealing to me.

What could I have said, anyway? I had lost weight. I’d barely eaten in months. The stress of life had stolen my appetite, caused my clothes to hang from my frame in a slightly looser fashion, and, if I didn’t remember to eat, I could easily go a couple of days without food. From the look of her, Therese had experienced much of the same. It filled me with such happiness to see her now, eagerly eating her steak and potatoes, her cheeks full of colour, her eyes shining. What a difference a day made, I remember thinking wryly. If a morning of rampant sex was the way to her stomach, I’d have to make it a regular occurrence. I grinned to myself. I didn’t think I’d have much trouble making such effort.

“What’s so amusing?” she asked, pulling me from my increasingly lascivious thoughts, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Oh, I’m just happy I have found a way to make you hungry,” I drawled in reply, reaching for my martini. I watched her frown for less than a second, before understanding dawned and she blushed brilliantly. My smile widened.

Her green eyes darted around the room, and she leaned closer from across the table. “Well, I can see your appetite isn’t completely in ruins, either,” she remarked in a low voice.

I sipped my drink, regarding her intently, taking my time in replying. “I think it’s clear by now that you’re very good for my health, Miss Belivet. And my … appetite.” I purposefully drew that last word out for a millisecond longer than was necessary, and I felt a little thrill as her lips parted into a small ‘o’.
She glared at me for a moment, before sitting back and picking up her wine. “You … are incorrigible,” she muttered, though I could see the smile in her eyes. We returned to our meals and a couple of minutes passed before she looked back at me. “I forgot to ask; how was Abby?”

I finished my last mouthful and shook my head slowly. “Fine, after I convinced her that she really didn’t need to pack her bags and move in with me so that my ‘ignorant’ self couldn’t get into trouble.” I glanced heavenwards. “She lectured me for a full fifteen minutes before I could get a word in edgeways. Apparently, she’d called me early this morning, and, after I hadn’t picked up, she’d been just about ready to drive over and kick my door down.”

Therese’s eyes widened. “Oops.”

“Yes. She’s been rather over-protective, recently.” I couldn’t blame her. We’d known each other forever, and she’d never seen me in such a state as the one I had been in over the recent months. Within an hour of leaving Harge’s parents’ place and returning to the house, she’d been there, listening and holding my hand as I sobbed and sniffled while trying to explain everything that had happened, everything that I felt. Since that night, she had called me every day, as well as visiting as much as she could. I can’t imagine I was anything other than utterly miserable company, but she never complained, never made me feel guilty. I think she knew I was already doing a superb job at that, all by myself.

“She cares about you,” Therese reasoned.

“I know. She might be an absolute pain, sometimes, but she really has been doing her best to take care of me. I haven’t been the easiest of people to be around.”

“Good.” She studied the tablecloth for a moment, and then lifted her eyes to mine. “Did you … did you tell her about …”

I nodded. “Yes. She’s pleased.” I saw a flash of doubt cross her face and leaned forward, my eyes sincere as I stared at her. “Genuinely. She’s relieved. I don’t think she was a long way off from coming to your apartment and dragging you to me kicking and screaming.” I was making light of it, of course, but Abby really had been reaching the end of her tether when dealing with my heartbreak. Just the previous week, during yet another night of me weeping pitifully down the phone about the fool I had been, she’d finally lost her temper with me, demanding that I let her go down to the Times office and beg for Therese’s forgiveness on my behalf.

At this, Therese smiled. “I’m sure my landlady would have loved that.”

I chuckled. “Well, she wouldn’t have forgotten it in a hurry, would she?” I lit a cigarette. I found that, generally speaking, I smoked far less when around Therese. However, my habit of smoking after a meal refused to be quashed, and I inhaled greedily. “Abby invited us to a party.”

Therese’s eyebrows shot up. “Both of us?”

“Yes.” I frowned. “Why are you so convinced that she dislikes you?” She dropped her gaze, her fingers idly trailing over the base of her wine glass. “Look at me,” I coaxed gently, silently bemoaning the fact that we were out in public and I couldn’t reach over and touch her. Thankfully, my voice was enough, and her wide green eyes met mine once more. “I admit that she was a bit … wary … at first, but that wasn’t because she didn’t like you. She was worried. She thought I’d get hurt. She thought we both would.” A sudden sadness settled on her face then, and my heart lurched. No, no, no. This was not how this day was supposed to go.

“She was right about that,” she replied quietly, and suddenly it was me who couldn’t bear to hold our
gaze, the all-too-familiar feeling of regret abruptly coursing through my veins as I drained the last of
my martini.

I so badly wanted to reach across the table and hold her hand, apologise again for leaving her. The
wounds I’d inflicted were deep, and they wouldn’t be healed easily. I was painfully aware of that,
and I was fully prepared to do whatever was necessary, for as long as it took, to help their recovery. I
took another long drag of my cigarette, lost in my self-recriminations, berating, for the millionth time,
my stupidity. How I wished we lived in a simpler world, where our mere reunion would have been
enough to erase our mistakes and our hurt. Life and emotion just didn’t work like that, though. We
weren’t in a movie, or a book. Our love wasn’t lyrics to a song. We had to take responsibility for our
actions, hold ourselves accountable and accept the consequences. I suppose that’s how we learn. I
knew I would never be foolish enough to let her go again.

The feel of Therese’s foot tentatively brushing against my calf jerked me from my thoughts, my
surprise surely evident as I looked back over to her. As soon as she’d ascertained she had my
attention, she hastily glanced around the room, trying her best, but adorably failing, to appear the
very definition of nonchalance as she dropped her foot and straightened up. My heart skipped a beat,
as it was so prone to do while in her company, as she looked at me, her eyes brimming with
tenderness.

“Stop beating yourself up,” she murmured. “You’re not the only one to have messed up.” She must
have noted the scepticism in my eyes, because she sighed. “I was so wrapped up in my own hurt, I
never even really considered what you must have been going through. What you told me this
morning … about Harge and the therapy … I had no idea. If I’d spent just a little bit of time thinking
about you, instead of being selfish …” I opened my mouth to interrupt and she shook her head. “No.
Let me. Please.” I reluctantly obliged. “If I’d done that, I wouldn’t have felt as awful as I did. I
would never have tried to stop waiting for you.”

“You couldn’t have known,” I tried to explain, but she shook her head again, apparently intent on
getting this off her chest.

“I could have. Some idea, at least. I should have thought of the implications of …” Her face abruptly
I was too damn busy worrying about the possibility that you just didn’t like me anymore.” Her eyes
suddenly became damp, and I could hardly bear it. “I’m sorry,” she said, voice barely more than a
whisper, as a tear landed on her cheek and she hurriedly wiped it away with a napkin.

“You don’t …” I started softly, only to be cut off with a serious, if teary, look.

“I do. We both did things that, in retrospect, we aren’t proud of. We both made mistakes. And I
won’t have you thinking that you’re solely at fault, that you should shoulder everything. If we ever
have a chance at making this work, we each have to accept our faults. So, let me apologise. Let me
promise you that I won’t ever be so selfish again. Because how can I trust your words and promises
if you won’t even listen to mine?”

Her eyes were so sincere, her words so heartfelt, that I didn’t know what to say. Did I hold her
accountable for any of what had transpired? No. But I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, invalidate her feelings.
While I might not have agreed with the reasons behind her apology, the rest of her argument made
complete sense to me. I watched her as she composed herself, love and pride threatening to choke me
as I did so. I’d never met anybody like her. I knew I never would again. Her expression turned
expectant, and I realised I hadn’t yet spoken. “Okay. You’re right.”

I don’t know if her mood was just particularly fragile and all over the place that day, or if she was
simply as desperate as I was to regain the previously light atmosphere between us, but she suddenly
regarded me playfully. “I know. I love hearing you say that I’m right.”

I narrowed my eyes in jest. “Don’t get used to it.”

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My mind wandered languidly as I lay in Therese’s bed that night, with her in my arms, her back to my chest. She’d not long fallen asleep, and the room was silent, with the exception of her soft, slow breaths. For the first time in a long time, the silence didn’t bother me. Usually, the nights were the worst for me, when the quietness was at its most pronounced, suffocating and malicious as it fed on my tears. I could just about manage, most of the time, during the day, it would be in the evenings and nights that my demons would come out of hiding, dancing proudly in front of my eyes as they paraded all of my mistakes, all of my losses, all of my regrets, pulling me apart and leaving me powerless.

That night, though, it seemed the silence and I had called a truce, though I wasn’t yet sure if it was temporary or permanent. Right then, I didn’t care. I was just grateful for the reprieve as it enveloped me in its warm, suddenly kind, embrace, allowing my mind to drift lazily through the events of the day. A smile settled on my face and refused to be moved as I thought about the walk we had taken after lunch, talking about such trivial things. I think it was important, a necessary counterpart to the inevitably deep and soul-baring conversations we were having, to just be able to casually talk about the weather, or the scenery, or her annoyance the other day when she’d gone grocery shopping and they had ran out of milk. It still amazed me, how comfortable I felt when talking to her. It was such a foreign concept to me. Admittedly, I still had a long way to go when trying to voice my fears and my feelings, but I was trying, and, once I’d started telling her that morning about all that happened in her absence, I’d found it less difficult than I’d expected. I’m sure I literally glowed with joy as we strolled around the park, then finally heading to my car and driving back to her apartment.

There wasn’t a question of whether we would go to my apartment or hers; I’d packed a small bag of clothes just before we had left mine. While at her place, it was like we were in our own little world, and I could sense that she needed that as much as I did. I loved being surrounded by her, her belongings, her extraordinary photographs, her smell. Looking back, I suppose I was something akin to a woman deprived of food until on the brink of death, only to be delivered to the finest banquet she’d ever seen. I feasted on all of it, every little thing in that apartment, the furniture, the books, the little personal touches interspersed throughout. It was bordering on the ridiculous as I found myself staring, almost dreamily, at her hairbrush, shaking my head at myself in disbelief once I realised exactly what I was doing. I couldn’t help it, though. My life had felt so empty and bereft without her that I felt an irresistible urge to fill it back up with every last thing that could possibly be associated with her.

We’d made love in the late afternoon, each of us apparently insatiable when it came to the other. I know I was. It was gentle, sensual, and so sweet that I wept as I came, holding her to me for what felt like forever as I slowly descended from nirvana. We took our time, going again and again, the love flowing between us making every second seem more personal, more intimate, more utterly wondrous. I loved the depth I shared with her. I loved how I could be filled with a wanton lust so visceral that I had to fuck her there and then, that I couldn’t wait even a nanosecond longer to have her, that I desperately needed to make her mine, give her no option but to surrender to me completely, send her crashing from one orgasm into another as she cried my name. I also loved how I could be overwhelmed with such love for her, such care, that I could have made love to her for days, with all the tenderness that my heart contained as I carefully explored every inch of her body, each movement I made consumed with adoration and awe. The power she held over me, the way my emotions for her left me powerless, was hard to comprehend. All this time later, it still is.
Afterwards, she had made us omelettes, and I’d watched her from the kitchen archway as she stood over the stove, my offers of assistance being firmly denied. I don’t know why seeing her there made my heart swim with emotion, but it did. It’d happened a few times, to be honest, at the most unexpected of times. When she’d handed over the robe I’d packed while at my apartment, the way she’d moved as she stretched out on the couch and put her head in my lap, the way her brow had furrowed when we’d been discussing politics, the sight of her as she’d walked out of the room, the flush on her cheeks when she’d looked up from searching through some papers to catch me staring at her … each time, my heart had twisted with love that ran so deep it left me breathless.

I remember feeling pure elation as I lay there, thinking over all that happened that day, overwhelmed with an almost painful sense of relief over her coming back to me. Just over 24 hours earlier, I’d been wholly convinced that I would only be with her again in my dreams, and yet here we were. The smile still hadn’t left my face as I closed my eyes, my nose mere inches from the top of her head as I breathed in deeply, the natural scent of her mixed with the subtle fragrance of her freshly washed hair quickly sending me to sleep.
As soon as sleep had deserted me early the next morning, I knew that Therese wasn’t there. I hadn’t even had to open my eyes, I just knew. Obviously the fact that she wasn’t in my arms was some indicator, but I don’t think I was awake enough to even fully grasp that yet. I’ve told you before that I honestly believe that what Therese and I feel for each other runs on another level entirely. I could feel the absence in my heart before I could feel it in my arms.

You know, as I’ve been writing this I’ve been a little surprised at how much of a romantic fool I sound. I wish you’d known me before I’d met Therese, so that you could fully understand the transformation I have undertaken. Many years have passed since the weekend I am currently sharing with you, and I’m still taken aback at how she changed me. If I had met this version of myself before I’d met Therese … oh, my old self would have wanted to get away as soon as possible, rolling her eyes and bemoaning schoolgirl crushes.

I suppose the main change is that of my heart. Before Therese, I’d always strived to keep that part of me carefully guarded, with, of course, the exception of Rindy. And Abby, to a certain extent. I would never have done this, writing down my feelings, my fears, my thoughts. I would never have believed it possible to experience such profound and exhilarating and terrifying emotions, all in equal measure. I would have thought it ridiculous to even entertain the notion that one person could change another on such a deep level. Therese taught me a lot. Sometimes, I still doubt whether she truly comprehends just how much.

I suppose the purpose of this diversion from the memories I’m trying to describe to you is to explain that I truly do understand if this all sounds a bit … fanciful, a bit romanticised. If I wasn’t writing down my own experiences, if I hadn’t felt all of these things and so much more, it’s likely that I would have agreed with such an assessment. I can assure you that I’m not this verbose about my feelings in person. I think the nature of writing, of having the misguided belief that it’s just me and my words, has unlocked a sense of freedom in me. In writing this, I’ve found myself with the opportunity to offload all of my thoughts and emotions, and the events that transpired, almost as though I’m properly examining them all for the first time.

Anyway, back to that morning. My eyes shot open in direct response to the realisation that she wasn’t with me, and I was groggy enough to believe, for one awful moment, that I did indeed have some nervous breakdown, and Therese hadn’t come back, at all. My surroundings quickly managed to dispel this thought, thankfully, though panic and insecurity swelled up within me as I took note of the empty space beside me. I strained my ears but could hear nothing. I felt nausea rise, and I brought my legs over the side of the bed and retrieved my robe.

I found her in the living room, sitting in the middle of the floor. I hung back by the doorway, watching her silently as she rummaged through a small box. She looked particularly adorable right then, I remember thinking, dressed in her dotted pyjamas with her short hair barely collecting into a ponytail, hundreds of brown strands falling around her face, resting against the back of her neck. She wore an expression of concentration, and I thought I could see a hint of … I wasn’t sure, sadness, maybe, or nostalgia, though I couldn’t see her face fully. So wrapped up in her task was she, that she didn’t notice my arrival, and, for a couple of minutes, I was content to just watch her. I wondered what on earth she was looking at, what had captured her interest so fully, and, finally, my piqued curiosity would not be quietened any longer.

“What have you got there?”
She jumped, her head snapping up as she dropped whatever she was holding back into the box, alarm flitting across her features until her wide eyes landed on me. She was hesitant for a moment, and then gave me a small smile. “How long have you been stood there?”

“Not long. I woke up a few minutes ago and wondered where you were.” I tilted my head slightly, regarding her. “When did you wake?”

“About an hour ago.” She glanced down at the box and then back to me. “Come and have a look.”

I’m not sure why, but I almost felt nervous as I stepped towards her, suddenly uncertain of whether I wanted to know what she had been doing. As soon as I was in touching distance, I reached out a hand to brush against her ponytail. I realised I did it whenever we were alone, always wanting to feel her, whether it be her hair, or her cheek, or her hand, or her shoulders, or her back. I suppose it goes back to that magnetic thing I tried explaining before. I was always drawn to her, both emotionally and physically. She had rested the lid of the box atop it, partially obscuring the contents, and she waited until I was sitting next to her, my legs stretched out in front of me, before lifting it.

My eyes widened as I saw my own face staring back at me from within a photograph. I knew immediately that it was one that she had taken while in that diner, where we’d stopped for our first meal on our road trip. I felt her eyes on me as I studied the picture, feeling a sense of being transported back to that time. I took note of my chin, resting lightly atop my fingers, and then paid attention to my eyes, staring directly into the camera, though I knew that, at that moment, the camera wasn’t what I was trying to see, at all. It was merely an obstacle, hiding Therese’s face from me. Just seconds before, our hands had touched, and, if I looked closely, I could see a trace of lingering desire in my gaze, infused with a warmth I hadn’t even been aware that I was capable of emitting. I closed my eyes for a second, savouring the memory, before turning to her with a question on my face.

She swallowed, and answered by taking the photograph and laying it on the floor. I looked back at the box. Another photograph. Me, again. This time, viewed through a car window as I exited a small store, just one of the many I had visited for supplies whilst on our travels. I hadn’t known it was being taken, and I stared at it for a minute. I reached over, picked it up to place on top of the first, and found another. I kept going through another eight, all of them having been taken without me being aware, before stopping, though I’d barely made a dent in the materials. I looked back over to her, feeling my heart constrict with affection as I saw the shyness on her face.

“You were busy,” I teased gently, not quite sure of what to say.

She smiled again, affording me a glimpse of her dimples. “It would appear so.” She watched me for a few moments, and then reached into the box, grasping the entirety of its contents between her hands and setting them on the floor. She scattered them with one quick movement, so that they were spread out between us, overlapping each other. There must have been around 40 photographs, all of me, only a few I had posed for, and I skimmed over them briefly in amazement, my eyes landing on the one she had taken of me at the tree lot, just before Christmas. Amidst them all, I could see other little bits of varying shapes and sizes, and I plucked one between my fingers.

It was a small square piece of paper, with nothing written on it except a printed ‘McKinley Motel’ sign. I recognised it from the notepad I vaguely remembered seeing on the table. I looked at her again, searching her face, and saw her flush. I smiled softly, turning back to the paper in my hands and setting it down again. I reached for a nondescript pen, bearing ‘Boarder Inn’ along its body, the name of the motel we had stayed in, in Pittsburgh. I spotted a cloth napkin, picking it up for closer inspection, unsurprised when I saw ‘Drake’ embroidered upon it. I found a piece of paper ripped from what I gathered was a diary, listing the date for our first afternoon at the house, then a small flattened Kodak film roll box, one of the few I had given to her on my previous visit to her
apartment.

So many emotions and memories flooded through me as I regarded all of these items, picking them up, examining them closely, recalling the circumstances around each little snippet of our time together, and it was one of the most bittersweet moments I have ever experienced. The box was fit to bursting with Therese and I, back before everything that had worked to separate us, and I felt my eyes suddenly fill with tears at the thought of her keeping all of these little mementos. It was a beautiful act, so loving; I’d never had anything like this presented to me, anything so romantic and sweet, and I felt a fierce rush of love grasp my heart.

I reached for her hand, squeezing it tightly in my own, staring at her. “I love you,” I said quietly, and even I could hear the intensity and adoration that clung to every word. I watched her for another moment and then curled my legs beneath me and rose to my knees, careful of the materials on the floor as I inched closer to her, cupping her face in my hands and kissing her softly on her cheek, on the corner of her mouth. I pulled back.

Her hands held my wrists, and her eyes locked onto mine. “I love you, too,” she murmured, pressing her lips against mine for a lingering kiss.

She released my wrists and I sat back down, still feeling somewhat dumbstruck at the display in front of me. It wasn’t just the realisation that she had painstakingly collected all of these items during our time together, which was amazing in itself, but that she’d kept it. Even after she’d thought I’d abandoned her. Even after she’d woken in a hotel in Chicago and found me gone. Even after the weeks and months of silence. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. She had a way of convincing me that I couldn’t possibly love her, admire her, any more than I did, and then doing something which only caused my love to grow, my heart to expand.

“I can’t believe you kept it all,” I voiced in wonder.

“Yes, well, I suppose we can add this to the list of things you’ve brought out in me,” she replied lightly, any traces of hesitation having left her. “Apparently, I’m a sentimental fool. Who knew?”

I smiled broadly. “You’re my sentimental fool.”

“Always.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, and, internally at least, I swooned.

She started tidying the collective items, and I helped. A thought came to me. “Why did you get all of this out this morning?”

She paused, her lips parting as she released a sigh. “On Friday, when we first got back here, we were in the kitchen.” I nodded, feeling slightly confused. “I saw you looking at the wall of my photographs … and … the picture I took of you wasn’t there anymore.”

Of course, I’d noticed. And I can’t deny that I had felt a twist of sorrow. Not that I would have ever let that show. How could I expect her to keep it there, after everything that had happened? While I had experienced a jolt of hurt at the indication of my disappearance from her life, I hadn’t expected anything different. She had been trying to protect herself, trying to move on, and I couldn’t begrudge her that, I never would. “I know,” I replied. “And I understand why.”

She nodded. “I couldn’t cope with daily reminders of you,” she continued, and horror started to line my stomach.

“You don’t have to explain yourself, darling,” I said gently. “It’s okay.”

“No,” she responded, shaking her head slightly. “Listen. About six weeks after Chicago, I realised
that I couldn’t keep on seeing photographs of you every day. It was too painful. I missed you so much, I was hurting so badly, that the only thing I could think to do was to put all of our memories away. It never even occurred to me to throw them out; I could never have done that. But … I needed to try and live again, because I was losing my mind.”

She looked so vulnerable, her green eyes pleading for me to understand. “Therese … I know,” I tried to soothe, bringing a hand up and resting it against the side of her face. “It was the right thing to do.” And it was. I didn’t like it, I hated that I had made her feel that way, that I’d caused so much pain that she couldn’t even bear seeing my face, but I understood completely what she was saying. She’d needed to look after herself. As I have previously stated, her happiness means far more to me than my own.

She suddenly rose to her feet, holding a hand out to me. “There’s one more thing I want to show you.”

I took her hand and stood, wondering where this was heading. She led me into the bedroom, stopping at her bedside cabinet. I watched her as she opened the drawer and pulled something out from the back, handing it to me silently. It was another photograph. Me, asleep, my shoulders bare, my hand resting on the pillow. I studied it for a few seconds and looked up at her.

“I couldn’t bring myself to put you away completely,” she said, her green eyes expressing such depth that the breath was taken right out of me. She moved for my hand again, holding it between both of hers. “That’s what I need you to know, Carol. Even when I was pretending to myself that I was moving on, I couldn’t put you away.”

I closed my eyes involuntarily, emotions welling up inside of me, trying to devour me whole. When I opened them again, she was still looking up at me, her eyes belying her sincerity. “I’m sorry,” I said, guilt consuming me, my voice barely above a whisper, and she shook her head.

“No. That isn’t what this is about,” she said seriously. “I understand. I know why you did what you did; I know what you had to go through. You don’t need to apologise to me anymore.” She pulled me over to the bed, and I sank down on it and moved until I was resting against the wall, not fully able to shake my dismal thoughts. She climbed on the bed and positioned herself in front of me. “Remember yesterday, at your apartment?” Colour stained her cheeks. “I mean … before …”

I couldn’t help it. Seeing her flustered caused a small reluctant smile to tug at my lips. I nodded.

“I was in your living room, and I saw Easy Living on the record player.” She looked down at her hands and then back up to me. “It was just another reminder, I guess, that you hadn’t given up on me. I needed to show you that I hadn’t given up on you either, no matter how much I wanted to believe that I had.”

It had been another emotional morning, and I stared at her wordlessly for a moment, trying to remember how to speak. “You are amazing,” I said, finally. “I am so lucky to have you.”

She smiled, then, the biggest smile she’d given me so far, that day. She scooted closer, until her face was mere inches from my own. “Know that I feel exactly the same.”

Our gaze held for a long few seconds as my negative thoughts dispersed, the joy I was now feeling leaving no room for such dourness. Her eyes shone, and I could feel myself getting lost in them yet again. After a couple of minutes, that deliciously familiar and electric tension began to charge between us, and I only lasted a handful of moments before I grabbed at her hips, pulling me into me. I was insatiable. I couldn’t get enough. If her responding moan was anything to go by, neither could she.
“It would appear that we make the perfect team,” Carol remarked, a twinkle in her eye as we sat around my tiny kitchen table. “This is delicious.”

“It is,” I replied with a smile, before taking another bite of the vegetable casserole we’d spent the previous hour making. It was one of my favourites, partly because of the low cost of the ingredients, but also because it was one of those definitive comfort foods, nice and filling at the end of a long and tiring day.

Not that that Sunday had been particularly tiring … unless I counted the bedroom activities that had started midmorning and had taken us right through to early afternoon. I sneaked a glance at Carol, looking as stunning as ever. She really was glorious. We’d spent the afternoon in our robes, and, as we hadn’t left the apartment, neither of us had bothered with sorting out our hair or applying our usual makeup. Her face was bare, her hair still damp from her shower and falling around her face, and she’d never looked more beautiful to me than she did right then. The robe she’d brought from her apartment wasn’t the one I’d seen her wearing during our trip. It was black and slightly shorter than the tartan one I remembered, the dark colour acting as a breath-taking contrast to her creamy skin.

My glance turned into a stare as I became captivated by her. I drank in her blue eyes, eyes that seemed to lighten and darken depending on her mood, eyes that could flash a steely blue in anger, penetrating and formidable enough that I was sure she could have made the most intimidating of men wither in front of her, eyes that could appear to literally smoulder in desire, could undress me, could see into the deepest recesses of my soul, could turn my legs to jello.

They were so enchanting, her eyes, sometimes almost bordering on grey, but then, at other times, displaying a blueness brighter than the sky. One look could make my heart forget to beat, could make me forget my own name, could make me feel like the most cherished person in the world. They were powerful, far more powerful than a pair of eyes had any right to be. She could make me feel like I was in paradise, like I was invincible, like my heart could, at any moment, implode with happiness. At the same time, she possessed the power to leave me with nothing, to crush my heart and soul into little more than pulp, to take the sunshine and joy and anything even remotely resembling goodness away and break me for eternity. It both petrified me and caused me unparalleled exhilaration to acknowledge that she’d stolen my heart so completely.

She looked up, catching me staring at her, and arched an eyebrow. My stomach flipped lazily, and my eyes widened. I would have to, at some point, learn to control myself for more than an hour while in her presence, I scolded myself, shifting slightly in my chair as I hastily scooped up another mouthful of casserole and chewed it slowly. Honestly, it was reaching the realms of absurdity, my physical reaction to her. The very thought of having sex had frightened and repulsed me before Carol had come along. Now here I was, unable to quench my thirst for it, for her. I chanced another look at her, our eyes meeting again after I noted a knowing smile playing on her full, inviting lips. I flushed, clearing my throat and reaching for my water, racking my brains desperately for something to talk about, something that would provide a distraction.

“Why is your apartment so empty?” I blurted without having the chance to run the words through my internal filter. I inwardly cringed, eyes wide again for a completely different reason, my spoon hovering between my bowl and my mouth. Well, that was certainly one way to douse my emotions in cold water. My blush burned hot in my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I …”

“It’s fine.” To her credit, Carol barely batted an eyelid, though the almost imperceptible frown on her
forehead told me that she was taking the time to think about how to answer my question. “I suppose I
didn’t much care about filling it. I was . . . preoccupied. It seemed unimportant.”

“Oh,” I said lamely. Silence fell between us as I tried to think of a more adequate response, staring at
my near-empty bowl.

“Perhaps you . . .” She stopped, picking up her water and taking a small sip, and then looking at me
with clear hesitation. “I was thinking . . . well, hoping, I suppose is a more accurate term, that you
perhaps might like to help me decorate it.” She watched me carefully, and I could see the anxiety in
her expression as I floundered for an answer.

This was another in a long line of crucial moments for us, I could feel it. I’d felt something in the air
all day, something slightly . . . off, something I couldn’t, or possibly wouldn’t, identify, but which had
caused me to feel a faint sense of apprehension since I’d woken. Tomorrow would be a step back
into reality. I would have to go to work, and the little cocoon we had constructed around ourselves
for the weekend would be shattered. I’d forced it from my mind, needing to be able to enjoy this time
with Carol, needing so strongly to be allowed to bathe in the cure to my broken heart, to shelter
myself and recuperate with her beside me.

I hadn’t broached a discussion of what would happen on Monday because I was scared of what the
outcome might be, I was scared that, if we so much as prodded the haven we were in, it might
collapse around us, and I knew without doubt that I would be unable to cope with that. To be upfront
about the matter, I didn’t want to have to talk about how things would proceed, where we would go
from here, because there was something I had to say that I knew she wouldn’t like. It was cowardly,
I knew, to run from what needed to be said. I knew that all I was doing was putting off the
inevitable. And, now that the time was upon me, I felt nausea violently churn my stomach, my
nerves coming apart. My thoughts raced, falling over themselves in their haste, until I knew my only
option was to bite the bullet.

“Carol . . . I can’t move in with you.”

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It took the length of time for seven words to be spoken for my heart to drop to the pit of my stomach.
I searched Therese’s face quickly, urgently, trying to retain my grasp on rationality, even as I could
feel it start to slip away from me. I’d been so intent on her recovery that I hadn’t spared my own a
single thought, and it was only then that I realised my heart was currently being held together by
band-aids. It had only been two days since the Oak Room, less than 48 hours since Therese had
walked back into my life. The weekend we’d had together had been healing, undoubtedly, but my
heart had a long way to go to being fully repaired again. The pain was still too new, too raw, the fear
of life without her had only receded just below the surface, ready to pounce and make me its slave
again at a second’s notice. I could feel it gnawing at the bars of its fragile cage, starting to slither
through the gaps and carefully calculating its targets. I couldn’t breathe.

She jumped from her chair, crouching down next to me, gripping my hand tightly, her green eyes
verging on wild as she watched me. Only a few seconds had passed, but each one had felt like an
eon. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I do. I really do,” she said quickly, her words rushed and almost
overlapping as she voiced them. “But I can’t. I love you so much, Carol. I love you so, so much, that
it terrifies me. And . . . and when everything happened . . . I wanted to die. I . . . I wished for it. Every
day. Everything was so dark, and so pointless and meaningless, because you weren’t there. Because
you showed me so much, and taught me so much, and made me love you so much, and then it was
all gone. And it’s not your fault. I’m not saying that it’s your fault. But you were my everything and
then I had nothing.”
The panic in her voice was evident, and I watched tears pool in her eyes, but I still didn’t know what she was saying. The guilt that had become my only constant companion since Chicago gripped me in its sharp talons, and I inhaled sharply. Was she leaving me? Was this some sort of cruel karma, the universe giving me a slice of redemption only to yank it away from me again? Is this what I deserved? I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything. Horror was billowing in my heart as I waited for her to hand me my death sentence.

“And … and I just … I can’t move in with you. Not now. What if something happens again? What if we’re torn apart … again? You have my heart, you have all of it, every last sliver of love I have to give … it’s yours. It always will be. It always has been. Even before I met you, I loved you. I was waiting for you. And I know that sounds crazy. I know it sounds stupid. But it’s true. It must be true. Because I was made for you.” She was talking so quickly, with so much passion, that I was struggling to keep up. It didn’t sound like she was about to up and leave, or, rather, tell me to up and leave, what with us being in her apartment, so … why? Why was she looking so scared? I couldn’t comprehend. My heart was on the brink of breaking, and I knew, with a sudden aching, devastating clarity, that, this time, no patching up would fix it. No band-aid would hold it together. If this was it, if it was about to smashed to pieces again, it would finally be broken without the faintest possibility of repair.

“But … but I need my life, too. Last time I had nothing, but now I have this job, I’m finally getting to where I want to go. And I can’t give it up. And then there’s Rindy to think about. Who knows what Harge would do if he found out we were living together. He set a goddamn spy on you last time. I can’t … Carol, I won’t jeopardise that. You haven’t even set up any visits yet. That situation needs to be straightened out before we can think about doing anything else.” She paused, for air I presume, hurriedly wiping at her tears with the back of her hand. “I just … I need you to understand. I need you to know that I love you more than I have ever loved anyone; I love you more than I will ever love anyone. But … but I can’t just go running into this. I want to. God, I want to. But we have forever. We can afford to take our time.” Her lower lip trembled then, and her eyes were pleading. “Can’t we?”

I blinked. The entirety of her speech had taken less than two minutes, and I worry that even that timeframe is giving it far too wide a margin. So much information had been thrown at me in such a short amount of time that I still wasn’t sure of the exact details as I frantically tried to sift through it. “You’re … we’re not … over?” I asked, the terror swirling within me pausing to listen to her answer.

“What!” she cried, tears coming fast now, too fast for her to mop up and, after a couple of seconds, she gave up. “No! I … no!” She reached up and placed her hands on my cheeks, her fingers curling around my skull. “I love you. I just … I don’t want you to be mad at me because I can’t move in with you yet. I don’t want you to … go. Not tonight.”

Oh, god. I felt my own eyes start to fill as relief finally saw fit to swathe me in its benevolence, forcing the fear to submit and retreat to its cage, going some distance in righting my world again. I looked at Therese properly, the anguish in her eyes, desperation and trepidation intermingling to create a combination so saddening that I could hardly stand it, her cheeks lined with so many tears that it seemed they would be stained that way forever, her nose running, her lips apart to allow for her haggard breathing. “Oh, Therese,” I whispered, leaning forward and planting a kiss on her forehead. It would appear that this was too much for her, as she released a loud sob, pushing her face into my side and wrapping her arms tightly around my waist.

I understood her reaction only all too well, feeling my own tears tracking down my face. I doubt very much that her flow of endless tears was simply due to the conversation at hand, just as I find it hard to believe that my response of quickly becoming consumed with an all-encompassing fear was, either. It ran far deeper than that. I don’t think I could fully process that at the time, but, looking back,
it is clear to me that we were both reacting to a culmination of all that had happened since Friday, all that had happened since Chicago. We had survived the shipwreck that had been the past few months, our own personal Titanic, but now we were left trying to find our feet, still becoming acclimatised to the fact we had reached safety. We had only just found each other again, and we had been through so much during our time apart, that, I realise now, it was only to be expected for us to feel overwhelmed with emotion. Perhaps most importantly of all, we had to find a way to trust each other again. Therese needed to trust that I loved her enough to stay, that nothing would ever take me from her again, and I suppose I needed to trust that my past actions hadn’t caused irreparable damage, that our love for each other really was strong enough to overcome my mistakes.

I don’t quite know how I managed it, but I slid from my chair until we were both on the floor, and she wrapped her arms around my neck, pushing her face between my shoulder and jaw, her breath shuddery. I folded my arms around her. “Shh,” I murmured softly. “Shh, my love. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be all right.” I stroked her hair and realised I was swaying slightly from side to side. “You don’t have to move in. I understand. It’s okay.” She stayed where she was, clinging on to me as though I were a life raft. “We’ll work something out. Whatever you need to do, I’ll be here. I told you, I promised you, that I would never leave you. I won’t.”

I don’t know how long we stayed like that, huddled together on the kitchen floor. It was a while. My mind wandered, thinking about what would happen now, what Therese needed from me. I knew without any hesitation that my words to her were true, I would do anything that she asked of me, but I was anxious to find out just what that would entail. Would she only want to see me once a month? Once a week? I grimaced at the thought, my heart wincing, panicked nausea blooming again in my stomach. I’d already experienced a foreshadowing pang of longing at the thought of not being able to see her for the eight hours she’d be at work tomorrow. I’d already known that it would be hell, being apart from her, even for the space of a day. Now I found myself faced with the prospect that eight hours would pass in a blink of the eye compared to the scenarios I was envisioning. I released a sigh without realising, and she slowly set about disentangling herself from me enough to be able to meet my gaze.

The instinct within me, the one that made me fiercely protective of her, roared louder as I took in her face, pink and coated in a fine sheen of perspiration, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed, her bangs plastered to her forehead. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, her expression faintly embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I don’t …”

“Stop,” I interjected, before she could say any more. The backs of my fingers brushed against her cheek. “You don’t need to apologise.” Her eyes dropped, and I moved my hand to gently lift her chin. “Look at me.” She did. “You haven’t done anything wrong,” I reasoned, my voice soft.

She was silent, her brow furrowed slightly, as her green eyes searched my face. “Do you … do you understand why?”

“Yes.”

“Are you mad?”

I sighed, shaking my head slowly. “No, darling.”

She bit at her lower lip. “I didn’t want you to think it’s because of you, or because I don’t love you …” she whispered, eyes becoming damp again.

“I don’t.” I offered her a small smile then. “You were made for me, remember?” I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I like that.”
She leaned into my hand. “You don’t think it sounds crazy?”

My smile widened slightly. “I think what I feel for you is crazy. In fact, the only thing that makes sense is the notion that we were made for each other.” Her lips lifted a fraction, the small movement immediately making me feel a bit better. I hated seeing her so upset. I leaned forward, placing a gentle kiss at the corner of her mouth, and then rested my forehead against hers. “I love you,” I murmured. “Everything’s going to work out. All right?”

“All right,” she replied after a couple of seconds.

“Good.” I moved back just far enough to look at her, running a hand through my hair to get it out of my face. It was dry and I idly wondered how long we’d been talking.

“Um … Carol?”

My thoughts returned solely to her. “Yes?”

“Why are we still sitting on the kitchen floor?”

I saw a smile pull at her lips before I glanced around, having been so lost in our conversation that I’d almost completely forgotten our surroundings. I looked back at her, saw her trying to stifle a chuckle, most likely at my dumbfounded expression, and suddenly found myself laughing. It was a welcome relief after the intense atmosphere of our discussion, and the sight of Therese bursting into a fit of giggles only set me off further, the humour of it all causing our laughter to echo from the walls, a temporary reprieve in the discussion that I knew was far from over.
“So,” Carol said, raking her fingers through my hair slowly, again and again, “Where do we go from here?” She was trying for nonchalance, I knew, and, if she was had been with anyone else, maybe they might have believed it. Her tone was matter-of-fact, her perfectly sculpted lips pressing lightly together, her gaze unwavering, but I could see the slight tightening of the skin around her eyes, the almost non-existent raising of an eyebrow, the brief flicker of panic in her expression. I’d studied her face so many times, with such attention and wonder, that I knew it almost better than my own. My heart ached painfully, and I hated myself for being the reason for her sadness.

We’d moved from the kitchen into the living room, my head in her lap, my feet propped up on the far end of the couch, a thick and heavy silence hanging over us after our unexpected bout of laughter. I felt exhausted, drained from my tearful meltdown, but I knew sleep wouldn’t take me for hours yet. I wouldn’t let it. My earlier outburst had let to a conversation that hadn’t yet been finished. Besides, I didn’t want this weekend to end. It had been the best weekend of my life, without question, and a very big part of me wished that we could stay here forever, like one of my photographs, frozen in time.

Did she really understand my reluctance to move in with her? I didn’t know. I don’t know if even I did, truthfully. Was it another layer of self-protection? Trying to insulate myself from any further pain, as much as I possibly could? Maybe. All I knew was that I couldn’t allow myself to jump headfirst into this, like I had last time, as much as I wanted to. Because I did. I wanted to throw all caution to the wind, pack up my things, hop into her car, wave a final farewell to my apartment, and live happily ever after. I wanted it so much that it almost choked me with its ferocity. Even as I’d explained to her why I couldn’t, I wanted to beg her to ignore my words, plead with her to look into my heart and tell me what she saw, to take control and demand compliance. I didn’t know if I was being responsible or horrendously, unforgivably stupid, and the warring between heart and mind left me concerned for my sanity.

What I did know was that, last time, I had followed my heart. I hadn’t hesitated in accepting the offer of taking a trip with someone I had known for a handful of days. We had moved so quickly from strangers to friends to lovers that I hadn’t had time to catch my breath, let alone anything else. And then, in the space of 24 hours, my world had crashed down around me and left me with nothing. One day, we were together, the next … we weren’t. And it had destroyed me. I’d been left battered and bruised, my life devoid of anything but pain.

I hadn’t exaggerated earlier; there had been some dark, dark nights in which I had truly believed death would be better than living like this, living in a world where the best part of my life had already passed. Every morning, for a long time, I had woken up and felt a stab of regret for bearing witness to another sunrise, another endless, broken day. It was the worst thing I’d ever lived through, and there had been plenty of times where I’d thought, possibly even hoped, that I wouldn’t live through it, that I simply wasn’t strong enough. I’d barely managed to come out of the other side, and my heart and soul still bore the jagged wounds, wounds that would take a long time to heal. With the return of Carol, my heart was happy to forget the unyielding hurt that had torn it apart, my soul perfectly content to partake in a dollop of amnesia, but there was some part of my mind, some terrified survivalist part, that was desperately trying to take any possible measures to prevent itself from having to endure anything like that again. As much as I couldn’t admit it to myself at that point, I know now that I just didn’t trust Carol enough again, yet. It was too late, far too late, to try and put a barrier around my heart—as far as that was concerned I was hers forever—but I could try and keep hold of some other parts of my life, such as my job and my apartment, so that, if it all went to shit again, I would have something. More than that, I loved my job. It meant so much to me, to have
taken a step closer to where I wanted to be, on my own. There were few things in my life that made me feel proud, and that was one of them. I couldn't have given it up if I wanted to. And I didn't.

Aside from all of that, I truly believed my other points put further context into my decision. Carol had given up joint custody of Rindy in order to be the best parent she could be, but I knew it devastated her more than she was willing to admit. I didn’t feel the guilt I had first felt when she’d told me about Rindy, not after she’d explained the reasons behind her choice, but I knew it would rise up and smother me completely if we living together came in the way of their visits. Harge had gone to extreme lengths to win full custody; I couldn’t bear the thought of his jealousy keeping Carol and Rindy apart permanently. I deeply felt it was important for the visits to be set up and entered into before we could think about moving in together.

That said, I couldn’t fathom how I was going to get through my days without her by my side. For the first time since I’d got the job at the Times, I was dreading going to work. She was the air I breathed, and I was scared I would suffocate without her, even for a few hours. For the past two days, my world had been set right again, everything being where it should for the first time in months. I couldn’t shake the fear that, by re-entering reality, my life would spin off its axis, unravelling completely as it went. And that’s just how I felt about being apart from her for a workday. It was magnified limitless when I tried to consider spending days away from her at a time, hence the current violent struggle raging between my mind and heart.

Her question rang in my ears as I stared up at her, the uncertainty she was trying to hide so painfully evident to me. “I don’t know,” I replied honestly, vehemently wishing I had a better answer for her, as she so deserved. “I can’t go for days on end without seeing you. I can’t. But I think we need to try and tread slowly, or at least slower than we did last time around.” Her fingers had paused in my hair as I’d starting speaking, and now they resumed again, slow and methodical, comforting. Her eyes pierced mine, and I couldn’t have looked away even if I’d wanted to. She looked faintly relieved, and I suddenly wondered just how she’d thought I was going to respond.

“I understand. I can work with that,” she said, and, though I could detect the reluctance in her voice, I felt a rush of appreciation towards her. She’d promised me she would do whatever I needed, and here she was, upholding her promise. I knew she hated it as much as I did, but she was prepared to try and take this at whichever pace I set. My heart swelled, and again I wondered how on earth I was going to follow this through. “What are you thinking? Once a week? Twice?”

I inwardly recoiled, panic licking at my soul like flames. Once a week simply wasn’t an option. Even twice felt like a stretch. I inhaled deeply, having to remind myself that it was I who was applying the brakes. I searched her eyes and saw nothing but love and determination there. “Twice,” I mumbled, trying hard to ignore the outraged wail of my heart. “Twice, at first. And then see how it goes?”

She nodded mutely, continuing to play with my hair, and then offered me a small smile, one that I knew took effort. I reached up and stilled her hand.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my throat trying to close up with emotion. “I love you. Thank you for doing this for me. I … I … you’re amazing.”

Her beautiful blue eyes searched my face for a long moment. “I love you, too, my darling girl.” She brought my hand to her lips and gently kissed my fingers. “I will do whatever it takes. I won’t lose you again.”

“No,” I murmured, eyes locked onto hers. “You won’t.”

***
The air in my bedroom was warm, a stark contrast to the bitter wind outside, and I pushed the blanket further down my body in a bid to cool down. It probably would have been more sensible to pull myself from Carol’s arms, as the shift in blanket position really wasn’t making all that much difference, but I wasn’t prepared to do that. I nuzzled deeper against her, mindless of the heat radiating from her chest. My fingers lazily bore patterns into her collarbone as we lay there in silence.

The blood in my veins was still singing, my limbs still feeling loose and relaxed, my mind enveloped in that luxurious post-coital haze as I lay there, relishing the feel of Carol’s fingers curved around my hip, her arm pressed against my back. Our lovemaking had taken on another note tonight, every move, every whisper, every kiss encased gently in love. It had been so sweet, and pure, and emotional, and I knew that, on my part at least, such beauty partly stemmed from the fact that tomorrow everything would be different. We came together, clinging onto each other as our bodies became one, quietly murmuring declarations of love as we rode our shared high.

My eyes closed at the memory, and I concentrated on feeling the rise and fall of Carol’s chest beneath my cheek for a few moments, matching my breathing to hers. I kept having the rather giddying realisation of how lucky I was, to have her, to love her, to be loved by her. It would come to me randomly, and I’d be filled with a sense of disbelief, every single time I thought of it. She was amazing, inside and out, and she was mine. It felt almost magical … miraculous, even … that I’d found myself with someone like her. She was so beautiful, so magnificent, so wise, and smart, and kind … she was heart-stopping, breath-taking, life-changing … and she loved me. I smiled into her shoulder, inhaling deeply as I did so. She had none of her favourite perfume on, and yet I found the natural scent of her skin was far superior to any carefully picked ingredients mixed together in a bottle.

“What are you smiling about?” she asked, her voice deliciously husky.

I smiled again. “I just love you, is all.”

She made an appreciative noise and held me closer. I thought of something. “When is Abby’s party?”

“Why?” she asked, sounding surprised.

I finally pulled myself away from her, moving onto my stomach as I rested my cheek against my hand and looked at her. “I just wondered.”

She shifted onto her side to look at me closely, her blue eyes narrowing, trying to figure out the cause of my sudden interest, I think. “Friday.”

“Mm,” I murmured with a small nod, as though mulling this piece of information over. “Maybe we could go.”

I grinned as I saw her eyes widen slightly, confusion still colouring her features. “Where did that come from?”

“Well, you told me about the party, but you never asked me to go,” I said. “So …” I cleared my throat, as if about to announce something of extreme importance. “Carol, would you please be my date to the party?”

She shook her head slowly, a smile forming on her own lips. “My, my, Miss Belivet. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

My stomach lurched lazily at the seduction in her voice. Honestly, I don’t even think she was aware
of it, half of the time. It just came as naturally to her as breathing did to me. I blinked a couple of
times, trying to focus on the conversation at hand. “Is that a yes?”

“I suppose I might be able to clear my diary,” she replied, her eyes twinkling. “But why the sudden
change of heart? I thought you believed, quite wrongly, that Abby hated you?”

“I think she might hate me a little less when she’s had some alcohol,” I said, only half-joking. She
raised a reproving eyebrow. “And I really want to go to a party with you. I want to go out
somewhere and have fun. With you.”

She regarded me with a faint smile. “You haven’t been to one of Abby’s parties. They are … well, I
would like to say they are unforgettable, but the amount of alcohol she tries to force down
everybody’s throat ensures that trying to remember anything is usually a fruitless exercise.” She
glanced heavenwards for a second in faux exasperation before returning her gaze. “Are you sure you
would like to go?”

I gave her my brightest grin. “Yes, please.”

She looked at me intensely then, in a way that reminded me of our first lunch date at Scotty’s, when
she’d called me strange. She leaned over until our noses were almost touching, my eyes surely
crossing as they tried to keep studying her. “Flung out of space,” she whispered tenderly, and my
stomach flipped again, before our lips met and all thought of conversation was lost.
“Therese!” an impatient voice behind me called, and I jumped, whipping around and finding Johnnie, a senior editor at the Times, looking at me with an unimpressed expression. From his annoyed frown, I assumed that it wasn’t the first time he had tried to get my attention, and I scurried up out of my chair, brushing down my skirt as I walked over to him, an apology ready on my tongue.

“I’m sorry, Johnnie. I …”

“Save it,” he said dismissively, and I felt my cheeks burn as I stood there. He didn’t like me anyway, I think because he felt a woman didn’t belong in the workplace, but now I’d actually given him a reason to show his disdain. The gleam in his eye told me that he was relishing it. “The staff meeting was supposed to start five minutes ago. Are you about ready to grace us with your presence, or do I need to reschedule it to a time more suited to you?”

I stood my ground, my eyes never wavering from his, even as I wished the ground would open up and swallow me whole. With the exception of Johnnie and another guy, everyone at the Times had welcomed me fully into their team, encouraging me and including me in their discussions and jokes. It had only taken me around two minutes to realise that Johnnie and Thom weren’t of the same cloth as the rest. I didn’t really allow it to bother me, we only usually saw each other in staff meetings, and I was sure to be extra-courteous and charming around them. Civility was an important quality to have. Besides, I quite liked the thought that it pissed them off further. However, today Johnnie actually did have a point. I was in a world of my own. It frustrated me. “I’ll be there now,” I said coldly, not backing down from his superior sneer.

His amusement reached his eyes, and I could have kicked myself for allowing my emotions to show. “Make it snappy, Belivet,” he said, turning on his heel and disappearing through a door to his left.

I stood there stiffly for a couple of moments, before regaining my composure, grabbing up my notepad and pen, and following suit. Today had been … challenging, to say the least, and it wasn’t even noon yet. Every task took at least twice as long for me to complete, and I would often find myself staring at the wall, or a blank piece of paper, or some photographs that I hadn’t even noticed had been handed to me, while my mind transported me someplace else. I went through cycles of feeling a heady combination of giddiness and love as memories of the weekend came unbidden, followed by a yearning so deep, so intense, that it left me bereft … hollow, even.

If Carol hadn’t expressly forbid it, I would have called in with some excuse and spent the day at home, but she had, though the fleeting look of longing on her face told me that I wasn’t alone in dreading the return of real life. This morning had been painful as we got ready to leave mine, everything feeling as though it were moving in slow motion and double speed at the same time. I don’t know how many times I’d told her I loved her, the words tripping off my tongue like a prayer. I don’t know how many times I reached for her, needing to touch her, kiss her, be held by her. I do know how many times she reached for me. One. She was trying so hard, I could tell, to show me that this was okay, that she understood and supported me, ignoring my pleas to let me call the Times and be with her instead. The only time her mask slipped was just as we were about to leave, my hand grasping the door handle, my coat slung over my arm.

I felt her hand at my shoulder and immediately froze, my heart stopping for a beat at the contact, my fingers loosening their grip on the handle. Less than a second later, her soft lips were behind my ear, her warm breath eliciting a shiver as I instinctively tried leaning back into her, every thought forgotten as my breathing hitched in my throat. She planted a gentle kiss there and my heart
responded by bursting into a sprint, my eyes closing of their own accord. She knew just what to do, just how to do it, to make me forget everything but her, and I didn’t put up even a trace of resistance as she reached around to place the palm of her hand on my chest, applying pressure and turning me on the spot until I was facing her.

Her blue eyes held me captive, filled with tenderness, love and desire, causing me to feel quite faint all of a sudden, and then she stepped forward, a large enough step to make me move backwards until I could move no more, my back pressed against the door, my pulse racing as I waited. She broke our gaze, her eyes taking in my hair, my lips, my jaw, my throat, and I could feel aching anticipation start to build within me, heat staining my skin as I watched her wordlessly. She lifted a hand, tracing the outline of my lips with a fingertip, and I wanted so deeply to pull her closer, but I couldn’t. I was paralysed from her magic touch, helpless, though I’m sure she could see the desperation in my eyes.

It seemed like forever, though it could only have been a minute at most, before she leaned in, pressing her mouth against mine, holding me there for a long handful of seconds, as motionless as if we were statues, and then delivering the very softest of kisses. I moved to loop my arms around her neck, but she pulled back and regarded me intently, the set of her jaw telling me no. I frowned, and she reached forward to plant a kiss at my temple, lingering there for a moment, her hand curved gently around my throat. I heard an almost silent sigh leave her lips as she moved back again, and I could have cried with unfulfilled need as I watched her, every fibre of my being ready to fall at her feet and plead for her touch.

“I’ll miss you,” she said quietly, and it pulled me up short as I watched her, disbelief that we were soon to be parted ripping through me and leaving me abruptly teary.

“I’ve still got time,” I tried to reason. “I can call …”

She brought a finger back to my lips, shaking her head. “No, my love. You need to go, and I have things I need to do today.”

“But …”

“No,” she repeated, softening the blow by kissing the very corner of my mouth, and then stepping back completely. I felt cool air assault me in the absence of her proximity and I exhaled slowly, her expression making it clear that I could say nothing to change her mind. It was ridiculous, I knew, to feel a stab of rejection, but I did. She affected me so thoroughly, in so many ways, that I found it hard to think rationally while around her. I stared at her for one more second, seeing the determined steel in her eyes, and turned, opening the door and leading the way downstairs. What the hell had I been thinking, telling her that we should go slowly? It pained me greatly to think of being away from her for a single minute, let alone hours, let alone days.

The car ride to the Times was quiet, her concentrating on the road, me concentrating on her. She glanced at me a couple of times, with a smile on her face that I knew was forced, and I hated myself for my stupidity, for my caution, for my brain overruling my heart. By the time we were turning onto 8th Ave, I was lighting a cigarette, handing it over to Carol and taking another for myself. After a few minutes, she took a left onto West 43rd Street and slowed the car, pulling into one of the few spaces remaining, just down from the Times Annex. Stopping the car, she turned in her seat and looked at me. God, I didn’t deserve the love in her eyes. I was naïve, and foolish, and I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I dropped my gaze, studying the pattern of my skirt as I tried to stave off tears.

“Therese …”

I blinked in quick succession as I felt the familiar sting behind my eyes, biting at the inside of my
cheek.

“Look at me.”

I have no doubt that, had we been somewhere that afforded us privacy, she would have reached for my chin and forced my gaze upwards. As it was, the street was busy with people on their way to work, and she placed her hand on my knee instead, giving it a gentle squeeze. I couldn’t refuse her. I never could. She could have told me to jump from the Empire State Building, and I would have asked her for a precise time and date. I made myself meet her eyes, a painful lump forming in my throat.

She frowned as she saw my eyes start to fill, squeezing my knee again. “What’s all this about?”

I shook my head miserably. “I don’t want to go,” I said honestly, my words sounding pathetic and feeble even to my own ears.

She tilted her head as she looked at me. “Oh, Therese,” she said softly, and a tear spilled onto my cheek. Apparently no longer caring about our current destination, she wiped it away with the pad of her thumb and then rested her hand back on my leg. “We’ll see each other again tomorrow,” she tried to soothe, referring to the date we’d set late the previous night. “And, if you need, you can call me tonight.”

I nodded mutely, overpowering emotion rendering my vocal cords temporarily useless. There was no way possible that I wouldn’t be taking her up on her offer and calling her the second I got home; I didn’t know how I was going to last 30 minutes without hearing her voice, let alone over eight hours. I blinked back my tears with difficulty, feeling faintly embarrassed at my emotional breakdown. There was a part of me that knew I was being ridiculous. Tomorrow, I would be seeing her again. Tonight, I would hear her voice. This wasn’t like last time, not in the slightest, and it was on my own terms. I don’t think my heart quite understood that.

She watched me silently as I slowly clawed back my dignity, radiating calmness that somehow seeped into me, or at least a part of it did. When she could tell I wasn’t about to break out into hysterics, she took her hand from my knee. Another wave of sorrow washed over me at the loss of contact, but I tried to keep it at bay. Knowing that the longer I stayed there, the harder it would be to leave, I cleared my throat, hoping fiercely that I could get through this without making a complete idiot of myself.

“I’ll call you,” I said, grateful that my voice sounded almost normal.

She smiled kindly, and it was like a punch to my gut. “If you need.”

“I’ll call you.”

I knew her well enough to see the dread in her eyes, the same dread that was lining my stomach, but, aside from affording me a faint glimpse of it every now and then, she didn’t really let it show. She was being so strong, so determined to give me what I needed, that I doubted my earlier choices even more. I wanted to kiss her, climb onto her lap, breathe in her perfume, tell her I didn’t mean any of it. But I couldn’t. Not only because of where we were, but because my brain wouldn’t let me, memories of my life after the Drake causing it to try and withstand any white flag my heart was trying to wave.

“Go on,” she coaxed, her head tilted to one side, her beautiful blonde hair resting on her shoulder. “You don’t want to be late.”
I nodded, blindly reaching for the door handle. “I … I …” I shook my head in exasperation, not sure if my heart would ever forgive my mind for this. Her blue eyes continued to burn into mine, and I sighed. “I love you,” I mumbled, “I’ll … see you tomorrow. I’ll call you tonight.”

She regarded me intently for a moment. “I love you, too, Therese. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Alarmingly aware that I was again about to fall into another bout of tears if I wasn’t careful, I simply nodded again, opening the car door and hurrying out onto the sidewalk, barely waiting until I was stood upright before closing the door behind me. I didn’t, couldn’t, look back as I stumbled into the Annex, trying to concentrate on taking deep breaths even as the woman I loved drove away from me. I know, it was stupid. I was the one who had bleated on about going slowly, giving her every reason why, and she was simply doing as I had asked. I don’t expect to receive any sympathy, I am simply recounting that day to the best of my memory. I was in love … is there any other explanation needed for the fact I was a walking, talking contradiction?

I thought of all of this yet again as I sat in that staff meeting, giving thanks to the universe for gifting me with the ability to ruminate over my personal life while still somehow managing to scribble down the minutes of all that was being said. I stole a glance at my watch. There was still over five endless hours keeping me from Carol’s voice. My chest tightened in response, and I couldn’t help the frown knitting my brows together. It was going to be a tedious afternoon.
Foolin' Myself

It had just turned 5 p.m. as Billie Holiday’s soulful voice drifted through my apartment and into my kitchen, and I impatiently waited for the percolator to boil, my fingernails tapping a beat into the worktop that far outpaced the tempo of Foolin’ Myself. I have to admit, I wasn’t really paying attention to the music, my thoughts elsewhere. It didn’t matter; I had listened to this particular record many, many times in the past few months, and the words had been forever ingrained in my memory. I stared at the percolator through narrowed eyes, as though my glare would make it somehow conform to my demands and boil instantly, and cursed under my breath when it didn’t. It took no notice, and I cursed again, louder this time, turning on my heel and stalking over to the kitchen window, looking outside but not really seeing anything.

My mood had been dark since I’d had to say goodbye to Therese that morning, and I had noticed even the smallest of things suddenly having the ability to evoke irritability from me throughout the day. The only reprieve I’d had had been when I had called Abby; her sardonic, sarcastic attitude to everything thrown her way meaning that I relished the distraction she provided, even if she did want to know everything that had transpired between Therese and I since Friday. I think she was quietly surprised when I refused to go into detail about certain events, mostly the ones that made my heart soar and ache with love, but she didn’t make much fuss over it, which I was thankful for.

I did tell her that Therese and I were going to attend her party, to which she emitted a small squeak that made me shake my head as I lay curled up on my bed, idly playing with a single strand of Therese’s fine brown hair that I’d found on the pillow I now thought of as hers. I made sure to inform her that she had to be on her best behaviour, a warning I knew held little use even as I was saying it. Abby couldn’t be tamed at the best of times, let alone whilst swimming in alcohol, but I knew she would make the effort, regardless. She didn’t dislike Therese, as much as Therese thought otherwise, and I truly believed that the near-catatonic state I’d been in since Chicago had shown her that any worries she had about Therese and I paled in comparison to when she was absent from my life.

Eventually, the conversation moved on, and we discussed my options regarding Rindy. I’d spent some time thinking about it since the hearing with the lawyers, and I told Abby that I planned to cut Fred and Jerry out of the equation completely, and subsequently deal directly with Harge. She seemed wary at first, but I was firm on the matter. Harge wasn’t a bad man, though he had made some thoroughly terrible choices in the past few months. However, for all of his faults, of which there were plenty, the one thing I was absolutely sure of was that he loved Rindy just as much as I did. That knowledge had been the ultimate deciding factor in being able to stand up and say what I’d said during our meeting. If I had held any doubt, I would have forced myself, no matter how painful it would have been, to continue the battle for custody until the very end, to live against my own grain. First and foremost, I was a mother, and I would have always fought, will always fight, for whatever was and is best for my daughter.

I believe I’ve told you before that I knew Harge wouldn’t keep Rindy from me forever. The previous few years between us had been strained, and I had lost almost all of the respect for him that I’d once had, but he was, ultimately, a good father. His lawyer, I knew, would do his best to keep Rindy and I apart for as long as possible, or insist on supervised visits indefinitely, and, regardless of what I’d said in that room, I couldn’t have handled that. If Harge could hear my voice, away from the prying ears of Jerry and anyone else, if he could just hear me being reasonable and civil, I knew he wouldn’t keep Rindy from me for much longer. I also strongly suspected that, though he might insist on supervised visits at first, for the benefit of his ego, he would relent quickly enough.
Aside from everything else, he was all too aware that the promise I’d made in front of the lawyers hadn’t been an idle one. If he didn’t give me access to our daughter, I would take it to court. It would be horrific, I would become little more than the focal point of venomous gossip, but I wasn’t the only one with things I’d have liked to have kept private. It would get ugly, but not just for me. It came back to his ego, one of the biggest things I came to resent during our time together, but now the one thing I was relying on. His reputation couldn’t afford to be tarnished, and, even if it could, he wouldn’t have allowed it. It was an odd paradox I found myself in, feeling utterly helpless in one way, but knowing that I did hold a large portion of power if he refused to abide by the conditions I had set. He knew that just as well as I did. By the time I had explained this all to Abby, she was in agreement, almost hurrying me off the telephone so that I could call Harge straightaway.

I didn’t, though. I felt … weak, I suppose, as though I was recovering from a deadly strain of the flu, after everything that had happened since Christmas. It had taken so much for me to stand up for myself in Fred’s office in the first place, and I still seriously doubt that I would have been able to do so if it were not for seeing Therese through the cab window on the way there. Though our reunion had given me the immediate care my mind, heart and soul had so desperately required, our separation that morning had left me going through what I can only imagine withdrawal symptoms must be like. I scowled, then, as the sky opened up and prepared to drown the streets in rain, though the sound of bubbling water soon caught my attention and I strode back over to the work surface, lifting the percolator from the stove and making myself another cup of coffee. Easy Living was now crooning to me from the living room, and I checked my watch, feeling my ire spike again at the realisation of how slowly time was passing.

I paused in the hallway, coffee cup in hand, torn between the living room and the bedroom. After a moment, I sighed, allowing my feet to take me where my heart wanted to go, entering my bedroom only a couple of seconds later. I felt pathetic, I was pathetic, as I climbed back onto the bed, moving until my back hit the headboard, my eyes drawn to the telephone on the small wooden bedside table. I tutted at myself in frustration, leaning my head back and closing my eyes as I tried to ignore the hope blooming in my heart, the hope that Therese would call.

That morning had been horrid, not being helped in the slightest by the fact I hadn’t slept well, waking up repeatedly during the night with the fear that Therese wasn’t beside me. We hadn’t said goodnight until past midnight, and I know, on my part at least, it was because I didn’t want the morning to come. I’d woken earlier than Therese, and had managed to use the bathroom, light the stove, make two cups of coffee, have a cigarette, and spend a few minutes studying her as she slept before her alarm sounded and she woke up with a start.

I could see the anxiety in her face as we both got ready to leave, could hear the emotion in her voice as she told me she loved me, begged me to let her call in sick, could feel it in her touch as she reached for my hand, or my leg, or my lips, and I can’t pretend I didn’t waver each and every time. I wanted nothing more than to spend the day with her, to extend our stay in a world where the tolls of reality didn’t exist, but I couldn’t. There was one moment, I must admit, where my own emotions got the better of me, just as we were leaving, my strength suddenly deserting me as I kissed her with fervour, on the very precipice of asking her to stay. But, as I said, I couldn’t.

She had been right. She needed her job, and she needed her independence. I could have pleaded with her to leave the Times, to allow me to provide for us both, something I could have easily managed, but what would that have made me? She’d procured this position by herself, and, from the little we had spoken about it, it was clear to me that she loved it. I’d always considered myself to be rather selfish, and such a belief hadn’t bothered me in the slightest. No one else was going to put me first, and so I was untroubled by the notion of doing so myself. That had changed with the arrival of Rindy, though with the rest of the world I remained the same. I’d convinced myself that my love for Rindy, the change in me, was because she was my child, and it was. I suppose I mean to say that I
didn’t believe I was capable of being completely selfless for another human being, other than one born to me. Therese had proven me wrong. I would have done anything to ensure her happiness.

This is why I couldn’t do any of the self-serving things I deeply wanted to do. I simply loved her too much. How could I expect her to drop everything for me? How could I even want her to? Rationally, I did not. I wanted her to thrive at the Times, flourish like I knew she had the talent and potential to; I wanted her to achieve her ambitions and follow her dreams. But I cannot deny a small part of me secretly wished for her to leave and spend all of her time with me. Not that I would have ever told her that, of course. And that was why I had remained so resolute. One day off could easily turn into two, into three, into a week, a month, a lifetime. It didn’t matter how much I wanted her constant attention, I was putting her first, even if her trembling bottom lip and teary eyes wrenched at my heart.

The goodbye in the car had been the worst. Her plaintive tone as she’d expressly told me she didn’t want to go, the sadness in her eyes, had very nearly been my undoing. I cannot tell you how much effort it took to tell her to go, to persuade her it would be fine and that we would see each other the next day. I saw a million emotions cross her face, and every part of me wanted to start up the car and drive us away, somewhere we really couldn’t be found, where nobody could track us down. I hadn’t stayed to watch her enter the building, aware that I would likely hop out of the car and drag her back with me if I had, but I felt that unpleasantly familiar sense of grief as I pulled away, turning the radio on to try and escape my thoughts.

Now here I was, sitting next to the phone like a lovesick fool. I raised a derisive eyebrow at myself when I realised that was exactly what I was. I’d made it painfully clear that she was only to call if she wanted or needed to. She’d asked that we take things slowly, and I was determined to give her the time she needed. That said, I was desperately hoping that she would call, I was craving the sound of her voice, I sorely wanted to know how her day had been, how she had been. As well as bemoaning her absence, I’d also spent a considerable amount of time worrying about her, as I tended to do when it came to Therese, that kind of worry that turns your stomach into knots and leaves you unable to eat, and I just wanted to hear that she was okay, that she’d made it through the day without being too upset.

I looked at my watch. 5:35 p.m. More time had passed than I’d realised as I’d sat there, thinking about her, and it was with a heavy heart that I noted she must have been home for at least 10 minutes, if not more, by then. I gulped down the last of my coffee, cold by that point, before closing my eyes again. Just because she hadn’t called the very second the door had closed behind her didn’t mean that she wasn’t going to. And even if she didn’t call, that didn’t mean anything, either. I reminded myself that I understood her stance on not rushing into things, because I did, but my heart didn’t always listen to my head, especially where Therese was concerned.

I shook my head in utter exasperation, muttering an expletive under my breath, and climbed off the bed, walking across the room to retrieve a pair of pyjamas, when there was a knock at the door. I hovered in indecision. It was probably Abby, she had a knack of turning up unexpectedly, and, though I loved her dearly, I didn’t want her to be here when, if Therese called. I wanted Therese all to myself, so I could savour every word, every breath, every sound that she made. There was another knock, and I frowned before reluctantly moving out into the hallway. The rain hadn’t ceased, I could hear it hammering against the windows, and Abby might actually gut me with a knife if I left her to leave the safety of my apartment building and return to the unforgiving weather.

About to award her with my best stern expression, I reached for the door handle and pulled it open quickly, the words on the very tip of my tongue. Those words abruptly scarpered, my frustration rendered useless and quickly being replaced with bewilderment as I took in the figure standing in front of me.
Therese.
Overwhelming

My eyes locked onto the wide green ones staring back at me for a long moment, my mind trying its hardest to keep up with what my eyes were seeing. It was only when I saw her blink three times in quick succession that I noticed the wet hair plastered to her face, droplets of rain dripping down her forehead and onto her eyelashes, causing her mascara to run. The surprise began to slowly subside and my heart swelled so rapidly with happiness that I felt almost faint for a second. I stepped back wordlessly, granting her access, and scrutinised her closely as she walked into the hallway, as though she would disappear if I so much as dared to blink. Reaching blindly behind me, I closed the door, and then it was just Therese and I, alone in my hallway, a few feet apart, our gaze meeting once more.

She looked almost shy as she stood there, biting at her lower lip, and I still hadn’t the wherewithal to form words. She regained control of her voice before I did. “I’m sorry, I …”

Though my vocabulary might have been lacking, my need for her was not, and I hurried forward without conscious thought, closing the distance between us, stopping her words with my lips as I hungrily pressed my mouth against hers, grabbing her head between my hands and feeling desire mixed with joy race through my veins, my heart picking up pace and my pulse thrumming in my ears. She was still for the smallest fraction of a millisecond, before her mouth moved energetically against mine and she released a low moan from her throat. My tongue slipped between her lips, one of my hands snaking around her back and pulling her closer to me, the other now cupping the back of her neck, as her tongue met mine, tentative at first, I assume due to her own surprise, before rapidly developing the same passion that drove my own.

I felt her hands resting on my hips, our close proximity rendering her arms useless, and fire scorched my soul as our kiss continued. There was no room for thought, for deciphering why she was there, my abrupt burst of ecstatic arousal at the mere sight of her meaning that I was incapable of doing anything other than obeying the demands of my body. I held her tightly as my tongue continued to explore her mouth, walking backwards until I felt the wall and turning briskly until I could push her up against it. Fuck, I loved her like this, trapped, and aroused, and under my control. My heart constricted tightly as I finally pulled away and stared at her, paying little attention to my own ragged breathing, concentrating on hers, instead. She made me feel so possessive of her, so determined to show her that she was mine, just as I was hers, and I took note of her flushed cheeks, her parted lips, her wild eyes as she watched me. I could see the lust, it was written all over her face, it burned in her eyes, it made me unable to think, see, hear anything but her.

“You are so beautiful, Therese,” I stated quietly, my voice throaty as I continued to regard her. I think she was too far gone to respond verbally as she thrust her pelvis and tugged at my hips. I felt my lips pull up into a small smile, felt another wave of insatiable desire rip through me, and moved in to kiss her again. I loved her so deeply, I’d missed her so viscerally, and I was desperate to show her how deep-rooted and unwavering my emotions for her were.

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We were a tangle of sweaty limbs as we lay in Carol’s bed, my head on her chest, so close that I could hear her heart, still struggling to return to its usual beat, one of my legs entangled in both of hers, my hand curled lightly around her clammy shoulder. She was holding me in such a way as to be able to stroke my hair with one of her hands, the other draped around my waist. I closed my eyes, steadfastly focusing on enjoying this moment, enjoying the sensation of being in her arms, skin touching skin, being enveloped by her completely. The smell of her, and me, and us, hung in the air,
and I breathed in deeply, marveling at the contentment I felt, which was completely at odds to the gnawing anguish I’d experienced throughout the day. It never failed to stun me, how just being near her could so wholly alter my mood, could change my thoughts and feelings in a matter of seconds. I clung to her tightly, having missed her so severely that I now felt an overbearing need to lose myself in her, to never let go.

“Well, that was a surprise,” she said a couple of minutes later, and I froze for a second, before exhaling slowly.

“For me, too,” I confessed, suddenly feeling a sense of self-consciousness.

Her fingers paused in their journey over my hair. “What do you mean?”

I was quiet for a short moment, my fingertips sinking deeper into the skin of her shoulder, already feeling heat in my cheeks. “I … well, we weren’t supposed to see each other until tomorrow. And I was just going to call you tonight. But …”

She started stroking my hair again and my eyes fluttered shut. “But?”

I was sure my face was positively glowing by that point. “I missed you too much,” I admitted in a small voice. “I didn’t mean to show up on your doorstep, I just …” I shook my head faintly, moving until I was resting on my elbows and I could see her face, my heart skipping a beat as I was confronted with the sheer beauty that she possessed, my thoughts momentarily muddling. “I … I’d completely lost my train of thought, her penetrating blue eyes causing my brain to simply surrender and admit defeat for a long second. She raised an eyebrow, searching my face. It might have been possible to fry eggs on my cheeks at that moment. “I couldn’t help it,” I finally blurted with a helpless shrug. “I got a cab to go home because of the weather, but when I went to give my address … well, yours came out, instead.”

She smiled then, a smile infused with warmth and love and tenderness, and I felt like I could cry. I remember feeling like that a lot during that time, unexpectedly finding myself on the brink of tears over the most random of things. Even now, with time on my side, I don’t fully understand why, but I do think a big part of it was because everything was just so overwhelming. She was overwhelming, what I felt for her was overwhelming, what she felt for me was overwhelming, all that had happened was overwhelming, and my heart and mind didn’t quite know what to do with it all. I bit back my tears with difficulty.


I stared at her mutely for a short while. “Is it like this for everyone?” I asked, unable to mask the wonder in my tone.

She shook her head slowly, reaching over to cup my now cooling cheek. “No, my darling girl. No, I don’t suppose that it is.”

I turned slightly to kiss the palm of her hand. “Today was horrible,” I mumbled, glancing down at the sheet before returning my eyes to hers. “Every second felt like forever. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

She gave me another small smile. “Nor I about you.”

I sighed. “I made a mistake.”

A small frown pulled at her brow. “Regarding?”
“Thinking that I could make these stupid rules and stick to them.” I shrugged again, downcast because of my idiocy, elated because of her company. It was a confusing combination. She continued to watch me, not saying a word. “Today would have been a lot easier if I hadn’t forbid myself to see you tonight. All I could think about was how tomorrow felt like it was a lifetime away.” I frowned at the thought.

She looked as though she was thinking carefully about her response, her eyes slightly narrowed, her brow furrowed, her lips pressed together lightly. “What are you saying?” she finally replied, and I saw the smallest hint of vulnerability cloud her eyes.

I felt so out of my depth. This was all completely new to me, unexplored territory. I would have felt more confident if I’d been dumped in the middle of China with nothing more than a knapsack and a nickel to my name. I stared down at the mattress. “I … I don’t know,” I admitted, ashamed of my inadequacy. In that moment, I really did feel like a naïve, hopeless child, thrust into this thing called love without possessing even a hint of knowledge of what it entailed, fruitlessly trying to make sense of it. “And I know that doesn’t help you, and it doesn’t help me, but … I don’t know what to do.”

Carol sat up, then, her hand at my chin as she forced me to meet her gaze. I felt my sudden onset of anxiety lessen a fraction as I looked at her, feeling safe and loved as her eyes seemed to examine my soul. She could be so vulnerable one minute, and yet so strong and assured and authoritative the next. I found it disarming, and so uniquely Carol. She made me feel like everything would be all right, like, as long as I was with her, I was protected. The layers of my devotion to her ran so deep.

“How about we forget the rules?” she said eventually, her voice soft yet unfaltering. I felt my eyebrows rise as I continued to watch her. I think she noticed the small flare of panic in my eyes, because she gently brushed the pad of her thumb against my jaw. “I’m not suggesting we move in together. I believe you were right about that, as much as I might not like it.” Her lips quirked up into a self-deprecating smile. “I’m suggesting we take things a day at a time. No pressure, no demands. You keep your apartment. I’m suggesting we stop inadvertently punishing ourselves, because I suspect the only thing we’re managing to do is setting ourselves up for failure.”

I opened my mouth to say something, and then closed it again, settling on giving her a nod. She spoke in such a measured and rational way that I wondered once again what the hell I’d been doing in trying to establish such rules and regulations in the first place. That terrified part of my mind was still, indeed, terrified, but she used such unfaltering logic that all of me knew with abrupt certainty that she was right. I was mesmerised and awed at her insight and wisdom for the countless time.

“I want to enjoy being with you, starting my life anew, with you in it. What point is there in making ourselves miserable solely to abide by a timetable?” I had no answer to that. “I love you, Therese. I can promise you that I’m not going anywhere. At the same time, I don’t expect your trust, not right now. The only way I can prove my sincerity to you, is to show you through my actions. I understand that, and I will endeavour to do so every single day. I’m not suggesting we see each other daily, because that is, in itself, enforcing another rule. You have your life to live, and I will not allow us to get in the way of that, just as you knew, even before I did, that I need to focus my energy on seeing Rindy before you and I can take the next step, whenever that might be.” She leaned forward to kiss the top of my head, still damp from the rain, and now also combined with sweat, and, yet again, I could have wept. Love rose up so fiercely that my heart felt like it was gripped in a vice as I lifted my head to look at her again.

“What I am proposing, my love,” she continued, and I hung onto every word, “Is that we merely take things as they come. No specific days together, no specific time apart. Why not simply enjoy us, one day at a time?” Her eyes were filled with love and understanding, her voice calm and encouraging, strength and patience emanating from her. I managed another nod, left without words
as I bathed in the magnificence of her. She stroked my cheek and then seemed to think of something as another smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “With all of that said,” she added, a twinkle now in her gaze, “We will need to keep our date of Friday. I spoke with Abby earlier, and told her of our attendance at her party, and she was … well, I fear ‘thrilled’ might be putting it mildly.” She looked heavenwards in fond exasperation for a second. “If we don’t go, it’s entirely plausible that she will kill us both.”

A bubble of laughter spilled from my lips in response, and I shook my head. “I think we can manage that, can’t we?”

The skin around her eyes crinkled in amusement. “I don’t believe we have much choice in the matter.”

I reached up, almost breaking my back in the process, and kissed her. “Good.” Moving back, I raked a hand through my hair, feeling … meek, almost, I guess, as I stared at her. She didn’t break our gaze, didn’t speak, apparently able to sense when I was fighting for words. There weren’t any words, not enough of them, anyway, to explain how I was feeling, and why I was feeling like it. Only two came to mind, and I uttered them in a hushed tone. “Thank you.”

“You have no need to thank me, Therese.”

“No, I do. You are so wonderful, and amazing, and I love you so much,” I said, truth ringing from every word. “I thought ‘taking it slowly’ meant trying to pull back completely, and you still went along with it, even though I know it was painful for you. And …” I forced myself to maintain eye contact, “No one has ever done that for me before. No one. No one has cared about me enough to take my beliefs or ideas into consideration, even if they knew it would likely end with me quickly realising the error of my ways. No one has loved me enough to listen to my fears and accept them, even if they knew they would be hurt in the process. And, for that, I will never be able to thank you enough.” Tears formed in my eyes as the words started to flow, finally voicing to her things we’d only rarely discussed before.

“You think that you have made so many mistakes,” I caught a fleeting look of pain cross her face, and reached for her hand, gripping it tightly, “But you can’t ever understand just how much you have done for me. My life was so empty before you came along, and you filled it up, and opened my eyes to things I didn’t even know existed. Even now, you let me take my own path, even when it hurt you, because … because you love me.” I’d never experienced anything like it, never would again, and I remember wondering if I would ever fully believe it, if it was something I would ever be able to wholly comprehend. After a lifetime of my own wishes being ignored, of living in a dark world where I’d truly believed I didn’t really matter, I wasn’t sure.

Carol blinked, and I saw the tiniest amount of moisture cling to her eyelashes. “I do. I love you, with all of my heart.” She pulled on my hand until I was sitting next to her, and then leaned forward to give me the most tender of kisses. I rose on my knees, releasing her hand and looping my arms around her neck, as our kiss deepened, leaving the realms of comfort and entering something intrinsically more passionate. Within thirty seconds, all other thoughts were gone, as I conveyed my endless love and gratitude for her with all that I had.
Intoxicating Anticipation

I checked my watch for what felt like the millionth time, my heart leaping as I noted its reading. 7:29 p.m. I turned away from my living room window, smoothing down my dark green dress as I did so, and hurried for the door, intoxicating anticipation almost making me giddy as I grabbed the small bag stood in the hallway, opened the door and practically skipped down the stairs. The forceful wind outside meant that I hovered behind the door to my apartment building, peering through the pane of glass as I waited, wondering yet again if I had taken Carol’s words a bit too literally when she’d assured me that I shouldn’t dress up.

It was the night of Abby’s party, and I had rushed home straight from work to hop in the shower and get ready, nerves and excitement flooding through me as I washed myself, continuing as I roughly dried myself off and worked my hair through the towel. This was one of those rare times where I was glad of my fine hair; by the time I was dressed and had applied my makeup, it was dry. I hadn’t needed the full two hours to get myself ready in the end; after forgoing the usual products I used on my hair and opting to leave it natural, I’d still had 45 agonising minutes left until I was reunited with Carol. That time had mostly been spent panicking about my choice of clothing, and endlessly checking my watch, furiously wishing the minutes away.

When I’d spoken to her on the phone the night before, she’d reiterated to me, not for the first time, that Abby’s parties tended to have a casual theme, promising me that she wasn’t intending to dress up, either. I had been glad, my love for comfortable clothes always outweighing how I felt about the outfits I wore to work, even though I enjoyed how much more mature they made me look. I’d dithered over suitable attire for longer than I would care to admit, trying on a couple of different things before settling on the green dress I was currently wearing. I liked the way it fell straight to the knee, the light material perfect for a party, in an olive green. It was very simple, very understated, and, at the last minute, I had opted to try and add a bit of sophistication by pairing it with my nicest brown wedged shoes. I sorely hoped Carol would like it.

I clasped my bag closely to my chest as I waited, ears strained for the sound of her engine. We’d decided on Carol picking me up and then driving us to Abby’s, where we would stay overnight before driving to Carol’s in the morning and spending the day there. My bag held my favourite pair of pyjamas, my toothbrush and clothes for the following day, and I had struggled to shove it all in to the small holdall I rarely used. The purr of a slowing engine caused me to squeeze it tightly, and, a second later, the front of Carol’s car pulled into view, causing all of my nerves to be forgotten as excitement momentarily won out. I yanked the door open and bounded down the steps, only to stop in amazement as Carol stepped out of the car and turned to me, my mouth falling open of its own accord as I took in the vision stood before me, mindless of the wind whipping a frenzy up around us.

She was dressed in a pair of grey trousers, which just caused her legs to appear even longer, with a cotton blouse that seemed to perfectly match her red lipstick. She looked … she looked otherworldly, as though she didn’t belong in this street, in this city, on this planet. Her hair was as perfectly styled as always, but, aside from her bright lipstick, she wore only minimal makeup, her face fresh and heavenly. I looked her up and down a few times, completely forgetting about the etiquette and manners required of me, especially while in public, and I’m sure my eyes were as wide as saucers as I drank her in. The woman was a goddess. I swallowed hard as my eyes finally reached her gaze, her blue eyes capturing my green ones and holding me there for a long moment.

She stared at me with an intense expression in her eyes, and then weakly waved her arm at our surroundings. “We should get in the car,” she said, having to repeat herself in a louder voice when she realised I hadn’t heard her over the wind.
I shook my head, trying to physically rid myself of my awe. It didn’t work. “You look … exquisite,” I said in reply, all the while knowing that no word would adequately describe her.

She looked at me, glanced down at the ground, and then returned my gaze, the corners of her mouth pulling up into a smile. “As do you, Miss Belivet,” she said after a moment.

Suddenly remembering what I was wearing, and feeling plainer than ever, I self-consciously smoothed my dress down again and half-turned back to the apartment. “I … I should go and get …”

She reached for my wrist, grasping it tightly and making me turn back to her, before apparently realising where we are and dropping her hand. A group of rowdy young men were walking along the sidewalk, only a short distance from where we were stood. She looked at me through narrowed eyes and gestured towards the car. “Come on, it’s cold.”

I obeyed this time, hurrying around the car just as she was opening my door, and slipping inside. I fumbled with the seatbelt, feeling somewhat deflated by my outfit choice, and, when I finally straightened up, she was staring at me, a displeased expression on her face. I looked at her in puzzlement, waiting for her to say whatever was on her mind. She continued to watch me, and eventually I caved. “What? Are you okay?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You look absolutely stunning,” she said, her voice grave as her eyes penetrated my soul. “Perfect. I won’t have you thinking any different.”

I blinked. “Well, thank you. I just …”

“No, Therese.” Her eyes were like steel as she stared, and I could tell from the firmness of her tone that there was no room for argument. “You look beautiful tonight. I adore that colour on you.”

I flushed, only vaguely aware that I was fiddling with the straps of my bag. She reached over and stilled my hands with one of her own, and that single movement caused my body to be abruptly filled with a need so profound that my mouth instantly became dry. I hadn’t seen her since Wednesday, and I had missed her deeply, even though we had talked for an hour the previous night, right up until my landlady had opened her door and stared at me pointedly as I muttered my goodbyes and hung up the phone. Besides, she looked so stern and serious, and that always sent my heart into a frenetic beat, sent arousal racing through my body. I didn’t know why, but she just looked so … predatory, I think is the right word, and commanding, and it would seem that such an expression had a direct route to my very core. My flush burned hotter, and I hastily cleared my throat. “Thank you,” I finally replied, annoyed at the hint of huskiness contained within my voice, berating myself again for the lack of control I had whenever we were close.

She exhaled slowly, and only the faintest darkening of her eyes told me that she felt the tension charging between us just as much as I did. “That’s better,” she said, her voice a darn sight steadier than mine, letting her hand linger for a couple of seconds more before lifting it and taking her breathtaking eyes away from me. The engine burst into life, and she pulled out onto the street.

I bit at my lower lip, hands still frozen amidst the straps of my bag from where she’d stopped them. I continued to stare at her for a long moment, my eyes savouring the view of her strong and endlessly glorious profile, taking in her forehead, the corner of her brow, an eye permitting me to see only a small hint of blue, the curve of her nose, her lips, her jaw … I inhaled as deeply as I could to try and soothe the rampant desire currently flooding through me and muddling my thoughts. Such an action only caused her perfume to further invade my senses, and I let loose a small sigh, trying to inconspicuously press my thighs together. I have to be honest, there have been a few times where I’ve been genuinely concerned about my physical reaction to her, my perpetual need that never seemed to be fully satisfied, and that evening, in that car, was one of them.
I snapped my eyes closed and turned my head, only opening them again when I knew the only thing I would be confronted with would be the car window, and my fingers started twisting the material of my bag again as I hopelessly tried to think of something to say, blindly staring at the buildings and other cars quickly passing us by, frustrated that the powerful nature of my attraction to her was rendering my mind useless. Thankfully, it wasn’t long before she stepped in and saved me from myself.

“How was your day?” she asked, her voice cool and calm and collected, the exact opposite to how I was feeling.

I tried to remember, rolling my eyes at myself as I did so. It was in these moments, when I was left desperately scrambling for words just because of the mere sight of her, that I felt with certainty that I could never have the same effect on her. Don’t get me wrong, I knew without doubt that she loved me, I knew that she found me attractive, and she often made me feel like the most important, most cherished, most beautiful, smartest woman in the world, but I didn’t believe it was possible for Carol to feel the level of hungry, insatiable, voracious, unending, almost torturous passion that I could feel for her. I could hardly believe that she could have that impact on me. It left me reeling, every single time, left me helpless, as my love and lust for her took me over, scorching my veins, tightening my chest, sending my brain into disarray. I’d never have believed it before I had experienced it for myself.

I looked down at my bag, trying to remember how my vocal cords worked again. “It was … okay,” I said after clearing my throat. “It was … slow.” I could see her glance over to me out of the corner of my eye, unable to stop myself from meeting her brief gaze before she turned her attention back to the road. I willed my heart to settle from its rapid pounding. “How was yours?”

“Oh, it was fine,” she replied in her usual smooth drawl. “But … also slow.”

I nodded, only realising halfway through that she couldn’t see me. “Oh,” I murmured. A thought came to me. “Did Harge call?”

“No,” she sighed, and I looked back over to her, then. “I don’t suppose he has yet forgiven me for my threat of court, nor the fact I wasn’t in tears begging for mercy when I called him.” She caught my eye again and offered a small smile. “No doubt he will call at some point next week. His ego has suffered quite the bruising.”

When we had spoken on the telephone the previous night, Carol had told me she had called Harge directly and told him that she wouldn’t be reaching out through their lawyers anymore, that she wanted to talk solely to him regarding their daughter, and that she would like a date set for her first visit with Rindy. She’d tried to sound breezy while telling me about it, but I knew how much it had taken for her to make such a move, and I so truly hoped that he would be a decent man for once and concede to her requests. From what she had told me, I gathered that he had been surprised upon receiving her call, and had been rather abrupt, but hadn’t demanded that she contact his lawyer, which, she assured me, was a very good sign. She knew him far better than I did, and I prayed she was right.

“I hope so,” I replied honestly, relieved that the topic of conversation had temporarily dampened my arousal, my hands now resting on top of my bag.

“He will,” she said succinctly, and her confidence offered further reassurance. I looked out of the window again. The roads were relatively quiet for a Friday evening, people preferring to bypass their vehicles in favour of walking, and I spent a couple of minutes watching them as they went about their business. With a sudden jarring feeling in my stomach, I realised that, only a week before, I had been doing the same thing, on the ride back to my apartment from the Oak Room, and I felt a sense
of disbelief come over me, combined with an unyielding surge of love and gratitude. Only a week had passed, just seven days, but so much had happened, almost all of it good. It hadn’t yet fully sunken in, I don’t think, but I knew, without doubt, that I was happier than I had ever been.

“How are you feeling about the party?”

Jerked from my thoughts, my fingers took up their pastime once more, and I took a deep breath as I turned back to her. “Okay,” I said, and immediately sensed her scepticism. “Nervous,” I admitted with a small shrug that she couldn’t see.

She looked at me for no more than a second, giving me the smallest shake of her head before again turning her focus onto the road. Her hand sought out mine, and she gave it a squeeze, then trailed the pad of her thumb over my knuckle. “You have nothing to worry about, Therese,” she promised. “There will be a few of Abby’s friends there, there will be alcohol, there will be music … and I’ll be by your side.”

“I know. I just … I don’t know. I’ll be fine once we get there.”

“We can always turn back, you know,” she said, and I knew that, had I even voiced the faintest hint of hesitation, I wouldn’t have finished my sentence by the time she had done just that. “We can go to mine, or yours, get something to eat, relax. It’s completely up to you, my darling.”

“No,” I replied, though it did sound like a heavenly alternative. “Thank you, but no.” I was the one who had suggested going to the damn party in the first place, and I wasn’t going to back down from it now. “It’ll be nice,” I continued, more to try and convince myself than Carol. “How much longer until we’re there?”
As soon as I laid eyes on Abby, I knew she was at least two brandies beyond the state of sobriety, and I shook my head, even as a smile crept onto my face. I had known the pattern of Abby’s parties well enough to realise that knocking at the front door would be a fruitless exercise, and so had led Therese around the back, where I knew the door would be open. As soon as we had stepped into the kitchen, Abby spotted us from the hallway, giving a wave that was ever-so-slightly exaggerated, another indication of her alcohol consumption, her pink cheeks and wide smile only adding to my certainty. I glanced at Therese, amused at the slightly startled expression on her face, and, by the time I had turned back, Abby was fast approaching us.

“Where have you two been?!” she asked loudly, not giving either of us a chance to answer as she first pulled me into a hug and then Therese. She pulled back and looked between us with a suspicious expression. “Or do I not want to know?” She waggled her eyebrows, and, if I had been prone to blushing, I would have succumbed in that moment.

“Abby!” I scolded, looking at Therese, relieved when I saw her initial shock fade until she was fighting back a smile. The mischievous look on Abby’s face was infectious, it always had been.

“What?!” she replied, eyes wide and innocent, though she couldn’t maintain it for long and soon grinned broadly. “Drinks?” Not waiting for an answer, she strode across the kitchen, beckoning us with a finger to the oak table, which was surely as stocked as the nearest bar. It was almost creaking under the weight of the bottles of brandy, sherry, wine, gin, vermouth, rum, vodka, whisky … it went on and on. Glasses of every shape and size only added to the strain that the table was under, and I knew that, had I looked in the fridge, I would have found countless bottles of beer and champagne. It was a good thing that Abby didn’t throw parties every weekend, I remember thinking; she would have quickly become bankrupt.

Therese appeared awestruck, her eyes flitting up and down the table in apparent disbelief. I couldn’t blame her, it did seem awfully excessive, until one came to realise that it was simply Abby. She had never been one to do anything halfheartedly, and she was a regular visitor of the party circuit. I couldn’t tell you how many times she had called me or showed up to my house with a sore head and humorous recollections of her latest adventures.

“What would you … oh!” Abby started as she finally noticed our two small bags, grabbing them up in her arms before Therese or I had a chance to react. I had to hand it to her, her alcohol intake hadn’t impacted on her reflexes. “I’ll take these up to your room,” she said, nodding more to herself than to us, I felt. Turning around promptly, she headed for the doorway. “Help yourselves, gorgeous ladies,” she called over her shoulder, and I shook my head again as she disappeared from sight.

Doris Day could be heard playing in the living room, and I presumed that that was where the other guests were, their voices barely a murmur over the music. I looked to Therese and smiled at her nonplussed expression.

“Wow,” she said after a moment, waving towards the table.

I nodded. “I warned you,” I teased, reaching over to procure the bottle of vermouth and bottle of gin, the thought of a dry martini propelling me forward. “What would you like?”

She was quiet for a few seconds, and I turned to her, smiling again when I saw her peering at the different wine labels. “I think I’ll have a Claret, please.”
“Of course, mademoiselle,” I said lightly as I leaned over to get it, placing it in front of me and reaching for two glasses.

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I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror as I washed my hands, smiling stupidly at the reflection staring back at me, noting the flushed cheeks and sparkle in my eyes as I wondered what on earth I had been so worried about. The party was going well, though I didn’t know how much of that had to be attributed to the two wines and two, almost three, beers I had been throwing back. I dried my hands and took another sip.

We must have been there for a couple of hours by that point, and it had probably taken me less than ten minutes to drop my guard completely and allow myself to enjoy the night. There hadn’t been a man in sight, as women from all backgrounds, of all ages, huddled in small groups, talking, or singing, or dancing, or smoking. It was an almost magical experience for me, I think, attending something like that. I’d gone to a few parties before, but it had inevitably included more men than women, falling over themselves drunk by the end of the night, making me roll my eyes as their raucous chatter increased in volume with every drink, their comments becoming more and more vulgar, or dull, as the minutes passed.

This felt like something else entirely, like I had stumbled across a new world, watching in wonder as women casually held hands, seemingly without a care in the world, leaning over and whispering in each other’s ears, dancing closely with one another, or dancing in larger groups when the more up-tempo music called for it. It all looked, and maybe even more amazingly felt, so normal, so natural, and it left me stunned.

Looking back, it was the first party I had ever gone to where my social awkwardness hadn’t made itself known, where I almost felt like I belonged. Everyone had been friendly, more people arriving as time passed, and the laughter at times drowned the music out completely, though, I have to be honest, I felt a twang of jealousy, and a fleeting sense of inadequacy, when I saw a very attractive brunette so very obviously look Carol up and down while we were talking. It was to my eternal relief that Carol barely batted an eyelid, instead focusing her attention solely on me as we stood near the patio doors and had a cigarette. She hadn’t left my side all night, with the exception of bathroom breaks, and we drifted around the room, talking to other guests, or wandered into a corner to talk amongst ourselves. It had taken me about half an hour, I guess, to become accustomed to the fact that, here, we could be ourselves. I’d found myself panicked and looking around quickly when she’d first reached for my hand, when she’d put a hand on my hip while leaning in to murmur something into my ear, but no one had paid the blindest bit of notice, with the exception of that darn brunette. Like I said, it felt magical to me.

Abruptly eager to get back to Carol, I turned from the mirror and reached for the door handle, opening it only to stop short as I was confronted with Abby. I grinned at her, feeling more confident and happy in her company than I ever had before. She definitely knew how to throw a party, and she had seemed thrilled with herself all night as she split her time between dancing and talking with a beautiful redheaded woman called Edith, Edie for short, with whom she seemed utterly devoted, and checking on all of her guests, often throwing her head back with laughter as she mingled with everyone, encouraging us all to refill our drinks, even pouting at me at one stage until I drained the last of my beer and went to get another. I was so glad to have seen her like this, the happy, free, funny woman who was best friends with Carol, and why wouldn’t she be? Abby was like a magnet, drawing people in with her exuberant nature, her witty and dry humour. I would have to have been blind to miss the attraction the very idea of her friendship brought. It was such a relief, too, to no longer feel insecure or inferior while around her. We definitely made progress that night. I waited for her to step aside so I could leave the bathroom, but she stayed where she was, a smile playing on her
“Can I talk to you?”

I hadn’t even finished nodding before she grabbed my wrist and spun around, yanking me along behind her down the hallway, not even slowing down as she reached the last door on the left, opening it and pulling us both inside. As soon as the door was closed, she dropped my wrist, and I looked around. The room was large, with a big bed resting against the middle of the far wall, and an armchair by the window. When I remembered to turn back to her a few seconds later, she was staring at me intently. I smiled, slightly self-consciously, and took another sip of my beer for want of something to do.

She gestured to the oversized chair. “Sit, sit.”

My legs were moving before I’d even thought about it, and I walked over to chair and sank down into it, wondering what this was all about, too giddy from the alcohol to feel any real concern. She perched on the end of her bed, and we watched each other for a few moments. “Are you okay?” I asked.

She smiled warmly. “Yes, Therese. Are you having a good night?”

“Oh, yes,” I replied without hesitation. “Your party is wonderful. Thank you for inviting me.”

She scoffed and shook her head. “Don’t be a stupe. You don’t need to thank me. I actually wanted to thank you.”

I looked at her blankly. “Why?” She sighed in mock exasperation and I knew that, had she done the exact same thing a mere three hours before, I would have felt attacked. As it was, the evening had enlightened me to her sense of humour, dry and similar to Carol’s, and I spotted the kindness in her eyes, raising my eyebrows in return.

She seemed to approve of my reaction, giving me a small smile. “Thank you for waiting for her. Carol. Thank you for taking her back, and making her happy again.” Her words sounded so very genuine, her tone sincere, and I blinked, the alcohol clouding my thoughts. I drank some more of my beer. “She was such a miserable so and so while you were gone. I swear, that woman can be such a nitwit sometimes. I don’t know how many times I told her to get back in touch with you sooner.”

She shook her head again, her expression becoming more serious as she regarded me. “I suspect you know this by now, but, behind her bravado, she has her insecurities and her vulnerabilities just like the rest of us, perhaps even more so.”

“I know.”

“Good. And you’re happy?”

I nodded immediately, a smile pulling at my lips. “Yes.”

“Good. She’s so … different when she’s with you. Like the Carol I used to know, only brighter, somehow.” She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then that twinkle returned to her eyes. “Don’t let anything come between you again. Or I shall be forced to hunt you both down. And I will.”

I grinned. “I don’t doubt it.”

“As well you shouldn’t!” she pretended to scowl, and I chuckled. She stood, then, and reached a hand out to me. “Well, I think another tipple is in order. Besides, if I keep you for much longer, I fear she’ll hunt me down, and I refuse to be killed in the middle of my own goddamn party!”
I accepted her hand and rose, that goofy smile back on my face. I finished the rest of my drink as we left the bedroom and walked back down the hallway. “Edie seems nice,” I said as we descended the stairs.

Abby’s face almost split in two with her grin, and she glanced over to me. “Doesn’t she?! She’s amazing.” I went to sound my agreement, before realising she hadn’t yet finished talking. “She’s funny … so funny. And gorgeous.” She looked at me again. “Isn’t she?!” I nodded, taken aback at the dreamy look in her eyes. “And, my god, the things she can do with her …” She stopped suddenly, as if only just remembering who she was talking to and what she was saying. She cleared her throat. “Ahem. She’s very … skilled, is all I shall say about that.”

Understanding dawned and my flushed cheeks turned even pinker, though I couldn’t help but laugh at her expression, half chastened, half delighted with herself, or, rather, with Edie, by the sound of it.

She studied me for a minute when we reached the bottom of the stairs. “I like you, Therese. You’re a good one.” I had no time to reply before she pulled me into a tight hug, only pulling back when she had practically crushed my ribcage, and then planting a fat kiss on my cheek. “I’ll get you another drink. Find Carol before she realises I kidnapped you and burns me like a witch.” She swept away, and I stared after her for a long moment, mouth agape, heart warm.

I could hear a rousing rendition of Botch-A-Me, a rather fun song by Rosemary Clooney which had been a hit just the previous year, from the living/dining room, and happily followed the sound, suppressing a giggle as I saw most of the women standing, the alcohol ridding them of all inhibitions as they sang along loudly to the nonsensical words, linking arms or stomping their feet, dissolving into laughter at themselves and each other. It took me a moment to see Carol, crouched down next to two women, one of whom had put herself in charge of the record player, surrounded by a scattered pile of covers, all of them talking over the music.

I moved until I could see her better, and then just watched her, taking in her graceful frame, the creaminess of her neck in contrast to her red blouse, the bend of her knees, her blonde hair, slightly mussed by now but endlessly beautiful. She was, without doubt, the most magnificent woman in the room. I grinned to myself as I realised again that she was mine. I was only afforded a few seconds before she somehow sensed my eyes on her and turned, looking at me with an easy smile that sent my heart lurching, saying something to the two other women before lithely rising to her feet and walking towards me, martini in hand.

Her hand curved around my hip as she leaned in, and I shivered as I felt her warm breath at my ear. “Where have you been?” she asked. “I was about to send a search party.” She pulled back and it took me a moment to remember how to breathe again.

I looked at her dumbly until my brain managed to rouse itself back into action, opening my mouth to reply but being thwarted in my attempt as the room erupted into a loud, merry ‘Kiss me!’ along with the song. I grinned. “I was in the bathroom,” I explained, raising my voice so that she could hear me over the laughter. “And then …” I faltered, suddenly drunkenly determined to not tell tales on Abby. “The bathroom,” I finished weakly. I was so terrible at lying.

She narrowed her eyes, and they quickly filled with understanding as she observed me, a rueful smile on her lips. “Abby?”

I was about to try and argue, but I realised it was pointless. I tried to stifle a smirk. “Abby,” I replied solemnly.

As if on cue, Abby appeared. “You called, my lovelies?” she said behind me, making me jump. I think one of the other guests accidentally knocked into her as the room saw the song to its close, and
she used it as an opportunity to push through the small gap between Carol and me, turning to face us both with a wide grin on her face, her eyes shining with glee. “People are having fun. Are you having fun? You’re having fun, aren’t you?” Evidently too excited and drunk to bother waiting for an answer, she looked at the drinks in her hand. “A beer for my darling Therese,” she said, thrusting the bottle into my hand, “And a brandy for my oldest and most treasured friend.”

“I’m fine with …” Carol started, but Abby quickly raised a silencing finger.

“Brandy,” she ordered, holding it out impatiently.

Carol turned to me with an amused shrug before tossing back the rest of her drink and swapping her empty glass for the fuller one being proffered.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Abby replied in a haughty fashion that made me laugh. She suddenly looked at me with a fondness I hadn’t ever received from her before, taking a sidestep in my direction and flinging an arm around my shoulders. “This one’s a keeper,” she said in a hushed tone to Carol, as though I somehow wouldn’t hear her. Confirming my suspicion, she stretched to look at me. “I just told Carol you’re a keeper! Hey, do you want to come over for dinner next week? Or, oh, or we could go to a restaurant?! Oh my word.” Her eyes widened in delight. “We can go to Edie’s steakhouse! Do you want to?!”

The wine and beer was making it difficult for me to keep up with her hurried words, though I couldn’t keep from laughing at her eagerness, her merriment contagious. Her eyebrows were rising up her forehead rapidly as she waited for a reply, her eyes shining, her face expectant. I felt Carol’s hand on my arm as I tried to contain my mirth.

“How about we stop bombarding Therese with questions,” Carol proposed, and I could tell, without even looking at her, that she was only half joking.

“But …” She stopped as she saw Carol quickly turn her head, moving it left and right as though looking for someone. I looked in the same direction in confusion, and I was sure Abby was following suit. “What? What is it?”

Carol turned back, and both Abby and I waited for what she was about to say. “I thought I heard a voice calling for you, but I must have been mistaken. However, I think …” she said, looking grave all of a sudden. “I think I saw somebody with an empty glass.”

“What?!” Abby cried, alarm on her face, dropping her arm from my shoulders. “Well … no! No, I’m not having that. Not at one of my parties. I’ll catch you both later,” she said, paying little attention to either of us as she manoeuvred herself around me and marched away. A look over my shoulder showed me that she was craning her neck, trying to find the perpetrator.

I looked over to Carol. “I would not want to be the woman with an empty glass,” I grinned, taking a swig of my beer. I saw a sly smile on her face and my eyes widened. “You lied?!?”

She nodded matter-of-factly, bringing her glass to her lips and having a sip, blue eyes sparkling. “How else would I have had you all to myself again?”

I shook my head, a chuckle spilling past my lips. “You are terrible.”

“Oh, I know,” she replied smoothly, her expression teasing and seductive all at the same time. I honestly don’t know how she managed it; it was an art form.

I inexplicably found myself speechless again, swallowing as I looked up at her, the alcohol seeming to spur my already voracious appetite on. I bit my lower lip, then looked around the room. I hadn’t
noticed the song end, it was only when I heard the first notes of the next song that I realised. Small
groups of women came together, pairing off around the living room as Patti Page’s Would I Love
You started playing. I looked back to Carol, the slight darkening of her eyes as she watched me
causing my heart to quicken its pace.

She took another sip of her brandy and then set it on the bookcase behind us. “Would you like to
dance?” she asked, a sultry smile on her face that left me breathless.

I nodded silently, and she took my beer, putting it next to her own before taking a step back into the
room and extending a hand. My mouth was suddenly dry as I accepted it, stepping forward and
feeling her arms loop around my waist. I’d never danced like this before, not this close, not
romantically, having felt too embarrassed and ridiculous when Richard had tried to persuade me.
Now, though, I instinctively linked my hands around the back of her neck, my forearms resting on
her shoulders as our eyes never wavered from one another’s. She set the pace perfectly with the
music, and for a handful of seconds I was concerned that I would step on her feet or something awful
like that, but such worry soon vanished as she guided us around in a small circle and I became lost in
the moment.

The guests were the quietest they’d been that night, and Patti’s silky voice drifted over the room
beautifully. I stared into Carol’s eyes, and I was so enraptured by her that I think I even forgot to
smile, my eyes wide and needing as we moved as one. I felt like we were one in that moment, both
physically and mentally, and it all just felt so beautiful to me. Her eyes seemed to see into my heart,
my soul, and a glorious smile was on her lips. I think it was probably the most graceful I had ever
felt, dancing slowly in her arms, expertly guided by her as we moved.

Without thinking, I brought a hand down and slid it around her back, turning my head and resting it
against her shoulder, inhaling deeply and closing my eyes, allowing every other sense to roam free.
Her hand came up to my head as she held me close, and I sighed as I realised just how perfect this
moment was. There was no need for words, for declarations of our feelings, the love and longing we
felt for each other flowing between us effortlessly, accompanied by the sung words floating around
us. I could have stayed there forever.

The song drew to a close, far too soon for my liking, and I reluctantly looked up at her. The room
was still almost silent, and she pulled me in even closer to her for a second, her hand running through
my hair. “You are magnificent, my darling girl,” she whispered, staring deeply into my eyes, and I
saw a myriad of emotions cross her face, matching exactly those in my heart. She stepped back, then,
and my arms felt empty without her in them. She handed me my drink, and I took it, bringing it to
my lips and taking a large mouthful. I looked around, smiling as I saw Abby and Edie still in each
other’s arms, saw a roomful of women holding each other, murmuring quietly to each other, happy
and drunk and free.

A movement near the door caught my attention, and I glanced over, about to look away again when I
realised that it was just a few more newcomers to the party, still in their outerwear, and I idly
wondered just when Abby’s parties tended to end. As far as I was concerned, it could have lasted for
days, weeks even. I was having the time of my life. There was something, though, I still don’t know
what … maybe the hat, or the hair … and I moved a fraction to my left, in order to get a better look.
A second later, my fabulous mood was shot to pieces as I met the gaze of the first person entering,
my happiness being ripped down to make way for the anxiety suddenly blooming in its place as my
heart leapt into my throat. Genevieve.
Annie and Maria were talking quietly amongst themselves as they rifled through the records, and I watched them for a moment. They were the only two guests I knew at this party, and, the last time I had seen Maria, she had told me that their relationship hadn’t worked out. It would seem a lot had happened since then if their shared adoring glances and frequent touches were anything to go by. I was happy for them as I sipped at my brandy, enjoying the burning as the amber liquid travelled down my throat, a broad smile touching my lips as I realised Therese and I must have appeared very much alike to how they did.

The mere thought of Therese caused me to turn my head back to her again, my two friends forgotten completely as my hand immediately sought out hers. It was a welcome relief to be in a place where we didn’t have to worry about who might be watching, or how quickly the slightest sign of contact between us would become a focal point of gossip. I admit, I had had a few reservations in the run up to that night, mainly centred around how comfortable Therese would feel, how an inebriated Abby would react around her, and a very small, utterly selfish part of me resented having to share her with others, but I could not have been more glad of her insistence to attend. I had derived much pleasure from seeing Therese so happy and wondrous of all that was around her, watching her eyes widen as she saw that we could, for the most part, be ourselves, just two people in love going to a party and having fun. I remembered my first experience of something similar, and I felt so honoured to be at her side as she encountered a moment in time that was so intimate and enlightening. She looked so beautiful and carefree in her olive green dress and her hair falling naturally around her face. The fact that she and Abby appeared to be getting on well only added to my buoyant mood.

As soon as my gaze found her face, I hesitated, feeling a frown descend upon my brow as I quickly took note of the alarm in her green eyes. She was looking past me, her beer bottle paused on its journey to her lips, and I turned, trying to find the source of her sudden concern. I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary at first, but then, through a relatively large group of guests, another woman appeared, shrugging out of her coat and apparently heading directly our way, her brown eyes flickering over to meet mine for less than a second before returning to Therese’s. Confusion settled upon me as I looked over to Therese, but she was rooted to the spot, and so I turned back to the stranger, noting the breezy smile on her lips, not understanding in the slightest who she was or how she knew Therese.

“Therese,” she said, her voice oozing familiarity and confidence as she came to a stop in front of us. “Fancy seeing you here.”

I eyed her closely, feeling a sense of jealousy rising in me though I didn’t quite know why. I hadn’t felt overly possessive when Therese and I had mingled with the other guests, and when I had come back from the bathroom to find her animatedly talking with a group of women, the only emotion I’d felt was joy, thrilled to see her looking so comfortable in a territory previously so unknown to her. There was certainly something about the woman stood before me that brought something out of me, and I paid attention to her pretty face, more youthful than mine, her simple yet cute hairstyle, her checked blue blouse, which rested nicely atop her brown trousers. She looked younger than I, undeniably attractive, and she exuded a self-assurance that almost led me to doubt my own. I wanted to look at Therese, to see her reaction, but my eyes were locked onto the intruder, and I didn’t need to gaze into a mirror to know that my expression was stony.

“Genevieve,” I heard Therese say after a moment, and I could detect the slightest hint of anxiety in her voice. “How are you?”
Genevieve. I racked my brains, trying to match her name with something, anything, Therese had told me before, but my attempts were met with a resounding silence. How did they know each other? Was that a glimmer of flirtation I saw in this Genevieve’s eyes? I felt my heart pound as I bit back another surge of jealousy, draining the last of my brandy to stop myself from saying something foolish.

“I’m well,” Genevieve replied with a slow smile that made me grip my glass tighter.

“Good. That’s … good.” Therese cleared her throat. “This is Carol. Carol Aird.”

Genevieve finally took notice and I stood tall, staring her down coolly. “Genevieve Cantrell. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Carol,” she said and it almost sounded close to sincere, which only served to irk me further. She held out a hand.

“Likewise,” I murmured, forcing a smile as I shook her hand for the briefest of moments. I loathed her cordiality, such a vast and unflattering contrast to my ugly thoughts and feelings. She looked at me for just a second longer, and then turned her attention back to Therese. I felt my possessiveness swell alarmingly, primal in its nature, as my hand found itself resting at the small of Therese’s back, and I’m quite certain that had I been an ape I would have been beating my chest and screeching at this invader by now. I settled on taking a small step closer to Therese, my body language making it perfectly clear that she was mine. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her glance up at me, but I couldn’t look away from the attractive woman who now only had eyes for her, as though to do so would be to concede defeat.

“What happened to you last Friday?” Genevieve asked, and I cannot tell you how much effort it took to keep my eyebrows from shooting up. I instead worked on allowing a small, hopefully knowing, smile to touch my lips as my heart pounded in my ears while I awaited Therese’s reply.

“Oh … um … I had plans. With Carol,” she said, and then moved closer to me until our bodies were flush beside one another. “Did you have a good night?”

Genevieve looked at me again, her eyes fully taking me in for what felt like the first time, and I maintained my proud stance, head high, shoulders back, almost daring her to say something that I could finally react to. She gave me another quick smile before looking back at Therese once more.

“Yes, thanks. It would have been nice to see you again, though. Next time, maybe.”

I’m surprised my glass didn’t shatter in my hand with the force I was applying to it, my blood close to boiling in my veins, my eyes narrowing slightly without my consent as I continued to stare her down. Perhaps she wasn’t idiotic enough to try to make moves on my date while I was in such close proximity, but jealousy was clouding my reasoning ability. A small silence descended, and I felt rather than saw Therese tilt back her head to take a swig of her beer, aware of how awkward she must have felt.

“So, how do you know Abby?” I asked, fully aware of the aloofness in my voice and not remotely caring about it. “I haven’t seen or heard of you before.”

Her eyes didn’t waver as they met mine. “Ah, I came with a group of friends,” she jerked her head backwards, but I didn’t bother to look. “Clara is a mutual friend, and she invited us along.”

“I see,” I replied. I remembered meeting Clara once or twice and she’d seemed nice enough, but now I inwardly cursed her for inviting Genevieve. I didn’t let it show. I suddenly knew that I had to extricate myself from the conversation, in need of a brandy and a cigarette before my rationality was eradicated completely. “Well, I hope you have a nice evening.” I stepped away from Therese, looking at her for the first time as she quickly turned to me, her eyes searching mine. I gave her a
gentle smile. “Abby will notice my empty glass soon, and I don’t much feel like being on the end of one of her lectures. Would you like another beer, my darling?”

“I’ll come with you,” she said without hesitation, and an extremely petty part of me wanted to give Genevieve the most self-satisfied smirk that I could muster. I didn’t.

“It’s fine,” I assured, not prepared to allow Genevieve to think I was taking Therese away from her due to jealousy, even if that was exactly what I wanted to do. “Talk some more with your friend here.”

She looked at me with wide eyes for a few seconds, before I noted resignation settle there. I smiled at her again, though it stiffened as I turned my gaze to Genevieve, who was watching us with apparent interest. I uttered not another word as I walked away, navigating my way through the growing number of guests, inhaling deeply as I stepped out into the quieter hallway and moved towards the kitchen. It was empty, and I released a grateful sigh as I headed to the drinks table. I loosened my grip on the glass slightly and was surprised to see that my knuckles were white. I shook my head, about to question just how ridiculous I was being when I decided to forgo that exercise in favour of pouring myself another brandy, three, perhaps four, fingers worth, taking a needful sip before I’d even screwed the top back onto the bottle.

I walked over to the door and leaned against the worktop, my back to the hallway, one hand holding my drink, the other rooting inside my trouser pocket for the cigarettes, grasping the case quickly between thumb and forefinger and retrieving them. That first drag was sublime, and I closed my eyes as grey smoke hit the back of my throat. I wondered what Therese and Genevieve might be talking about, and abruptly fiercely regretted leaving them. It’s not that I didn’t trust Therese, you understand, it was Genevieve that I was wary of. She was a good few years younger than me, a very attractive woman, and she radiated a confident playfulness that, I can admit now, made me feel inferior. It was not something I was used to feeling, especially as a result of a stranger. I took a swig of brandy and a few long drags of my cigarette.

I didn’t hear footsteps until they were right behind me, and I turned my head just in time to see Therese appear at my shoulder. She was silent, her hands smoothing down her dress, biting on her lower lip as she did when she was nervous or shy. I knew that now it was the former. I stared at her for a long moment, my eyes drinking in her beautiful face, and I felt such an urgent wave of love and longing and possessiveness flood through me that I found myself lost for words. My face must have expressed this, because her eyes widened, her lip slipping from between her teeth as her beer hung forgotten in her hand.

We were silent for a few seconds, regarding each other with an intensity that caused my stomach to flip, and I was so filled with emotion that Therese noticed the interruption of three women entering the kitchen a short while before I. She tried to regain her composure, clearing her throat and hastily drinking her beer as I continued to watch her.

“I’m sorry about just now,” she said, and her eyes begged me to believe her. “Nothing ever happened. She was at Phil’s party, and we just talked for a while, and …”

I blinked myself out of my trance and lifted myself from against the worktop, quickly grinding my cigarette into the ashtray. She faltered and I reached for her hand. “Come with me,” I said quietly, vaguely noticing the husk in my voice. She nodded silently, and I turned on my heel, brandy forgotten as I led her out of the kitchen, down the hallway, up the stairs, and into the second room on the right, the room we would be staying in overnight. I let go of her hand and turned to close the door, all thought lost as I faced her again. Her lips were parted, her green eyes wide and bewitching, her chest rising and falling in a way to indicate her shallow breathing. I stared at her until it became
too much, rushing towards her and grabbing her, one hand in her hair, the other at her back, my lips crushing against hers as I kissed her with a forcefulness that took me over completely.

My body was on fire, my nerves on edge, every fibre of my being knowing that I had to make her mine, I had to show her that no one would love her, could love her, more. Passion consumed me as my fingers got caught in her hair, as I felt her reacting with abandon, the lust erupting between us saying more than words ever could. I was starved, ravenous, and nothing but her would satisfy my hunger. I thrust my tongue deep into her mouth, suddenly wanting to devour her from the inside out.

It took more strength than I can describe to wrench myself away from her, having to turn away and walk across the room in order to regain my self-control, the sound of my loud pants intermingling with hers and causing the heat within me to burn hotter. It must have taken at least a minute for me to feel well-equipped enough to turn back to her, and I very nearly came undone again at the sight of her tousled hair, her reddened lips, her beseeching eyes, her flushed cheeks. Fuck, she was beautiful, more beautiful than she would ever know. I exhaled shakily, but made no effort to approach. She hesitated and then went to take a step forward. I shook my head. No. I was going to give her a night she wouldn’t forget. I was going to drive her wild, and possibly myself in the process. It would be worth it. She frowned slightly, but I remained where I was, holding her gaze.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, I pushed my shoulders back. “Undress for me,” I instructed, my voice hoarse but firm.
“Undress for me.”

I blinked, so overwhelmed with the need to be near Carol again that it took me a second to realise what she was saying. Her voice displayed her desire, causing my heart to speed up even further, a shiver to tear its way through me, and any initial self-consciousness was immediately overshadowed by the look I saw on her face. She looked commanding and lustful at the same time, her blue eyes dark yet steady as she stared at me, and knowing she felt such arousal for me quickly doused my scant reservations in cold water. It wasn’t as though we hadn’t undressed ourselves before sex before, of course, but … this felt naughtier, somehow … racier, her demanding it of me, on the opposite side of the room. I kicked my sandals off without a word, feeling quite giddy, and reached for the hem of my dress, grabbing at the bottom of my slip, too, yanking them up and about to lift the skirt over my head.

“Slower, Therese,” she murmured, arching a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “I want to enjoy this for as long as possible.”

I swallowed hard, my mouth becoming dry as I tried to remember how to breathe. Her voice was mesmerising, both erotic and soft, powerful and gentle, her eyes piercing mine, and I knew with certainty that I would do anything she asked of me. I took my time as I lifted the dress up to my thighs, past my panties, across my stomach. I was too overcome with lust to feel embarrassed, and seeing her eyes take in every inch of me caused my inner muscles to clench. I raised it further, allowing her to see my chest, and then disappeared behind the thin material as I pulled it over my head and let it sail to the floor.

I watched her eyes linger on my chest, then up to my throat, before finally meeting my hooded gaze, and I reached my hands up behind my back, undoing my bra so the straps fell down my arms, causing our shared look to end once more as she stared intently at my breasts. I heard her take a sharp breath and I felt my nipples harden in anticipation, arousal seep into my panties, as I stood there for her perusal. Another few seconds passed and she nodded at me, leading me to slowly peel my stockings from my legs, and then hook my fingers beneath the waistband of my damp underwear and push them down until they fell to the floor and I was left completely bare. I stepped out of them, my heart set to beat right out of my chest, my nerves buzzing with expectation and desire, my pulse racing as fiery wantonness coursed through my veins. She took a graceful step forward, and then another, measured, like a predator with her prey, her eyes all over me, and, in that moment, I felt like the most cherished woman in the world. My legs felt weak as she approached me, the hairs standing up on my arms, the back of my neck, as I ached for her. I was on the brink of madness, and she hadn’t even touched me.

She stopped a couple of feet in front of me, and I trembled as I was awarded a closer look into her eyes. They smouldered, a dark shade of blue, and I could see the hunger within, combined with something akin to awe. They were carnal, wild, endless, breathtaking, and yet the tightening of the skin around her eyes and mouth told me just how much restraint she was using. I wanted to plead with her to let go, to take me in any way she wanted, to own me with her lips, her tongue, her hands. I wanted to drop to my knees and beg, say the magical words that would bring us together. I wanted to tell her how much I needed her, how my body craved her, how wet I already was, how I needed her more than I needed life. Instead, I was mute, all words eluding me as she held me prisoner under her dizzying gaze, my vocabulary absent as the physical reactions she drew from me left me mentally incompetent. I couldn’t think properly, couldn’t see anything but her, my mind was in a state of disarray that wouldn’t be righted until she’d granted me all I thirsted for. In a haze, I tried to close the
distance, but she shook her head again. It was the most divine torture I’d ever known.

She walked around me in a circle slowly, and I honestly felt like I might combust. When she was completely out of my sight, she trailed the very tip of her finger across my back and I gasped, her touch searing my skin, leaving me reeling as I waited for more. Nothing further was forthcoming, and she appeared in front of me again, dragging her eyes up and down my body, holding her gaze at the curve of my sex, my navel, my painfully erect nipples. I could feel my clot pulse, my core contracting repeatedly, and I felt on the edge of collapse. Her eyes finally met mine again, and I tried to convey my desperation. She smiled the smile that could bring the world to its knees.

“You are so beautiful, Therese,” she said, her voice low, her words clear. “So beautiful.” I inhaled a shuddering breath. She took a step forward and leaned in to give me a kiss on the very corner of my mouth. I tried to reciprocate but she immediately moved back. “No, my love. Not yet.” I closed my eyes in despair. Surely I was on the verge of heart failure, surely she was going to take pity on me. She emitted a low hum and I forced my eyelids open. “You smell so fucking good,” she whispered, her voice little more than a rasp.

I moaned, suddenly convinced that she was going to be the death of me as I felt more of my liquefied desire leave me, trailing along the insides of my thighs. My breathing was so erratic, my chest heaving, and I desperately tried to think of something, anything, to say, anything that would show my defeat, my surrender, anything to make her touch me. My mind somehow landed on a word, but I was in such a heightened state of arousal that it took me a few seconds to remember how to talk again. I licked my dry lips, closing my eyes in concentration. “Oh, please …” I whimpered. “Please, Carol …”

She waited for me to open my eyes before replying. “Please what?”

Fuck. This was agony and ecstasy, light and dark, exquisite and devastating. “Please … take me … touch me … oh, god …”

She continued to eye me and it took all I had to remain upright. Just when I thought that she’d never so much as kiss me ever again, she walked closer and cupped my sex with her hand, and I could have wept. She sucked in air between her teeth, her breathing becoming as disjointed as mine. “Oh, my darling Therese,” she marvelled, glorious blue eyes locking onto mine, “You’re soaking.” I nodded frantically, moving my hips, and she quickly took her hand away again. “Not yet.”

I released a feeble whine, not caring about how pathetic or needy or desperate I sounded. I was all of those things; I doubted very much that it was a secret.

“Tell me what you want,” she said, and though her voice sounded calmer again, I could hear the tremor lurking within.

“You,” I gasped. “I … I need you to … to touch me.” I was about to unravel completely, I knew, and so I spoke directly from my heart, from my soul, from my core. “Please, Carol. I need …” I took a shaky breath. “I need you to fuck me … to make me yours.”

Her eyes widened slightly and I saw her throat constrict as she swallowed. “Lie down on the bed,” she said, the urgency in her words clear.

Relief threatened to submerge me completely as I turned and slowly headed for the bed, afraid my legs might give way if I applied any more speed. I almost fell onto the mattress, hurriedly moving onto the middle of the bed before positioning myself on my back and lying down. My jaw went slack as I saw Carol quickly undressing. In the time it had taken me to follow her instruction, she was already down to just her panties, and I stared at her in awe, my own body and its wants forgotten for
a moment, as I looked at her full breasts, her strong yet curved frame, raising myself up on my elbows as she slid her underwear down her legs. My god. She was flawless, as if constructed simply to show the world a perfect specimen of a human being. She looked up, catching me in the act of watching her, and smiled, though I saw fire in her eyes as she came closer to the bed, deftly climbing atop it and crawling up until she was kneeling beside my waist. Her hair fell about her face as she looked down at me, the adoration and love and want that she bestowed upon me taking my breath away.

I arched my back slightly in an attempt to remind her that I would burst into flames if she made me wait a single second longer, and she quickly moved until she was straddling my stomach. I tried to recall how to breathe in as I felt her sex directly against my skin, felt her slick lips leave the most delicious traces of her as she pressed down on me. She held my breasts in her hands, and I felt my nipples rub against her palms, my eyes fluttering shut at the contact. She was a goddess, a master of her art, and I worshipped her at her feet, a willing slave to the magic she possessed. Her hands left my breasts and my eyes opened again, wary and pitiful as I regarded her. She smiled again as she leaned forward, her hands on the mattress at either side of my head. She stayed mere inches above my face for a few seconds as I stared up at her eyes, before moving in, kissing me roughly, her lips energetic and delectably ferocious as they moved from my mouth to just below my ear, causing me to moan loudly, my sex aching and clenching and drenching the blanket beneath me.

She moved her lips to my jaw and then shifted down my stomach slightly to attack my throat. I trembled at both the sensation of her lips and the glorious wetness pooled on my stomach. I was buckling under the sensory overload my body was going through, and I clung onto her back, sinking my fingers into her creamy skin. She sucked at my skin, softly at first and then harder, marking me as hers, and I pulled her as close as I possibly could, bringing my legs up and feeling the base of her back pressed against my thighs. I wanted to drown in her, to give all of myself, now and forever, to make a million promises that I would spend the rest of my life keeping. All I could do was moan and whimper and gasp helplessly as she took me to places I hadn’t known existed.

She moved back, admiring the mottled skin of my neck for a moment, before meeting my dazed eyes. “I love you, Therese,” she whispered. “I love you more than you could ever know. You are mine, and I am yours, my darling girl.”

“I … I love you, too,” I murmured with a small nod. “Always yours.”

Her luscious lips turned up into a smile, and I stared up at her in wonder, before she lifted her leg and climbed off of me. I frowned at the loss of contact, feeling empty and cold without her touch, my body fizing with need as I watched her. She moved down the bed, pulling at my thighs until she had enough room to sit between my legs. As soon as I felt her hands, I complied, gratitude tearing through me as she kneeled before me. She looked up, that smile still in place. “I want to try something,” she said quietly. I would have tried anything, anything at all, if it had meant she would feed my voracious appetite. I nodded mutely.

She raised herself up and leaned over me, her breasts against my abdomen as her mouth found my right nipple. As soon as I felt the very tip of her tongue, I groaned, arching my back, trying to force my breast further into her mouth. She resisted, flicking my nipple over and over again until I fell back into the mattress, my mouth open, my hand fisting in her hair, the other resting helplessly across my forehead, as the room filled with my increasingly unsteady breathing. She sucked my nipple into her mouth and I cried out, my back curving again in spite of myself as she rolled it around her tongue, one way and then the other, starting slow and increasing the pace. A hand came to my other breast, her fingers plucking at my nipple and teasing it with varying pressure. I couldn’t make sense of what was happening, aside from knowing without doubt that I never wanted it to end, my mind was thoroughly scattered, my eyes squeezed shut. I felt something begin to build, though, as I’d never
experienced it without full sex before I couldn’t quite understand what it was.

She didn’t stop, working my nipples expertly, making me pant and ache and mewl as she played my body with the finesse of a violin player, hitting every note and sending me higher and higher. I could feel my legs start to shake, a deep warmth spreading through me as my body climbed the scales to the crescendo, and I could feel myself on the very precipice of a cliff’s edge, ready to succumb completely, ready to dive into the welcoming abyss that awaited me.

“Oh, god …” I hissed, my eyes squeezing tighter, the curve of my back taut. I could feel my pelvis rocking of its own accord, hitting her abdomen with each thrust. “Oh, Carol … oh, god, Carol … oh …” The words tumbled unbidden from my lips as my body coiled like a spring, and still she continued. It was excruciatingly pleasurable as I continued to rise before my whole body jerked and I fell, helpless, unaware of the tears on my cheeks as my entire being dissolved into spasms, my arm over my eyes, suspended in this endless moment of mental and physical incoherence. She slowed her pace as I slowly landed back on earth, my pants piercing the air, my body slowly relaxing until only small tremors remained, and then she pulled back. I couldn’t open my eyes, still trying to find my place in this world again, my limbs now feeling like jello, dumbstruck at the realisation I had come from mere looks and Carol playing with my nipples, astounded at how intense it had felt.

I felt the mattress move slightly, then the palms of her hands on the inner sides of my knees, and she pushed so that they fell even further apart. I tried to open my eyes, but they refused, and so I relied on my other senses to inform me of what she was doing. I heard her inhale quickly, a sound close to a growl escaping her lips, and I finally coerced my eyelids into obeying. As soon as I caught a glimpse, they flew open, watching as Carol paid close attention to my sex, her face set with such concentration and awe that I rose up on my elbows again. I honestly hadn’t thought that I’d have anything left in me, what with the torturous run up to my earth-shattering orgasm, but seeing her there caused my core to twitch lazily, and my eyes widened in response. I was almost certain that this was not normal, but I couldn’t bring myself to worry about that, allowing my body to take control once more. Actually, ‘allowing’ is probably the wrong word. That would indicate that I had any choice in the matter. I didn’t. It simply blocked out every other thought than those concerning my rising arousal, and I continued to watch her with bated breath as my nerves sprung back to life, my heart, only just having started to calm down, now picking up the pace.

She continued to stare at the apex of my thighs for a long moment, and then, with great care, she moved her hand, her fingers brushing my entrance, and I jerked. Taking her hand away, she lifted it, and I saw her forefinger glisten. She looked at me directly then, every action pronounced as she brought her finger to her lips and sucked on it for a moment, her eyes closing. That was it. That was all it took to have me painfully aching for her again. It was so primal, so sensual and erotic, that I was practically panting by the time she opened them again. I couldn’t tear my gaze away as she smiled seductively.

“You taste divine,” she stated, blue eyes burning. “Fuck,” she whispered. My walls clenched desperately. She rose up on her knees again, and I was beyond thankful that her own desire meant that she was no longer in any mood to tease me. She reached over, putting her left hand beside my head, not offering any warning as she plunged two fingers inside me. I shot up further on my elbows, my face coming into contact with her shoulder, my knees throwing themselves up to my stomach, a hoarse groan ripping itself from the back of my throat. Falling back into the mattress, my eyes sought out hers, her pupils dilated, irises scorching, and they were filled with a lust so visceral that my core contracted around her fingers. She moaned, her eyes never leaving mine as she pulled her fingers out to the very tips and slammed them back in again, this time curling them around my front wall as she did so.

“Ah!” I cried, and I’m sure my eyes started rolling upwards. She stayed there for a couple of seconds,
pressing down with her fingers, and I was rendered incapable of emitting sound as pleasure tore through me, leaving me helpless. She did it again, and again, speeding up with each thrust, and I accepted her fully. When she retreated completely, I felt bereft, looking up at her in bewilderment, and she stared right back. A second later and I understood, as she slowly entered three fingers inside me. My eyes widened as I felt myself stretch around her, and her eyes watched me carefully as I adjusted. Any minor discomfort I felt passed almost instantly, whether that be due to her gentle care or my heightened state of arousal, and I pushed down on her fingers as much as I could, given my position, to let her know I wanted, no, needed, her to carry on.

She pulled them back steadily, before pushing back in, a slight question in her eyes as she was doing it. I nodded, and a sensual smile played on her lips as she curved her fingers again, and her movements quickened as she established a rhythm. We were fucking, there was no doubt about it, and it felt magnificent, her fingers thrusting into me, as far as they would go, curving in a way that drove me to the very edge of insanity, every single time, and then retreating, only to do the same thing all over again. It was rough, carnal, crude, and I loved it, my core clutching at her fingers, trying to draw her in deeper, never wanting to let her go.

“Open your eyes, Therese,” she breathed unsteadily, and I forced them open, releasing a fevered groan as I saw the passion on her face, her lips parted as her eyes unapologetically burned into mine. I could feel myself build again, but I could utter no words, no warning, no plea as I climbed to dizzying heights. My body, yet again, did my talking for me, as my slick entrance sounded out every time she re-entered, perspiration dripping from my forehead, clinging to my skin, my mouth open, vocal cords useless, my eyes desperately locked onto hers, urgency written across my face. I wanted to scream, shout, tell her I loved her, that I needed her, that I was hers, for now and for always, that she was my air and my life and my everything, but I couldn’t, throat constricted as fire spread from my core, my every nerve wound oh so tightly.

Her movements became harsher, faster, slamming deeper within me with every thrust, and I welcomed it with a gratitude that brought tears to my eyes. I forced myself to keep them open, to watch her, and my head spun, feeling as though I was in limbo. It felt like heaven, hell, and everything in between as my body surrendered, a feral cry ripping through me as I came violently around her fingers, again and again, my core muscles gripping her forcefully, and I could keep my eyes open no more, my body convulsing, breathless pants filling the air as I submitted completely. It felt like forever as I remained imprisoned under her spell, my eyelids scrunching together, my hand clawing at the blanket, the other gripping the edge of the mattress as though trying to anchor myself as I flew higher than the stars, plummeted lower than the oceans.

I couldn’t tell you how long it lasted, as I fell through all of space and time, spasms and jerks and ripples racking my body without mercy, but, eventually, I relaxed, completely undone as I melted into the mattress, trembling as she gently removed her fingers from inside of me. My legs hit the bed, falling completely apart, my arms limp at my sides, and my eyelids felt so heavy, but I longed to see her face. The wonder and love in her eyes as she looked down on me made my heart constrict painfully, and I lifted a heavy arm, resting my palm on her back, needing to touch her.

“You’re magnificent,” she murmured, her voice soft and brimming with adoration.

I managed a weak smile. “I love you, Carol.”

She brushed my sweaty hair from my face and then leaned forward, delivering a kiss that was so delicate, so gentle, that I could have cried. “My angel,” she whispered against my lips before pulling back, rising back onto her knees and stretching the muscles in her back. I stared at her perfect form, her breasts high on her chest, her dusty pink nipples, her supple shoulders pulled back, and, with
renewed energy and passion, I knew with absolute conviction that the night was far from over.
The Bathtub

I felt sore, my back, arms and thighs emitting a dull ache as I walked down the stairs, but I could not have cared less, a wide smile refusing to leave my lips as I thought back to the previous night. It had been in the early hours of the morning when Therese and I had finally collapsed in an exhausted, heated, sticky heap, breathing heavily as we clung to each other. I remembered feeling exhilarated and bone-tired, satiated after gorging on her for hours, shaky and weak from being the subject of her talented ministrations again and again, and it was only my strong need for a post-coital cigarette that caused me to rise a few minutes later, pausing to give Therese a lingering kiss before standing on legs that I wasn’t overly certain would support me, and crossing over to the tall wardrobe, reaching inside and retrieving the long blue robe that I knew would be in there.

After wrapping the robe tightly around me, grateful that it fell mid-calf, I left the room, completely unsurprised to hear Georgia Gibbs drifting up the stairs, the party evidently still underway. Heading downstairs quietly, I quickly approached the kitchen, relieved to see it was empty, and made a beeline for my cigarettes and lighter, still on the counter next to the brandy I had left there when I’d fervently dragged Therese to the bedroom. About to try my upmost to stealthily disappear upstairs again, I stopped to pour a large glass of water, bringing it to my dry lips and draining a good portion of it, and then refilling it again. Though conversation still sounded from the living room, I deduced that most of the guests had already left, only those with excessive stamina seeing the party through to the very end.

Having successfully navigated my way up to Therese without being noticed, I opened the door, slipping inside and closing it behind me before turning back to the bed. She was sitting up, the blanket we had been laying on now pulled up around her chest, eyes wide. “Oh, my god,” she whispered, and I stopped, bewildered. I suppose she saw it on my face, because she shook her head, appearing mortified. “Do you think Abby heard us?”

She looked positively adorable sitting in the middle of the bed, clutching the blanket around her, her hair dishevelled, and her green eyes seeking reassurance. I chuckled, walking to the bed and handing her the glass. “If I know Abby, and, trust me, I very much do, she is likely to be passed out in a corner somewhere.”

My smile widened now at the memory, and I waited until I had reached the bottom of the stairs to turn to Therese, her eyes still containing some lingering hesitation as they met mine. I reached over to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, and then leaned in. “Don’t worry,” I murmured. “Everything’s going to be all right.” I heard her release a sigh, felt her warm breath on my neck, and pulled back, taking her hand in my own and leading her to the kitchen. As soon as we entered, I saw Abby, her back to us as she sat at the table, her hunched shoulders and dropped head signifying that she was paying, yet again, for her wild ways.

“Good morning,” I said loudly, unable to resist, pressing my lips together to stop a laugh as she jumped, a hand flying up to her head.

“Hush!” she groaned miserably, unable to even turn around.

I rounded the table and sat down opposite her, Therese taking the seat beside me. “What’s wrong?” I asked, and she fixed me with an unimpressed glare.

“I’m dying,” she said morosely, her face pitiful as she returned her gaze to the coffee in front of her. “I mean, I’m not kidding. I think this is what death feels like.”
“Ah,” I nodded. I looked over to Therese, unable to hide my smirk. “Would you like a coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

I nodded and rose to my feet, only taking, at most, three steps before Abby spoke up. “Do I not deserve sympathy? I’m on my deathbed, and all you can do is ask your girl if she wants coffee?” I smiled to myself, glad of the fact she couldn’t see my face, and carried on walking over to the percolator. “She is cruel,” she muttered to Therese. “I don’t know how you put up with her.”

Therese chuckled lightly, and I remember forgetting all about my ribbing with Abby for a moment, pausing in my effort to refill the percolator, temporarily entranced by the sound. I loved hearing Therese laugh, the noise almost musical as it floated through the air and pleasantly assaulted my eardrums. It might have been my favourite sound in the world. An unbidden memory burst forth in my mind, of Therese raggedly calling my name as she came, and I inhaled sharply. Upon reflection, perhaps it was my second favourite sound. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, before forcing myself to focus on the task at hand.

“How is it that you two look as perky as a couple of fluffy kittens, while I’m sitting here genuinely considering calling up my lawyer to prepare my will?”

I turned around, leaning against the worktop, my hands gripping the edges on each side, and saw Therese shrug kindly, though her lips twitched as she fought back a smile. I caught her gaze and shook my head in amusement. “You know,” I opined, looking back to my forlorn friend, “One of the things I really admire and respect about you, Abby, is how you never exaggerate. It’s so refreshing.”

“Oh, fuck off!” she huffed, and I laughed. She turned her attention to Therese. “If you could be a doll and give her a polish around the edges, just to try and make her a bit less like the Wicked Witch of the West,” she shot me another dark look, “and a bit more like Glinda, I would love you for eternity.”

Therese grinned. “I’ll do my best.” I rotated on the spot as I heard the percolator boiling, and she continued. “How is Edie?”

Abby imparted a pitiful sigh. “She’s perfectly delightful. Bounced right out of bed this morning, chipper as anything as she got ready for work. I don’t know how you all do it.”

“How much did you have to drink?!?”

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t even know. All I know is that, at some point, Edie came looking for me and had to wake me up after I had fallen asleep in the bathtub.”

Drinks poured, I turned, working hard to curb my merriment as I saw Therese’s wide eyes fill with disbelief and Abby’s doleful expression. I set down a coffee in front of Therese and then retook my seat, putting my coffee down and offering my cigarette case around before taking one for myself.

“The bathtub?” Therese repeated, the cigarette dangling from her fingers, blind to the lighter I had slid across the table.

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“I tilted my head, as if in thought, and exhaled, grey smoke swirling in the air before disappearing. “Personally, I think your ultimate low was when you climbed into Annie’s mother’s bed, thinking it was your own, and caused her to wake the whole house up with her screams the next morning.” I spied Therese’s jaw drop.
Abby tutted in disgust. “For the last time, that was ten years ago! It happened once! I sent her flowers for Christ’s sake! If she can let it go, why can’t you?!”

Therese collapsed into peals of laughter, and it was so infectious that I couldn’t help but join her, our mirth mingling in the air and reverberating off the walls. I made a genuine attempt to calm myself down, but made the mistake of looking at her again, biting down on her lip with force as she tried to contain her own giggles, and I started again, cheeks aching as I held my stomach and my vision became blurred, the hilarity overtaking me causing my cigarette to burn away in the ashtray unnoticed. I wiped at my eyes, unable to remember the last time I had lost it so completely, past the point of even making much sound as I continued to descend into joyful madness.

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“Madame,” I said, presenting the chicken and vegetable pie I had just retrieved from the stove with a flourish, a thrill of delight rushing through me as I observed Therese’s responding smile. God, I would do anything to see that smile.

“This smells wonderful,” she said, and I murmured my agreement as I seated myself opposite her, my kitchen table decidedly bigger than the one in her apartment.

It was nearly 7 p.m., and the sun had just set as we tucked into our evening meal. We had only reached my apartment two hours or so before, not having left Abby’s until just past noon, and then driving to the East River, taking lunch in a small diner before taking a stroll. I’d felt elated all day, as though in a dream, unable to wipe the smile from my face. I cannot express to you how much it meant to me, to be able to spend the morning with my best friend and the woman I loved, watching them as they laughed and got to know each other further. From the beginning, both had been cautious with one another, both wary of the other’s motives, but you wouldn’t have guessed that by looking at them, deep in conversation at one point, then joshing with each other. It had warmed my heart when Abby had pulled Therese in for a hug as we left, though I cannot deny that I was eager to leave and have Therese to myself once more.

Although the sky had been overcast, the air had been warm and the stroll by the river had been pleasant as we talked casually. Therese told me about how much she had enjoyed the party, how awestruck she had been by the laidback environment, how deeply it had resonated with her, and I’d smiled, recounting to her my similar memories of the first time I had accepted an invite to a party after discovering who I was. It moved me enormously to know how Therese had treasured the experience, much like I had all that time ago.

We spoke of Eisenhower, discussed Vincent R. Impellitteri, the current New York mayor, and the possible implications that the mayoral election being undertaken later in the year could present, and then moved on to lighter topics, such as a small production that she was interested in seeing at the Black Cat Theater, and how the trees near the Times Annex were starting to fully bloom. That’s one of the things I loved most about Therese, the ease and fluidity of conversation, how she could talk at length about politics, her forehead faintly creased as she became impassioned about the subject, and then, the next minute, she could bounce on her heels like an excited child as she told me about the photographs she had taken on the way to work the previous morning. She was so smart, so well-informed, interested in anything and everything around her, and I always found myself intellectually stimulated while in her company.

“Mm,” she mumbled now, pulling me from my thoughts as I looked up at her. “This is so good.”

I smiled, swallowing my mouthful before replying. “It’s one of my specialities … one of my few specialities, so I’m glad you like it. It is likely we will be having it often.” She grinned, her glorious dimples showing, her eyes shining like they had all day. How was she so beautiful? How was she
mine? My heart suddenly soared as I watched her, as it so frequently did in these quiet moments we shared.

“I think I can live with that.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

We ate the rest of our meal in silence, but it was a comfortable silence, one that didn’t beg to be filled with unnecessary small talk, one that felt as natural and as comforting to me as it would if I were alone, perhaps more so. Given my private and detached disposition, I suppose it was inevitable that I had always derived pleasure from spending time on my own, but the past few months had turned my once-friendly relationship with silence into one filled with misgivings and dread. We were currently experimenting with a truce of sorts, my own company and I, though I doubted I would ever fully trust it again. We had been through too much, it had reared up against me so cruelly, and now I knew the full extent of its nature. It could be a dear friend, certainly, but it could also, in the blink of an eye, reveal itself to be my harshest tormentor, the harbinger of my demons, ravaging me without mercy, any semblance of our past friendship forgotten.

Everything felt so much easier when Therese was around, so much more enjoyable and all-encompassing; I found myself with a far greater ability to be able to enjoy the quiet, enjoy my thoughts, enjoy every minute and all that surrounded me. I’d never felt more comfortable with another human being than I did with her, as though she wasn’t a separate entity at all, as though she was the part of me that made me whole and at peace with myself and the world around me, the part I hadn’t even been able to acknowledge had been missing until that morning in Frankenberg’s. For as much as she was mine, I would forever, without option, without regret, without doubt, be hers.
I shrugged out of my favourite coat, kicked off my black heels and padded down the hallway to the closet, hanging my coat up inside and moving into the kitchen, acutely aware that caffeine was a must. It hadn’t long passed 2 p.m. on that Wednesday, but I could feel my energy flagging as I set about sorting the percolator, pausing to place my hand on the small of my back and stretch, before returning the appliance to the stove and hoping it would boil quickly.

It was my first week of working at Madeleine’s and, while I was enjoying it, I found myself feeling drained by the time I left for the day. It was a small but reputable company, not known to many, not back then, anyway, but treasured among the customers and dealers, and highly regarded within the décor industry. Abby and I had encountered the business a few times in the days of running our own furniture store, and we’d both been impressed by the variety and quality of the pieces they had to offer.

The company employed three furniture buyers, myself included, and, during my interview, Malcolm had explained to me that the reason they were hiring another had been as a direct result of the expanding business. Madeleine’s was starting to pick up steam, and they needed to make sure they were fully prepared for an increased workload. I informed him of my strong work ethic, told him that I was both willing and capable of rising to any challenge put in front of me, and I suppose Nancy had offered him a summary of her own experience of working with me. Quite a few people had applied for the job and, had I been in a more positive mind-set when I had received the telephone call telling me of my success, I would have been delighted. One of the things that had most drawn me to that job in particular, aside from having previous knowledge of Madeleine’s reputation and Nancy, alongside the generous salary, was the hours. I would have weekends off, a definite requirement for spending time with Rindy, and three afternoons off during the week. Mondays and Tuesdays, I was scheduled to work the 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. shift, and Wednesdays through Fridays I started at 8 a.m. and finished at 2 p.m.

My first few days had been pleasant, but long, perhaps not in terms of actual time itself, but it was mentally taxing. I wasn’t expected to do much in those first few weeks except familiarising myself with what my role consisted of. I had made more phone calls than I could count, making my acquaintance with a long list of merchandisers that Madeleine’s dealt with, and I’d spent much of that Wednesday hunched over my desk reading the inventory and flicking through a voluminous journal which predicted upcoming trends. There were so many names to remember, so many introductions to be made, all the while maintaining a professional smile on my lips, and I wondered if I would ever remember them all.

Still, it was enjoyable. I’d forgotten how nice it was to wake up in the morning with somewhere to be, to blend in with the melee of other New Yorkers on their way to work, to have an office to call my own, and a job in which I felt comfortable and confident. Nancy was good company, witty and intelligent, and Vera, the other, much younger, buyer, was pleasant enough, though she did spend every available moment talking about her fiancé and how she longed for a baby. It started to grate by the fifth hour. The thing I most loved about it, I suppose, was having something of my own again. I’d underestimated how much I had missed it.

The sound of the percolator boiling roused me from my musings, and I poured myself a cup, sniffing deeply as the aroma of coffee swelled up around me. I picked it up and headed into the bedroom. I would be meeting Therese at 5 p.m., and we had planned to go back to her apartment. I hadn’t seen her last night, though she had met me from Madeleine’s on Monday, a bright smile on her face as she waited under a tree right next to the entrance, and we had picked up some Chinese food and come
back to mine. I’d been ravenous, and so had she, and so we had forgone the inclusion of plates to our meal entirely, sitting cross-legged on my living room floor and scooping the delicious contents up out of the containers they had been packed in, as I fielded numerous questions about my first day and she had told me about how her day at the Times had been, Jo Stafford’s dulcet tones coming from the record player providing the perfect backdrop.

At one point, I had looked over to her and found her wrestling with a forkful of particularly elusive noodles, chasing her fork with an open mouth as she tried to catch them, inadvertently getting sauce on her cheeks, her chin and her nose. I’d laughed as I watched her, putting down my own meal to offer her a small round of applause once she had managed it, laughing more as I’d noted her eyes set in faux disgruntlement, handing her something to wipe her face with.

It was moments like those that were some of the ones I cherished most. It was extraordinary, how it felt like the most normal thing in the world, and yet how she also felt like my own personal miracle. It felt so intimate, so natural and comfortable, but I still had times where I almost had to pinch myself to make sure she was there at all. It was a contradiction in the best of ways, stupefying yet normal, magical yet mundane, and I held those moments close to my heart, drawing upon them for strength and reassurance whenever she wasn’t near. I don’t know if she truly knows just how truthfully and vehemently I meant it when I called her my angel, when I told her she was flung out of space. She was. I was not a believer of religion, but, fuck, I was a believer of her, of us.

I smiled as I thought of her, eagerly awaiting 5 p.m., but aware that there was something I needed to do first. I settled down on the bed, nausea abruptly welling in my stomach, putting my coffee on the bedside table, my eyes glued to the telephone. With a deep breath, I lifted the receiver, using the rotary dial to select a sequence of numbers that I knew well, clearing my throat as I heard the ringing in my ear.

“Hargess Aird. Hello,” Harge answered a few seconds later, each word clipped, his tone brisk.

“Harge, it’s Carol,” I said, infinitely grateful that my voice had managed to retain its usual coolness.

“Carol?” he replied quickly, and then he paused. “What do you want?” he continued brusquely.

“I think you know, Harge.”

“I told you,” he snapped, “I need to think.”

“And I need to see my daughter!” I retorted, momentarily allowing my anger and anxiety win out, immediately wanting to kick myself for such a lapse in control. I knew he was being pigheaded, and he did, too. I could even understand why, knowing him and his ego as I did, but I had given him enough time, more than I believe he deserved, and the absence of Rindy from my life was becoming more unbearable by the day. Since I had found the courage to step up and call him the previous Friday, I found my patience to be waning. Therese had encouraged me to call him again, and I knew she was right. That said, I needed to play this carefully, lest I wound his pride beyond anything I could even begin to try to repair. I inhaled slowly, closing my eyes and pinching the bridge of my nose. “Harge, don’t do this. It’s been weeks.”

“Do you think this is easy for me, Carol?”

I bit back a rash comment. “I don’t think it’s been easy on anyone,” I responded quietly, “Least of all Rindy.” I could just picture him, sitting as his desk, telephone clamped tightly to his ear, torn between wanting to play the victimised husband and the decent father, his face taut, a vein on his forehead becoming prominent. If I can be so honest, in that moment, all I felt for him was pity. I had never loved Harge, but there had been a time when I had respected him, and it seemed like such a
distant memory as I waited to see which direction he would take.

“Don’t bring her into this.”

My pity was instantly replaced with a loathing so deep that I wanted to go down to his office right that minute and strangle him with the telephone cord. I focused on releasing my breath as quietly and as slowly as possible. “She is in this, Harge,” I tried to explain, hoping he hadn’t reached the stage of being beyond all reason. He wasn’t a stupid man, not by a long shot, but he had a tendency to allow his emotions to override all thought when it came to his personal life. “I know that you are still angry at me. I know you will likely be angry at me for a long time. I’ve apologised for not being the wife you needed or deserved. But, I also know how much you love Rindy. If you want to punish me, that’s okay, I understand. I can take it. Just please, please, don’t punish our daughter.”

That is what I needed to say him, away from the ears of Jerry, who would undoubtedly feed him with such poison and vitriol as to leave him vengeful and reticent to the best interests of our child, and that is why I had decided to forgo the use of lawyers, entirely. Even if he slammed the phone down on me now, I knew he would take in all I had to say, and that it would replay in his mind until he understood what I was saying and why I was saying it. I just wished he had the capacity to separate his anger at me from what was best for Rindy, without me having to direct him to do so.

I heard him sigh. “She misses you,” he admitted.

Tears sprang to my eyes, my heart yanking painfully, and I wrapped an arm around my stomach. I couldn’t speak for a long moment, closing my eyes tightly, recalling her bright smile. Christ, I missed my baby so much. I silently counted to ten and opened my eyes. “Tell her I miss her, too, and that I will see her soon, won’t you?”

There was a small beat. “Okay.”

“When, Harge? When can I see her?”

“I don’t …”

“When?” I interrupted, reaching for my cigarettes, retrieving one from the case and fumbling for my lighter. “If you want it supervised, it can be supervised, but it needs to be soon.”

“I …” He sounded so hesitant that I believed he was going to refuse me, and I felt determination flow through me. Hearing that Rindy missed me only added further fuel, and I knew that I wouldn’t take no for an answer. Not anymore. Not with regards to my daughter. He sighed again. “Saturday. Come to the house. Florence will be there.”

I felt weak with relief, sinking back into the headboard, excitement at the thought of seeing Rindy causing my nausea and rising anger to be decimated at once. Unwilling to let him know the extent of my gratitude, I clutched the phone tightly in my hand and focused on calming myself. “That’s fine. What time?”

“Say noon? I’ll be out on the golf course until about three. I want you gone by the time I get back.”

I ignored the surliness in his voice, too filled with joy to pay much attention. “Noon it is.” I stared at the cigarette, still unlit, in my hand, abruptly realising I no longer needed nor wanted it. “Thank you, Harge.”

“Yes, well, I’ve got to go. I’m busy. Carol, I …” There was something akin to sadness in his voice, and I knew that he wanted to say more, but was trying to hold himself back. A second later, I heard the dial tone. I returned the receiver to its cradle and closed my eyes. It was a messy, unpleasant
situation we had found ourselves in, and, if it wasn’t for Rindy, I would have sorely regretted ever marrying him in the first place. Rindy. A wide smile pulled at my lips, and I leaned back against the headboard and looked up to the ceiling. In just a few days, I’d be seeing my beautiful girl. My heart rejoiced, my arms aching to hold her again.

I looked at my watch, slightly disheartened when I noted I still had over two hours to wait until I could see Therese again. I couldn’t wait to tell her, to share my wonderful news with the person I loved most. I was brimming with exhilaration, fit to burst, and I knew I couldn’t keep such progress to myself. I lifted the phone again, dialling Abby’s number and fidgeting restlessly as I waited for her to answer.
I pulled up flush against the sidewalk, removed my sunglasses and turned to Therese. “Are you sure I look all right?” I asked, bringing a hand up to touch my hair, pressing my lips together to ensure, for what must have been the tenth time since we had left my apartment, that my lipstick was evenly applied.

She smiled, that glorious smile that displayed her dimples, and turned her body to face me directly. “You look beautiful,” she assured, her eyes wide with sincerity, her tone genuine. “You always do.” She watched me for a few seconds. “It’s going to be fine. More than fine! I bet Rindy can’t wait to see you.”

I smiled in spite of myself, the excitement resulting from the very mention of Rindy’s name giving my nerves a temporary reprieve. “I hope so.” I fixed my eyes upon Therese’s. “And you’ll have a good day?”

“Of course,” she replied easily. “I promised I would meet Dannie for something to eat ages ago. I haven’t really had a chance to talk to him since I started at the Times. And then I need to do some shopping, and hopefully fit a bit of reading in. It will be nice.”

I nodded. “Good.”

“You’ll come to mine when you’re back?”

“Yes, my darling. I shan’t be late.”

She smiled and then reached for her bag, lifting it onto her lap and rifling through it. “Here,” she said, pulling out the camera I hadn’t known had been in there and holding it out to me. I glanced at it and then looked back up at her. “Take it. I thought it would be nice if you could take a photograph of Rindy, a recent one. Maybe Florence would take one of you both, too. I’ve set the film up ready, all you need to do is remember to take this off,” she popped the lens cap into her hand to show me, and then replaced it, “and wind this bit,” her fingers closed around the film winding knob, “one full turn just before you want to take a photograph. And then you simply press the shutter release button.” She looked at me from the camera. “I’ve focused it already, but I’m also going to give you the manual for the camera, so look in there if you need to do anything else to it.” She pressed it into my hand, then retrieved the manual and passed it over. “I’ll develop them tonight for you.”

I was silent for a moment, so deeply touched by her kindness and consideration, not only of the time I would be spending with my daughter this afternoon, but of having some physical memory to bring back with me. She was a magnificent woman, filled with so many qualities that had the capacity to leave me without words, and I remember thinking fiercely of how lucky I was to have her, how I would never take her for granted, never forget how her very existence saved me from myself. She’d told me of all the things I had brought to her life, but she hadn’t the faintest idea of how thoroughly and completely she had enriched mine. My heart constricted tightly as I drank in her endlessly beautiful face. “You are amazing,” I murmured when I had regained the ability to speak.

Her lips quirked up again, her cheeks turning pink. “Thank you.”

“I mean it. I love you, Therese.” I reached over for her hand, momentarily not caring that we were parked on a busy Manhattan street on a Saturday morning. I gripped her hand tightly in my own for a few seconds and then pulled back, checking my watch as I did so. It was nearing 9:15 a.m., and it would take me most of that time, if not all of it, dependant on traffic, to make the trip to New Jersey.
I sighed and looked back up at her. Her smile was still there, her eyes on me as she blindly sorted out her bag and got ready to depart.

“I love you, too,” she said after a moment. “So much. I can’t wait to see you again later. Today will be fine, Carol. Try not to worry.”

“I will. I’ll see you this afternoon, my love.” I watched her step out of the car onto the sidewalk, turning back to give me a little wave. I smiled, not moving for a moment until finally starting the ignition back up and pulling out onto the street. Was it crazy to be missing her already? Perhaps. But that’s how it was, my heart pining for her as soon as I was subjected to her absence. I put on my sunglasses again and tried to focus all of my attention on the road. I knew it like the back of my hand, but I was hoping to distract myself from my thoughts as I embarked on the journey to see Rindy.

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I thanked the waitress as she put my late breakfast in front me, ham, eggs, buttered toast, and a cold glass of pineapple juice, and then watched as she placed Dannie’s enormous stack of pancakes before him, along with a coffee. He patted his stomach eagerly when she turned away and I smiled, privately wondering where he would manage to fit it all, though experience had told me he would somehow do it. He reached for the maple syrup, applying it so liberally that, by the time he had finished, his pancakes were all but swimming on the plate. I shook my head in bemusement and scooped up a forkful of egg.

I liked this diner. It didn’t have the prestige that the rest of the bars and restaurants in the area had, but I think that was part of its charm. It was relatively cheap, the waitresses were always smiling and upbeat, and the food they served was homely and comforting, as though cooked with a hearty lashing of love. I hadn’t known of it until a couple of months previous. It had taken me a while after Chicago to re-enter the world again, and it was only at Dannie’s insistence that I did so. He’d pleaded with me every two or three days to leave the safety of my apartment and go for a walk with him or grab something to eat, and I think I finally accepted out of frustration at his persistence, rather than a want to do it myself. He’d introduced me to this little diner, with its brightly patterned walls and worn red booths, and I’d liked it immediately.

“How is Louise?” I asked after I had swallowed.

He grinned and he suddenly looked like a schoolboy, a comparison helped massively by the maple syrup dripping from his chin. He grabbed a napkin and wiped at it. “She’s good,” he replied. “She’s really good. She said to say hi. She’s at her sister’s today.”

He’d been dating Louise for a few months, and I had met her quite a few times. She was lovely; warm and kind and perfectly suited to Dannie. I smiled. “We’ll have to arrange next time for a day when she’s not busy.” He nodded, his mouth full, and I followed suit, biting into my toast and savouring the butter running over my tongue.

“So, what’s been going on, Therese? What’s happened to make you look so … happy?!” He noticed my raised eyebrows. “I don’t mean that you looked miserable before, I just … well, you did look pretty miserable,” he conceded with an affable grin.

I chuckled. “How on earth you managed to get a girl like Louise with lines like those will forever be a mystery to me.”

“I didn’t need lines. My handsome looks were enough.” He nodded firmly, and then fell into a shrug. “And when that didn’t work, I begged and pleaded with her every day for two weeks, if you
remember. Imagine how much longer it would have taken if it hadn’t been for my infallible charm.”

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my juice. I was so glad that whatever that very brief, painfully awkward, moment had been back in December was well and truly behind us. He’d proven himself to be a wonderful friend, my only friend, when my world had come crashing down around me, and I would be forever grateful to him for that. I had been initially worried that Louise might have felt jealous at him dragging me out for lunches or stopping by my apartment, but we’d got on well as soon as we had met, which had negated such concerns. I looked at him wryly. “You’d probably still be there now, or in a cell somewhere.”

He grinned. “Exactly. Fortunately for you, she accepted the love I had to offer, and I can still meet you in this lovely little dump.” He gulped at his coffee. “Anyway, what is with you? You look … different. Did you cut your hair or something?”

I laughed as he stared at me suspiciously. “Not since you last saw me, no.”

He looked genuinely perplexed as he chewed his pancakes slowly. “Huh. Did you …” He paused, and I could almost see steam coming out of his ears from the effort he was putting into trying to figure out the change in me. Suddenly, his eyes bulged, and he hurriedly swallowed his mouthful. “Is it …” He looked around the room, and then leaned slightly across the table. “Her?” he all but mouthed.

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling, busying myself with cutting up my ham and taking a bite. “It is, isn’t it!” he said. “Of course it is! She’s the only one who could make you look like you’ve died and gone to heaven. Holy shit, Belivet!”

“My pancakes are getting cold.”

“Who gives a shit about pancakes?” he remarked, then glanced down at his plate and back up at me. He moved back, picking up his cutlery. “Well, I do. But, seriously, Therese! What happened?!”

I sighed good-naturedly. I wasn’t very comfortable in general with regards to people prying into my personal life, but I knew that he was ecstatic for me. Anyway, he deserved to know after having to watch me dissolve into complete despair and misery for weeks on end. Aside from that, there was a pretty big part of me that wanted to shout from every rooftop in New York about how I felt, about the wonder of love, about the wonder of Carol. I had another sip of juice and then regarded him. “Well, it started two weeks ago, on the day of Phil’s party, actually …”

My stomach was in knots as I drove into New Jersey, my watch telling me that I still had a half hour to spare. The traffic had been surprisingly light for a Saturday, which I was thankful for, and my journey had been a smooth one. It felt strange, driving along the roads that had used to signal home to me. I hadn’t been back since I’d left almost seven weeks previous, but, being here now, it felt like only days had passed. So much had changed since my departure, I’d been through some staggeringly desolate lows, and some breathtakingly blissful highs, and yet, of course, everything around me looked exactly the same. It was a jarring experience, surrounded by an untouched landscape, while almost feeling like a different person, and it both unnerved me and filled me with untold happiness as I stared through the windshield at the road ahead.

I didn’t have time to analyse such a realisation, my thoughts elsewhere as I mindlessly took a left. In a matter of minutes, I would see Rindy, my baby, and my heart pounded at the thought. Generally speaking, I felt happier, more secure, more confident, and joyous, and at ease with myself, than I
could ever remember being, but something hadn't been right. I had Therese, the love of my life, and it had been made painfully clear to me that I couldn’t survive without her, but I missed Rindy so much.

I’d think of her every day, recount to Therese stories of her, and the sorrow her absence brought could leave me feeling physically stunned. I wondered how she was doing, what her new favourite activity was, if she was brushing her hair the way I’d taught her, how much she’d improved with her literacy and math, if someone was cooking her vegetables until they were slightly soft, the way she liked them. I thought often of her smile, her laugh, her little face when she got excited, the way her tongue rested on her top lip when she was really concentrating on something, the quiet murmur of her voice as she gently woke me up in the morning, the tremble of her bottom lip when she was upset.

I’d see mothers in the street with their children and have a powerful urge to stop them, to tell them how lucky they were, how they shouldn’t take anything for granted, how life could be cruel and husbands even crueler, how they needed to cherish every single minute because it could all be taken away. I didn’t, of course, but I had told Therese one night as we lay in bed, offloading on to her the sense of loss in my heart. She had been amazing, holding me tightly, telling me that everything was going to be all right, reminding me that it wasn’t going to be this way forever. I felt a smile on my lips as I realised she was right. After weeks of nothing, I was about to see my Rindy again.

I felt almost dizzy with anticipation as I took a right and turned into the driveway, slowing the car to a crawl and then shutting it off after pulling up next to the small metal fence. I let my hands drop from the wheel, allowing myself a single moment to collect myself, and then reached behind the passenger seat to retrieve the small bag I’d put there. It contained a few little pieces I had picked up for Rindy, just things I had seen while out, and I hoped she would like them. There were two colouring books, a big pack of colouring pencils with a pencil sharpener shaped like a rabbit, a sweet little soft teddy bear, and a small valise. She had played with my valise a lot, and evidently loved it, and when I had seen this one, almost the exact shade of brown as my own, I had bought it immediately, a smile on my face as I’d paid for it.

I looked at my watch. I was a couple of minutes early, but I simply could not bring myself to remain in my car any longer, knowing that Rindy was so close. I ran a hand over my hair, checked the mirror to make sure my makeup was still intact, and then reached for the door, opening it and stepping outside, reaching back in to collect the bag along with my handbag, heavier now with the camera in it. I retreated and shut the door, breathing in the warm air, hand hovering on the handle for a moment, and then smoothing down my grey dress. Exhaling slowly, I turned and walked towards the house, and I remember feeling distantly surprised at the size of it, almost an echo of how I had first felt when Harge had brought me there over ten years before.

I noticed a movement by the door, and had only just registered it when I heard a loud squeal. “Mommy!” I heard her cry, tears springing to my eyes as I saw her run towards me in a blur. I dropped to a crouch, arms outstretched, love and affection causing my heart to abruptly swell, and I found myself wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. “Mommy!” she shouted again, throwing her arms around my neck as she bounded into me with so much force that I almost fell backwards.

Her arms squeezed me tightly as my eyes closed, smelling her hair and pulling her as close to me as I could. “My baby,” I whispered, trying to keep the tremble from my voice, the tears at bay, revelling in her presence. “I’m here, kitten. Mommy’s here.”
The wheels rattled against the track as the train approached the end of another circuit, a bell ringing out to signify its completion, not breaking pace as it continued forth, paying no attention to the flashing red lights as it circled the town trapped at the centre. It was the first time I had seen Rindy play with it, and I smiled as I watched her eyes eagerly follow the train. My mind wandered as I thought back to that morning in Frankenberg’s, remembered watching that train hurtling forward with abandon, remembered meeting Therese’s gaze for the first time. I wondered how she was doing, if her day had been pleasant, and I found myself wishing, not for the first time, that she could have been here today. Alas, Florence probably would have fainted, and Harge would have thrown a fit, and, ultimately, I knew that it was important for Rindy and I to have some time to ourselves, even if Florence spent most of the afternoon hovering by the doorway, lest I suddenly decided to abduct Rindy, I suppose.

We had never liked each other, Florence and I; she had worked for the Aird family for decades, and she’d made it clear, right from the beginning, that her allegiance would always be to them. It was fine. She thought me cold and not good enough for Harge, I thought her a bitter woman who would probably benefit greatly from a night of rampant sex. Harge had no clue, too involved with his work to see that just beneath our cordial conversations lay an understanding of mutual dislike. In the last few months, she’d found it harder and harder to hide her distaste for me, though I suppose the fact that I wordlessly made it evident I could not care any less than I already did about her contempt only infuriated her further. That said, I could see she was making an effort this afternoon, and I had to admit that I was grateful for the distance she kept.

“Mommy?”

I blinked, so momentarily lost in my thoughts that I had been unaware of Rindy rising to her feet. “Yes, sweetheart?” She looked at me sombrely, and then walked around the trainset until she was right in front of me. I looked at her from where I was sitting on the floor, our eyes almost level. “Will you be very busy again?”

I frowned slightly. “When?”

She shifted from one foot to the other, and then moved forward to sit on my lap, our faces only inches apart. “When you go away.” Her small hands came up to cup my cheeks, her blue eyes wide and innocent as she looked into mine. My heart clenched. “Daddy says you’re very busy,” she added in a hushed voice. “That’s why you don’t hardly come home anymore.”

I worked hard to hide a scowl, to keep the abrupt flash of fury tearing through me from showing in my eyes. What the fuck did Harge think he was playing at? Telling my daughter that the reason I hadn’t seen her in weeks was because I was busy? Indirectly, or otherwise, implying that I couldn’t be bothered? That I had better things to do? It was a cowardly move to make, and the injustice of it gnawed at me. I seethed inwardly, promising myself that I would call Harge up and have him explain himself to me when I had calmed down. In the meantime, I had bigger, more pressing things to deal with.

“No, baby,” I said softly. “Mommy is busy, but I am never too busy to see you, Rindy. Never.” I moved my face closer, until our noses were touching, and then moved my head slowly from side to side, our noses meeting with every turn. It was our little thing, the Eskimo kiss, something I had done with her since she was just a few months old, and it had stuck. I pulled back slightly, smiling at the grin on her face. “I’m going to see you again, soon, kitten. I promise.”
“And I can see Aunt Abby?”

I nodded. “And you can see Aunt Abby.” Fuck Harge. “Perhaps not next time, but soon. How does that sound?”

Her little brow furrowed as she thought this over. It straightened out after a few seconds, and her beautiful smile returned. “Good.”

“Good!” I replied in a silly voice I reserved just for her, wrapping my arms around her snugly and scooping her up into a cuddle. She giggled in my ear, gripping onto me tightly, and I etched the feeling of her in my arms into my memory, savouring every second. “Now, munchkin,” I said lightly, squeezing her once and then pulling back, reluctantly aware of the time, “How about we go for a walk outside, and you can show me all of the pretty flowers that have bloomed?”

Her eyes grew bigger as she scrambled from my lap, springing to her feet and waiting impatiently for me to follow suit. I rose, slipping into my heels and turning to her, chuckling as I saw her outstretched hand. I took it, and she led me from the room, leaving me having to lengthen my strides to match her eager run. “There’s lots, Mommy!” she called behind her. “There are blue ones, and yellow ones, and white ones, and … and yellow ones … and …”

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Even though I’d been expecting it for about an hour or so, I still jumped when the intercom buzzer sounded, almost running to it in my haste to press the entry button, the delicious anticipation I always felt when I knew I would see Carol causing my stomach to flip as I opened the door, straining my ears to try and hear her ascend the stairs to my apartment. I guess it must be akin to how a child would feel on Christmas Eve, almost nauseous with excitement, feeling unable to wait one more second for the magical moment to arrive. That’s the closest thing I can compare it to, I think, but I felt that way every time, every single time I knew we would shortly be together again. She made hardly any noise on the stairs, as graceful as ever, and I had to stop myself from bouncing on the balls of my feet or bounding down the hallway to meet her as I waited.

My heart skipped a beat as she rounded the corner and finally came into view, and I once again wondered if it was like this for everyone. I couldn’t imagine it was, struggling to comprehend how the world would function and go about its business if everyone felt as lovesick as I did. She smiled at me, and I reciprocated, though I’m sure it was one of those goofy ones that I seemed to excel in displaying whenever she was near. I watched her as she came closer, noticing the faint tiredness around her eyes, and she came to a stop in front of me, her smile broadening as she looked down at me. She glanced behind her, and then dipped her head to brush her lips against the corner of my mouth briefly before pulling back. I realised my eyes were closed and worked on opening them.

“Hello,” she murmured.

I blinked. “Hi.”

Amusement lit up her eyes and she made a point of peering over my shoulder. “Are you going to invite me in, or …?”

I flushed, hurriedly taking a step back and to the side. “Oh, right. Of course.” I couldn’t help but grin at her smile as she glided across the threshold, pulling off her red hat as she did so. I followed her into the living room, stopping in the doorway as I saw her head straight for the couch and sink down into it, taking off her heels and releasing a sigh as she sank back into the cushions. She looked as if she belonged there, in my apartment, and I could have hugged myself with joy. I’d never have thought that she would look at home and comfortable and relaxed and natural there, and it filled me
with immeasurable happiness to realise that she did. My apartment was small and cold and plain, but, with her in it, it felt anything but.

She brought a hand up to rub the back of her neck, eying me quizzically as she did so. “What is it?”

I flushed brighter. “Nothing. I’m just happy to see you.”

Her eyebrow remained raised for a few seconds before she smiled. “And I, you, my love.”

I walked further into the room, approaching the couch and positioning myself so that my back rested against the arm, giving me a better view of her. “How did it go?” I asked, desperate to hear about her day. I’d not stopped thinking of her, hoping that her visit with Rindy was going smoothly, that Harge hadn’t decided to put a spanner in the works, that Florence hadn’t been overbearing. I’d only met the woman a couple of times, but my own encounters with her hadn’t made me warm to her, and Carol had filled me in about their barely civil relationship.

She shifted in her seat until she was facing me. “It was …” She frowned slightly, as though searching for the right words. “It was … good. And … sad. Oh, I don’t know.” I waited silently, bringing my legs up and wrapping my arms around them, resting my chin on my knees. I was all too aware that she found it hard to vocalise her feelings and inner thoughts at times, and I didn’t want to make it any more difficult for her by interrupting, not yet. She looked away, glancing at the bookcase before returning my gaze. “She’s grown,” she said after a long handful of moments, and I could detect pride tinged with regret in her voice. “And she was so happy to see me. She almost knocked me over.” She smiled again, a tired smile this time, massaging the back of her neck. “One of her teeth is getting wobbly; she took great pleasure in showing me that.” Her smile lasted for a couple of seconds and then started to fall, and she dropped her gaze. Quietness descended again, and at least a minute passed before she broke it. “I’m missing so much,” she whispered, tears in her eyes as she looked back up to me.

I shifted down the couch until we were touching and reached for her hand, holding it tightly between both of mine, heart aching as I watched her, not knowing what the hell I could say to make this feel any better. I felt a surge of boiling hot anger towards Harge for putting her through this.

She sighed and shook her head as if hoping that such an action would dispel her tears. “She loved her gifts,” she said in a lighter tone that I knew to be forced. I smiled in response. “She all but dragged me up to her bedroom as soon as she saw her valise, filling it with some vests and underwear ‘just like Mommy’.” The memory brought a genuine smile to her lips. “And she is still playing with her trainset. It made me think of you.”

I grinned again. “Well, I’m glad she has such good taste.”

“And I’m glad that you directed my attention to buying it in the first place,” she replied gently. She reached over to trail the back of her fingers against my cheek, holding it there for a moment, and then resting it on top of my hand. “It was wonderful to see her,” she said, voice soft and honest and vulnerable. “I’m not going to let Harge or anyone else keep us apart like that again. It’s cruel. He told her that the reason I hadn’t been to visit was because I was too busy.”

My jaw dropped at that, indignation coursing through me as I watched her through wide eyes. Her mouth set in a straight line, her eyes gaining that steely quality that showed her disapproval and anger, and I shared her outrage. “Why?!”

“Because he doesn’t want to admit that he has been a beast about the whole thing,” she said with contempt. “It’s easier to make me the villain than to accept any responsibility himself. That’s Harge all over. I shouldn’t have expected anything less.”
“But … but …” I spluttered.

“I know. I can assure you that I will be having strong words with him. If he wants to try to make me miserable, he can go ahead. He doesn’t realise how wonderful my life is now, and so he’ll fail. But to make Rindy feel as though she’s not important enough for her own mother to visit her … that’s crossing a line.”

Listening to the sudden strength in her voice gave me no doubt that she would pull him up on it, and rightly so. I couldn’t believe the sheer face of that man; I couldn’t understand how he could think he ever loved Carol, at all, and yet treat her this way. And then there was Rindy. I could have throttled him. That said, I was concerned that, if she approached him with anger, he would strike back and stop visits again. I’m not sure I’ve ever hated anyone as much as I hated him. I gripped her hand tighter. “It is. Just … be careful. I don’t want anything to backfire on you.”

Her thumb traced circles into the back of my hand. “I will, darling. I know how to deal with him. God knows, I’ve had enough years of practice.” She shook her head again. “But I’m not prepared to let that stand. We’ll be doing things my way now, and, if he refuses or calls the lawyers back in, I don’t care about the repercussions on me, I will take him to court, and then the whole of New York, and all of his business acquaintances, can find out all of those secrets he tries so fucking hard to hide. He’s not playing fair, and, when that involves filling my daughter’s head with vicious mistruths, I will fight fire with fire.”

I could see the fierce resolve on her face and swallowed. “Okay … but, maybe calm down a bit before you make any decisions.”

She looked at me for a moment and then broke out into an unexpected smile. “That scary, huh?”

I couldn’t help but grin as I saw the twinkle in her eye. “Let’s just say I am so glad that I am not in your bad books.”

She leaned forward, pressing her forehead against mine. “Never.”
I slowly opened my eyes and then closed them again immediately, groaning sleepily in protest of the sun shining through the window. I pulled the thin blanket further up my body, clutching it close to me as I waded through that short period of time where dreams mixed with reality, night with day, trying to decide if I would be able to fall back to sleep again. My mind wandered languidly for a few seconds before I thought about where I was, blindly throwing a hand behind me and coming into contact with nothing but thin air. My frown deepened. I felt again, just to make sure, and then made the monumental effort to roll over onto my left side, opening my eyes again now that I was out of the sunlight. Carol wasn’t there. I started to properly wake up then, moving onto my back and stretching, a loud yawn coming from my lips.

“You are perfectly adorable when you sleep,” a voice said, a voice I knew almost better than my own. I rose up onto my elbows, grinning when I saw Carol sitting on the plush armchair situated just to the right of the bed. “Good morning, Therese.”

She looked beautiful, blonde hair damp, body encased in a robe, legs curled up beneath her, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands, love brimming in those beautiful blue eyes, a smile on her full lips. God, I was lucky. I sat up, running a hand through my sleep-dishevelled hair. She continued to watch me. “Morning,” I replied after a few seconds. “How long have you been up?”

She tilted her head towards her coffee. “Not long, this is only my second of the day.” She smiled again. “Did you sleep well? You certainly looked as though you did.”

I flushed, hoping beyond hope that I hadn’t snored or drooled while she’d been watching me. Nodding, I plucked imaginary fluff from the blanket and then looked back to her. “Why the early shower? Do we have plans today?”

She unfurled her gloriously long legs and rose to her feet, careful with her coffee as she rounded the bed and climbed onto it. “Well,” she said once she was settled, taking a sip of her drink and looking at me from over the rim of her cup, “I was thinking.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Yes?”

She lowered her cup, turning to place it on the bedside table and then meeting my gaze once more. I swallowed as her eyes looked deeply into my own, so lost in them that I jumped slightly when I felt her fingertips brush against my hand. She smiled that knowing smile, and I felt my cheeks heat up again. “I was hoping that you would, perhaps, like to come furniture shopping with me. Rindy will be visiting next weekend, and I don’t want her to see the apartment like this.” She waved her hand at the room, glancing out to the hallway and then looking back to me. “Would you?”

I could detect the faint hint of hesitation in her voice, the smallest glimmer of apprehension in her eyes, and felt my heart constrict. The last time she had asked me, I had blurted out that I couldn’t move in with her and we had spent the majority of the evening in emotional chaos. I could tell that she was nervous about my reaction this time, and I was quick to reassure her. “Yes. Yes, I’d like that,” I said warmly, moving to grasp her hand in mine. “That sounds nice.”

She awarded me with a breathtakingly bright smile, bringing my hand up to her lips and kissing it gently. “I’m glad.”

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I was grateful for the shade the overhanging tree provided, taking a long, satisfying sip of my deliciously icy lemonade as I waited for Therese to return from the restroom. I hadn’t been to this small café before, having only stumbled upon it while taking a walk through Manhattan on my way home from work the previous week, but it had looked so quaint and picturesque, a narrow but long white building with symmetrical blue-rimmed windows, offering an even smaller outside seating area surrounded by large trees, and I had known that I had wanted to bring Therese here. It was hidden from the main street, perched neatly on the end of a relatively quiet side street, not far from Madeleine’s. Because of this, it was quiet, the service friendly and unhurried, and it felt like a luxury to be sitting outside in the unusually warm air, drinking homemade lemonade that tickled my taste buds.

Two weeks had passed since I had last seen Rindy, and, while I was very much looking forward to seeing her the following weekend, I had realised that the time had come to start turning my apartment into a home. This would be the first time she would see it, and I wanted to set up her bedroom, as well as the other rooms, to fill the empty spaces I had left neglected since I had moved in. It filled me with great joy that Therese had agreed to help me. I so desperately wanted her to be a part of this process, to share in this transformation with me, to impart some of her own touch on what I sorely hoped would one day be a permanent home for both of us. I cannot deny that I had felt my anxiety start to build when I had asked her, a small part of me worried that she would quickly assume that I was attempting to subtly ask her to move in with me, but such concerns had thankfully been unfounded.

I drew lazy circles in my drink with my straw as I thought back to the previous night, a small smile pulling at my lips at the memory of Therese stretched out on her stomach on my bed, flicking through the Times, while I spoke to Rindy and wished her goodnight. I had spoken to Harge on the Monday after my visit to the house, slightly calmer but just as determined to have my say. He had, of course, spluttered his denial, trying to insinuate that Rindy had simply misunderstood, but it took only a few further words from me to elicit his downbeat apologies. He knew he had pushed me beyond my limit, far beyond what I was willing to accept, and, though he feebly attempted to exert his perceived power when I informed him that things were going to change, it was evident to me that he was becoming more and more aware that his time for issuing threats was up. I wouldn’t be taken for a fool. I never had been. There wasn’t much in the world that I felt fiercely protective over, that I knew with certainty I would die fighting for, and Rindy was one of them. Therese was the other, and I had fought with all I had, laying myself open in a way previously inconceivable to me, to get her back. I was prepared—and now far more able with Therese by my side—to do the same for my daughter.

As a result, I had managed to get Harge to agree to regular phone calls and unsupervised visits with Rindy. She would be brought to mine by Florence on Saturday morning, who would then pick her up mid-afternoon to take her back to the house. I could have pushed for more, and there was certainly a part of me that had wanted to, but I feared I would just be doing so to lash out at Harge, and I refused to use my daughter as though she were nothing more than a way to get back at her father. She didn’t deserve that. I don’t doubt I could have had Rindy sooner and for an overnight visit, but neither would have been fair on her. I didn’t want her coming to a half-empty apartment, and I certainly didn’t want her to have to sleep somewhere she didn’t know. It would be far better if she could visit a couple of times beforehand, to become used to the apartment. She had been through so much change over the past few months, and I had to put aside my own wants and needs and think of her, put her first, something that Harge had clearly forgotten in recent times.

Therese had met me from work that Monday, eager to know how the conversation with Harge had gone, and I’d felt giddy with joy as I realised she felt almost as excited as I by the progress that had been made. I remained astonished at the depths of her kindness, at the sheer volume of her love for me, a love that apparently automatically expanded to include Rindy, and I could see the sincerity in
her eyes as she grinned inanely at my news, could hear the honesty in her voice as she told me how pleased she was. She was perfect, the beat of my heart, the oxygen I breathed, the reason for my happiness, my contentment, my peace, and I was reminded of that every single day. She was everything, she always would be, and she was mine. To put it in the simplest of terms, she was my angel. Flung out of space.

I wasn’t facing the door to the café, but a movement caught the corner of my eye and I knew without thought that it was her, our physical connection as strong as it always had been, turning my head and peering over my sunglasses as I watched her approach. I could do nothing but smile at her for a few moments, my heart speeding up as she gave me a grin. She had no clue how stunning she was; my life’s mission was to spend every day making her understand. I reached for my drink, taking a sip to stop myself from launching myself across the table and kissing her senseless. “Our lunch should be here soon,” I said once I’d swallowed.

“Oh, thank god. I’m starving,” she replied.

“I know, darling. It’s been a long morning.”

We had left the apartment fairly early, taking a slow stroll to Madison Avenue as we talked about what I was looking to buy. We’d started in Madeleine’s. As well as feeling a sense of duty to give my employers some business, there were some truly lovely pieces that I had wanted Therese’s opinion on. She’d liked them all, and so I had bought a beautifully varnished wooden chest of drawers for Rindy’s room with a matching small dressing table, and another set of drawers, an almost exact match to the ones I already had, for my bedroom. Therese had been leaving more and more of her belongings at the apartment, which had imbued me with such unparalleled delight, but it meant that we were quickly running out of storage space.

After leaving Madeleine’s, we had drifted in and out three other stores, picking up a few little bits and pieces on the way, and had then visited one of the large department stores. It had taken a while to get to the right floor, impatient shoppers weaving from one side to the other and appearing intent on ensuring that Therese and I were held up as frequently as possible, but, once there, it hadn’t taken long for me to pick a bed for Rindy, gaining a promise from the salesgirl that it would be delivered the following Wednesday afternoon. We’d spent a couple of hours in that store, going from one department to the next, buying bedding and girly knickknacks for Rindy’s room, then perusing the kitchen department, and then the furnishings. I’d encouraged Therese to show me what she liked, which included a stunningly crafted glass waterfall decoration, some matching photograph frames, a pretty crystal vase, and a wooden selection of carved bookends, offering up all letters of the alphabet to pick and choose from. She’d looked at me shyly, before picking up two and showing them to me, one a ‘T’ and the other a ‘C’. They were perfect, I fell in love with them immediately, mostly, of course, because of what they represented. I bought everything she had shown me, wanting as much of her in the apartment as I could have, unable to think of anything more comforting to me than being able to be surrounded by things she had chosen, to be constantly reminded of her.

She had only minimally objected—I think she understood how important it was to me—and, by the time I had paid, I suppose we were both starting to flag, in need of a cool drink and something to eat before we could continue. As we had walked to the little tucked away café, she had asked, not for the first time, what I was going to do with the completely empty room adjacent to the kitchen. The first couple of times she had posed the question, I had managed to deflect the conversation, successfully turning her attention to whatever item of furnishing was near us, but, as the morning had drawn on, she had become more suspicious, raising her eyebrows when I had given little more than a murmur at her most recent suggestion of turning it into a playroom. I knew my time was running out, and, as I looked at her now, I could almost see the words again forming on those beautiful lips of hers, her eyes slightly narrowed as she regarded me.
About to make banal small talk about how sweet this café was, how pleased I was to have found it, I instead was saved by a young man walking towards us with a plate in each hand and a warm smile on his face. Therese and I had ordered the same, a chicken salad, and he placed them down in front of us, asking if we needed anything and then disappearing with a dip of his head when I told him that we were fine. The sight of the salad made me feel all the more hungry, and I didn’t hesitate in taking a bite. I watched Therese do the same, though her eyes remained on me.

“This is lovely,” I said once I had swallowed. “The dressing is beautiful. Don’t you think?”

She nodded, reaching to take a sip of her water. “It’s nice.” I smiled. “Why do you keep changing the subject when I ask about the front room?” My smile faltered, appetite vanishing without a trace, and I tried to quickly retrieve it. She noticed, of course. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s …” She frowned, and I emitted a sigh. “I wanted to discuss this with you at the right time,” I finally admitted.

Her frown deepened, and she put down her fork, her lunch evidently as forgotten as mine. “Discuss what with me?”

I lifted my glass and sipped at my lemonade. It was something I had been thinking of for weeks, since before Therese had come back to me, since the very moment I had viewed the apartment. It had been one of the reasons I had wanted her help in furnishing it in the first place, one of the reasons I had ignored the sparse appearance of the place throughout her absence, had fiercely resisted decorating it, despite Abby’s regular pleas.

I wasn’t used to feeling unsure of myself. It was an emotion that had only made itself known to me when Therese had entered my life. I had spent a lifetime working hard to ensure that I was in control of myself, my thoughts, and emotions, and feelings, and actions; I had chosen since childhood to remain detached from the world around me, to exude an aloofness that would keep everybody at arm’s length, in an act of self-preservation, I suppose, only allowing a very select few in, past the barriers I had purposefully constructed, the ones I had been more than happy to live behind. And then Therese had come along and rendered those barriers useless, had, without knowing it, sent them crashing down around me with just one look, one smile, one life-changing moment, and with such apparent ease that I had been left wondering if my barriers had been constructed from little more than straw. I’d thought them impenetrable, had prided myself on that very fact, and she had proven me so unequivocally wrong as to leave me physically shaken.

Perhaps, almost five months in, I should have become accustomed to feeling this way, to feeling open and vulnerable and on display, to knowing with a certainty that was unnerving that I simply wasn’t in control when it came to her, that the way I felt about her overrode my thoughts, overpowered my previously unwavering determination to shut myself off from everything and everyone. But I wasn’t. It continued to be as alarming, and miraculous, and terrifying, and wondrous as it had at the start. My love for her continued to cause my stomach to lurch, my heart to stop, my thoughts to scatter, continued to defy the beliefs I had staunchly held about myself, continued to leave me with a sense of being in perpetual freefall. My happiness, my sanity, was, without question, utterly dependent on her, and to have that knowledge both left me feeling giddy with delight and completely, hopelessly, and, at times, uncomfortably, powerless. It was love in its purest, headiest, most wholesome and uncontaminated form. It was what the singers sang of, what the authors wrote of, using descriptions that I had never been able to believe, never been able to comprehend or invest in, until her. Until Therese.

She watched me closely now, her brow furrowed, lips slightly parted, looking as though she was
trying to read my mind, to extract the information she knew was lurking within. I put down my glass and removed my glasses, setting them down on the table and meeting her inquisitive gaze. “Before I say anything else, I need you to understand that what I am about to propose is not, in any way, me attempting to slyly ask you to move in with me. I agreed to go at your pace, and I meant it. I will not pressure you, I will not hurry you; it is for you to decide when you are ready for that. All right?”

She nodded slowly, the question still burning in her eyes.

“All right.” I forced myself to keep the gaze we held. “When I took the apartment, I took it with you in mind. I’d never been able to fully rid myself of the hope that you would forgive me, that you would come back, and I wanted an apartment that could be a home for the both of us, if I would ever be so fortuitous as to have you in my life again.” My fingers absentmindedly found my glasses, and I played with them as I spoke. “I imagined the master bedroom to be our bedroom, I knew which would be Rindy’s bedroom, I envisioned how you and I would decorate the living room, the kitchen … and, when I saw the other room … I immediately pictured it as …” I took a deep breath. "Well, as a darkroom-cum-office, I suppose.” I looked down, then, just briefly. I didn’t believe it would ever come naturally to me to speak my innermost thoughts freely, especially those that made me feel vulnerable or on display, but I was firmly committed to trying. Therese deserved that, and so much more.

Her quizzical expression had disappeared in the short moment I had looked away, to be replaced with a warmth and tenderness that stole my breath, the very beginnings of a shy smile gracing her lips. “You did?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper.

“I did,” I conceded with an almost imperceptible shrug, though I could feel my anxiety subside as every second passed, releasing my heart from its oppressive grasp, making way for relief and a surge of joy as I paid close attention to her reaction. “It’s large enough to serve as both, and I’ve found a supplier through Madeleine’s that provides modern blackout drapes for when you need complete darkness. I thought we could buy a desk to fit at the other end of the room, behind the door, perhaps, where I could do my work from time to time. What do you think?”

She shook her head slowly, green eyes wide, her smile now beaming. “I think … I think you’re amazing!”

I faked a stern look. “I meant about the layout, Therese.”

A small laugh burst from her lips, something akin to awe shining in her eyes. “You’d do that? For me?”

Now it was my turn to shake my head. “Oh, silly girl,” I replied quietly, leaning forward, my chin resting on my hands, my elbows on the table. “Don’t you know I would do anything for you?”

Tears abruptly filled her eyes, and she hastily glanced around the open space, still empty aside from us. Turning back to me, she stared at me for a long moment. “I love you. I love you, Carol.” Her words and tone were reverent, hushed, as though said in prayer.

I rose slightly from my chair, quickly but carefully brushing the tip of my thumb beneath her eyes to catch the errant tears that had fallen, and then retaking my seat. “And I, you, my love.” I smiled, and then chuckled when I heard my stomach emit a loud, demanding rumble. “It’s a good thing we ordered salads,” I mused. “We have a habit of allowing our food to go cold during mealtimes.”

She grinned, picking up her fork and spearing a chunk of chicken. “You’re right, by the way. This dressing is divine.” She popped the chicken in her mouth.
I smiled at her wryly and followed suit. “So,” I started when I had swallowed, “Would you like to help me choose a desk this afternoon?”

She brought a hand up to her mouth. “Yes, please,” she said, her response muffled slightly, and I could see the smile in her eyes. When she’d finished her mouthful, she took a gulp of her pineapple juice and then regarded me once more. “What time are we meeting Abby at the steakhouse, again?”

“Not until six. Why, did you have something particular in mind?”

She stared at me intensely for a long moment, lips parted, and then seemed to remember that she hadn’t answered my question. She flushed a brilliant shade of pink. “No. Nothing,” she mumbled a little too quickly, suddenly very interested in the checked blue and white tablecloth our plates rested upon. Realisation abruptly dawned and I felt a delicious thrill run through me, my stomach flipping lazily. The desk would be found, agreed upon and paid for within the hour, I knew with sudden conviction. It would seem we had much more exciting activities to partake in that afternoon, and my heated blood and growing impatience told me that today would not be a day for delayed gratification.
The room was dark, the sun still an hour or so away from rising, and all I could hear was the steady, comforting sound of Carol’s soft, deep breaths. Her arm was draped across my stomach, heavy from slumber, as I stared up at the ceiling. I don’t know how long I had been awake for, but it had been a while, and I was finding my excitement harder and harder to keep under control as the minutes crawled by, working on ensuring my breathing was slow and relaxed while my body was rigid, hands fist at my sides, as I tried to refrain from fidgeting. Today was the day. Carol’s birthday. It was July 17, and I had been waiting for this day for weeks. I could hardly believe it was finally here, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I tried fruitlessly to distract myself. I sighed in frustration, fiercely wishing that the sun would hurry up and rise, already, aware that my self-restraint was waning.

As stealthily as I could, determined not to rouse her, no matter how much I might have wanted to, I slowly moved from beneath Carol’s arm, almost falling out of bed in the process, only just finding my feet on time as I stretched, turned to watch her for a few moments, and then quietly tiptoed out of the bedroom, grabbing my robe and shrugging into it on my way. I silently closed the door behind me, and then hurried to the darkroom, slipping inside and closing that door, too. I turned on the light, shading my eyes with a hand as I became accustomed to the brightness suddenly bathing the room, and then approached the desk, grinning widely as I gave up trying to rein in my enthusiasm. Dropping to my knees, I crawled to where the safe was situated and deftly unlocked the door, yanking it open eagerly and reaching inside, joy causing my heart to swell as my hand landed upon the soft material that I sought. Grasping it tightly in both hands, I pulled it out, a large book bound in a soft leather. It was expensive, I had been putting a portion of money from each paycheck to one side over the last couple of months, but it was beautiful, perfect, and so thoroughly worth each cent.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, placing the book in front of me, running my fingers over the brown leather, over the careful stitching, and finally using the very tip of my forefinger to trace the gold inscription of Carol’s name, positioned directly in the middle of the cover, in a loose, attractive scrawl. I went to open it and paused, looking over to the door and straining an ear, as if I was a naughty child about to break into the cookie jar, in fear of being caught. Satisfied with the silence I was confronted with, I turned back, lifting the heavy cover. It was a photograph album consisting of 12 thick pages, and I had spent hours hunched over it, mounting each carefully picked photograph with painstaking precision, giving myself cramp in my right hand as I wrote captions beneath each one in my very best handwriting.

Abby had been a godsend in the weeks it had taken for me to put this together, rummaging through her belongings and finding a selection of photographs for me to choose from. There had been one of Carol holding Rindy, Rindy having been no older than a couple of months as she lay snuggled in her mother’s arms, Carol gazing down at her with an expression of adoration on her face. It was a beautiful picture, intimate and unlike most of the other photographs Abby had given me, where Carol looked more posed, more wary. In this one, I could see Carol, the Carol I knew, the one behind the mask she so often wore, and I had put it on the very first page. It had been the first one I had chosen to be in the album, and when, a few weeks before, I had been about to write the caption for it, I had stopped, pen hovering just above the page. In the end, I had left a blank space and moved on, an idea forming in my mind, an idea that I hadn’t been able to execute until the previous weekend, when Rindy had last visited.

Since Rindy’s first visit to Carol’s apartment just over two months before, Carol had remained adamant that their visits needed to be consistent and regular, at one point using Harge’s own threat against him and issuing a warning that she was on the brink of calling the lawyers back in and going
to court, come what may, when he tried to go back on their agreement. I had seen the sadness in her teary blue eyes when she’d ended that phone call to him, heard the reluctance in her voice, but she was firm, resolute on the matter, willing to put herself through public degradation if there was even the faintest hope that she would still be allowed to see Rindy. I remained in awe of her, of her strength, of her determination. She was done with treading water, she had given up on full custody in order to be the best mother she could be, to live her truth, for both herself and for Rindy, and I think, from everything she had said to me, she had simply had enough of singing along to Harge’s hymn sheet.

Thankfully, Harge had seemed to reach the same understanding, calling her a few days later and finally conceding defeat. He agreed to fortnightly visits, unsupervised, and Carol had immediately asked Fred to draw up some papers for them both to sign, I guess to avoid any further reneging from Harge’s side. I hadn’t met Rindy that first time, not wanting to force too much onto the young girl at once, but, two weeks later, Carol had brought Rindy to meet me at an ice cream parlour. I’d felt sick with nerves, which may sound ridiculous, but I really had.

I’d only met her once before, during a period when things had been so very different, and we hadn’t spent much time together, her main focus on decorating the tree properly before bedtime. Now I desperately wanted her to like me. I’d never spent much time around children, not quite sure how to interact with them, but, to my complete surprise and delight, Rindy had taken no notice of any hesitation on my part. By the end of that ice cream, she had begged me to come along to their walk by the river, telling me in great detail about her favourite colour, word, book, meal, toy, flower, drawing … anything and everything, with such speed that I struggled to keep up as we strolled through the park, her small hand holding tightly onto mine as she bombarded me with a lifetime’s worth of information. She was such a sweet girl, eager to please, polite, but funny, too, a mischievous twinkle not far from the eyes that were as astonishingly blue as her mother’s. Carol hadn’t been able to keep a smile from her face as she watched us, and I remember thinking it was the closest I had ever felt to being part of a family. It had felt magical, that afternoon.

From then on, I had spent time with Rindy during every visit, and I quickly realised I had reached the stage of feeling excited whenever I was about to see her. The past couple of times, I had already been at the apartment when she had arrived, at Carol’s suggestion, though Rindy hadn’t batted an eyelid, apparently simply happy to see me there. She’d had her first overnight stay three weeks prior to Carol’s birthday, and then again two weeks later, and it had already been planned that Florence would be bringing her over in the early afternoon for another, even though it had fallen on a weekend when she usually stayed with Harge, to see her mother on her birthday. I had stayed for dinner on her first couple of overnight visits, and then she and Carol had dropped me home, but we had agreed that I would stay on the night of her birthday. I had felt vaguely concerned about how Rindy might react, but Carol had been quick to expel such worries. We had reached the conclusion that pyjamas would, however, definitely be appropriate.

During the previous weekend, while Carol was in the shower, I had taken Rindy into the darkroom. She’d been beyond excited, rarely allowed in there because of my developing tools and Carol’s paperwork and journals, and she’d literally jumped up and down with glee when I’d showed her the photograph album, and the picture of her with her mother when she was a baby, asking her if she could be a big girl and practice her writing. It had taken her a good few minutes, with her tongue resting against her top lip in concentration, to write ‘Mommy and Rindy, 1947’, a frown of concentration on her forehead as she took her time to write every single character as neatly as she could. I’d felt like a fugitive on the run as I stood by the door trying to exude nonchalance, panic abruptly rising within me as I heard the water shut off. I was definitely not cut out for any sort of secretive behaviour, that much had been made clear to me.

I looked at the words she had written now, the letters big and uneven, but absolutely perfect in their
own way. I smiled, and then my gaze travelled down to the photograph beneath it. It was one of Carol and I at Edie’s steakhouse, taken a few weeks before, by Abby. Edie had put us in a booth in the corner of the room, away from prying eyes, and we’d had a wonderful evening. I’d asked Abby to take a photograph with this album in mind, and Carol and I had stared down the camera, wide smiles on our faces, our hands lightly touching. I hadn’t realised until when I was developing them that Abby had taken another without me, or Carol, noticing. Carol had her elbow on the table, her hand wrapped around the base of her neck, facing me, her profile to camera. I could see the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth, her blonde hair tucked behind her ear to reveal her beautiful skin, her eyes focused solely on me. I was staring at her, my eyes wide, a hand curled around her elbow, a goofy grin on my face. It looked as though we were in a world of our own, carefree and happy, and I’m sure it wasn’t just my bias that led me to see the love that seemed to leap from the print. I’d opted to use that picture, instead, mounting it onto the paper with care, adding a note underneath with the place, date and who we were with. I stared at it for a long moment, suddenly experiencing a sense of disbelief that that was me, that I was with her, that we looked so good, so natural, so … right … together. God, I loved her.

I turned the thick page over. There was a picture of Abby, Carol and a woman that I vaguely remembered from the party, Annie, from before I knew them, dressed in skiing equipment, arms looped around each other as they smiled into the camera. Abby had given me the required notes and I had jotted them down. The next was a photograph of Rindy, aged two, sitting on a chair with her hands in her lap. I have to be honest, she looked bored, but it was that very fact that made me laugh, the way she looked so unimpressed at having to have her picture taken, and I couldn’t stop myself from including it. The photographs continued, some of Abby and me, me and Carol, Carol and me and Abby, Abby and Edie, Abby and Rindy, a picture I had taken of Carol and Rindy the previous weekend, another of Rindy and me eating an ice cream, one of Edie and Carol where I had managed to catch them mid-laugh.

I continued flipping through the pages, smiling as I saw different happy faces staring up at me, until I reached the very last page of the album, looking at the photograph there for a long moment, and then bringing my finger up to lightly trace it. Carol, Rindy and I were stretched across Carol’s bed, our legs thrown up in the air behind us, our elbows resting on the very edge of the mattress, our hands cupping our cheeks, big, cheesy grins on each of our faces as we looked directly into the camera. I loved it. We looked like a family, and I’d never, ever thought I’d be able to say that, or, more importantly, feel that, feel like I belonged. In that moment, I did. With Carol, I did. With Rindy, too, which had been surprising but just felt so amazing to me. I fit. Me. Therese Belivet. The girl without a home. My finger lingered on Carol’s beaming lips as I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I blinked a couple of times and shook my head. This was not the time to get all emotional. Rising to my feet, I quietly left the darkroom and headed for the closet, only to return less than a minute later with the gift wrap I had bought. It was simple, gold, but I liked it. I grabbed the tape dispenser from the top drawer, along with the scissors, and set to work. It didn’t take long, and I soon found myself slowly opening the door to the bedroom again, padding across the room to place the wrapped album on top of one of the chest of drawers. I felt like a child, so excited that it genuinely took effort to not wake Carol up and thrust the present in her face, demanding that she open it, hoping desperately that she would like it.

I’d never enjoyed birthdays before. They’d felt so pointless, lonely, a day when it was expected of you to be happy. That was fine for people who had families and friends, had people around them to celebrate such times with, but it wasn’t something I’d experienced, and the forced joviality of it all had left me feeling cold. The joyous anticipation I felt was new to me, just something else in a long line of things that Carol had introduced me to, but it was like I had suddenly been let in on the big secret of why people liked these things so much, and I was positively giddy with delight.
I looked to the window, suddenly realising that the sun had risen without me, and then I looked to
the bed. I loved watching her sleep. I loved how completely relaxed she was, loved seeing the rise
and fall of her chest, her face as beautiful as though an artist had sculpted it, her blonde hair loose
and mussed, her lips parted the smallest of fractions, her long eyelashes brushing against her cheek.
She was perfect. She really was. She had her vulnerabilities, her insecurities, her imperfections, but
that was what made her so perfect. She was breathtaking, exquisite, there was no doubt about it, she
couldn’t walk into a room without heads turning, and I couldn’t envision there would ever come a
time when I wouldn’t be so utterly captivated by her beauty, but my love for her saw so much more
than her skin. Her heart, and wisdom, and strength, and humour, and fears, and loyalty, and
experiences, her deepest thoughts, and regrets, and mistakes … these are what I saw. These are what
I loved. These are what I would always cherish. I loved all of her, profoundly, viscerally,
irreversibly, and it was all of her that made her perfect.

I was watching her with such concentration, drinking in every inch of her with such reverence, that I
jumped when she stirred, holding my breath as I watched her. She remained still. I slipped out of my
robe and walked to the bed, smoothly climbing back on it and lying down. I rested my cheek on my
hand and watched her again, aware that I could watch her forever, that there would never be enough
time in the world for me to get my fill. I don’t know how long I stayed like that, marvelling at her,
revelling in her, but, at some point, her brow furrowed slightly, the way it always did when she was
starting to wake up. All of these little things, I knew, all of her little quirks, her mannerisms, and my
heart swelled alarmingly at the realisation.

Her eyes fluttered open, closed again, and then reopened. I grinned. “Happy birthday.”

She frowned slightly and then the corners of her mouth turned up into a sleepy smile. “Thank you,”
she murmured, blinking herself into wakefulness. She brought a hand up, trailed her fingers down
my arm. I suppressed a shiver. “Have you been watching me for long, Miss Belivet?”

I couldn’t even pretend to look chastened. “Busted,” I whispered.

Her smile widened. “What time is it?”

“It’s still early.” I leaned over, kissed her softly. She moaned quietly. I pulled back, experience
having told me exactly where this would lead, even as my body begged me to stay precisely where I
was. “Do you want breakfast? Coffee?”

“Mmm … coffee,” she said, her voice both wistful and amused. I moved to get up and she quickly
reached for my hand. “No … not yet.”

As if I could refuse her. “Okay,” I replied without hesitation, sinking back into the mattress. We fell
into comfortable silence for a few minutes, me watching her, her watching me, as though frozen in
time. I could tell she was trying to wake herself further. She smiled again.

“I’ve missed waking up with you.”

“Me too,” I replied honestly, though I dropped my gaze for a split-second. All of this secrecy was
going to be the death of me. Usually painfully intuitive, I was so relieved that she was still hazy
enough from sleep not to notice my slip. “Can I sing Happy Birthday, yet?” I asked, grinning already
as I waited for the answer I knew she was about to give.

“Oh, god, no,” she groaned, shoving me gently and pretending to scowl. “We’ve talked about this.
You’ll have to wait until Rindy is here. I’m only being put through that godawful song once.”

I laughed. “Fine, fine.” I paused for a beat. “Can I give you your birthday present, yet?”
“My, my,” she said with a smile. “Anyone would think it was your birthday, with how excited you are.”

“You have no idea,” I confessed with a shrug. “Present?”

She chuckled. “Okay, present,” she agreed, sitting up enough to lean over and kiss the corner of my mouth. As she moved away, I pushed the blanket back, rising until I was upright and about to swing my legs over the side of the bed. I glanced at her before I did, and saw her expression change from sleepiness to something far more pronounced, the look in her eyes causing my heart to break out into a sprint, my stomach to lurch, my mouth to become dry. I was left motionless, eyes wide as I watched her. Her eyes darkened as they gazed at my breasts, my collarbone, my throat, and my skin erupted into thousands of goose bumps, my nipples tightening in direct response to her gaze. I’d been so excited about giving her the photograph album, and yet, from a look, I couldn’t have remembered what the present was if my life had depended on it in that moment. All I cared about was her, her touch, her skin, her love. I swallowed, helpless.

Her eyes met mine again and a slow smile spread across her lips. “On second thoughts …”
That One Person

My eyes were still damp, still focused on the beautiful photographs that Therese had collected of my life, of us, of all the people who mattered to me, when she came back into the bedroom, hands holding onto a tray laden down with food. I wrenched my eyes away from a picture of her and I with our arms wrapped tightly around each other, taken while at another party, Annie’s that time, faces pressed together as we laughed. Each photograph held such happy memories, but I couldn’t stop from noticing how much more relaxed I looked in the pictures of Therese and I, or Rindy and I, or the three of us together. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was, whether it was my posture, or my smile, or just something in my eyes, but I looked freer in those pictures than I had ever seen myself be. I knew I felt different, but to realise that I looked different, too, was both pleasant and jarring in equal measure.

I looked up at Therese, my eyes unable to help themselves from resting upon her shoulder, her robe having slipped to reveal the bare skin underneath, before I silently berated myself and forced my gaze to travel up to her beautiful face. It was set in concentration as she leaned over and balanced the tray on the end of the bed, and then handed me the two cups of coffee. I had to bite back a laugh as I watched her walk over to her side and ever-so-gingerly climb atop the mattress. I turned to the tray, eyes widening as I saw the selection of pancakes, bacon, fresh fruit, toast, eggs, and maple syrup.

“You didn’t have to go to all of this effort,” I said, looking back over to her and seeing the happy grin on her face as I gave her one of the cups.

“I know,” she replied succinctly, shuffling down the bed slightly to retrieve the tray, and then setting it between us. “I wanted to.” She offered me a side plate, and I took it, shaking my head affectionately at her, watching as she picked up one for herself and loaded two pancakes onto it. I started with eggs and bacon, taking a welcome sip of coffee and putting it on the bedside table before scooping up a forkful of eggs. She didn’t begin eating hers until I had swallowed my first bite.

“Nice?” she asked, green eyes wide.

“Perfect,” I smiled, leaning over to tuck a lock of her fine brown hair behind her ear.

We ate quickly, our early morning lovemaking feeding one appetite but leaving another more famished than ever, though our eyes kept meeting, smiles shared, hands brushing against each other’s as we reached over to get more food, lingering at the contact. The contentment, and peace, and happiness I derived from that moment made for a heady combination, and I could have stayed there for the rest of time. The look in her eyes told me she felt the same.

The way I felt for her, the way I felt while with her, was more enlightening than anything I had ever experienced. I’d never known that such tranquillity, such happiness, and serenity, and joy, could and did exist, and, even if I had held such knowledge, I’d never had suspected that it could have existed for me. She’d taught me so much, she kept teaching me so much, about myself, about the person I could be, about the emotions I could feel, about the endless possibilities that life could hold, about the perils and wonders of love, the dizzying levels of lust, the terrifying fear and exhilarating bliss that crossing paths with that one person, that one person who was simply a perfect fit, who you couldn’t ever envision being without, who you knew, with sharp clarity was the very reason for your existence, the one person who made you whole, who made every second of every minute of every day worthwhile, could bring. I was in awe of her, of every inch of her, inside and out. I always would be, for as long as there was breath in my body. I was more sure, more certain, of that than I had ever been about anything else.

I swallowed my last grape and returned my plate to the now largely depleted tray before leaning
against the headboard and looking over to Therese, who had finished just before I had. “That was lovely,” I smiled. “Thank you.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly. “You’re welcome.”

I stared at her for a moment, my eyes searching hers. “And … thank you for my present,” I said, for what must have been the fifteenth time since I had unwrapped it. “It’s so beautiful … so thoughtful. I’ll treasure it forever.” My hand slid across the blanket and sought out hers. “You are so very wonderful, Therese. Don’t ever think that I don’t know that. I feel so blessed, so grateful for you, so lucky.”

She didn’t respond for a long few seconds, her flush deepening, and her stunningly expressive eyes looked as though they were peering into the very depths of my soul. I could see such love and tenderness contained within, such passion, and happiness, and care, that my heart missed a beat. “I feel the same,” she murmured eventually, and her lips pulled up into a wide smile, her dimples proudly on display. Fuck, I was a sucker for her.

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I hurried to the door as a result of the loud knock, opening it quickly and reaching down to lift a grinning Rindy into my arms, holding her tightly for a moment and then loosening my grip. Florence held out Rindy’s valise, and I smiled easily at her as I accepted it. She blinked, apparently surprised at my genuine display of civility, and I could see it pained her greatly to return the favour. I didn’t care. My mood refused to be dampened.

“Happy birthday,” she said tersely.

My smile widened. “Well, thank you, Florence.”

She nodded once. “Mr Aird will collect Rindy at 3 p.m. tomorrow. He’s very busy, he has a very important function tomorrow evening, so please make sure she’s ready.”

“Of course,” I replied, with as much grace as I possessed. “That won’t be a problem.”

She looked from me to Rindy and back again. “Good. I will let him know,” she said after a moment. “Goodbye.”

“Bye, Florence,” Rindy trilled sweetly, oblivious to the woman’s clearly foul mood. “See you tomorrow!”

“Have a wonderful day,” I added, unable to help myself.

She nodded again, then turned sharply on her heel and walked down the corridor. I didn’t wait for her to disappear from view before closing the door and spinning around with Rindy in my arms. “Hello, baby,” I smiled at her, laughing when she touched her nose against mine and rubbed it from side to side. I set her down on the floor and she reached for my hand as we walked down the hallway. “Have you been a good girl?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Daddy says I’ve been very good!” she replied proudly. She stopped just outside of the kitchen, pulling on my hand. I settled into a crouch in front of her.

“What is it, sweetheart? Would you like a drink?”

“No, thank you,” she answered with a quick shake of her head. “It’s … it’s …” I waited with bated breath. Whatever was on her mind, she was excited about, her voice breathless as she looked at me
through wide eyes. “Mommy, it’s your birthday today!”

I chuckled, kissing her soft cheek and pulling back. “You’re right! And guess what?”

Her eyes widened further. “What?”

“I got to see your big girl writing this morning!” I enthused. “It’s beautiful! You’re getting so good at
your writing, Rindy.”

She beamed. “Under the picture?” she asked, fidgeting as she did when she was struggling to contain
her excitement. “The one when I was just a little baby?”

“Yes, that one!”

She looked beside herself with glee. “Oh, Mommy! Trez …” She always uttered Therese’s name as
though she couldn’t wait to say it, having not quite mastered the pronunciation of the first vowel.
After a few times of attempting to correct her, I’d given up. Therese had admitted she found it
adorably endearing, and I couldn’t disagree. “Trez let me go into the … into the … into there!” She
whipped around, pointing at the darkroom and then whirled back, pride etched on her face. “And …
and … she said it was a surprise! And … and I writed it ever so carefully!”

My heart just about melted, listening to her. “You did! You wrote it beautifully, kitten. Thank you
very much. I love it.” I wrapped her into a hug, having to hold out a hand to steady myself against
the wall as she shifted from foot to foot, unable to control her unbridled joy.

“Mommy?” she said, her voice muffled. I moved back. Her eyes widened again. “Where’s Trez?”

I made a point of looking up and down the hallway. “Well, I don’t know,” I teased. “Shall we go
and see if she’s here?” She nodded fiercely and I laughed. I rose to my feet, and her small hand
gripped mine, forging ahead and pulling me along behind her. She strained her neck to peer into
the kitchen, and then did the same with my bedroom and hers. Aware of the rules put in place regarding
the darkroom, she bypassed it entirely, now leading us down to the living room. As soon as we
crossed the threshold, she dropped my hand.

“Trez!” she called excitedly, bounding across the living room. I entered just in time to see her
clamber up onto the couch and throw her arms around Therese’s neck. I leaned against the doorway,
watching as Therese gave her a warm hug, a wide smile on my face.

I cannot express to you what it had meant to me to see the relationship form between Therese and
Rindy. They were the two most important people in my life, they always would be, and to witness
their connection grow, to observe them together, each appearing equally devoted to the other, filled
me with unreserved delight and pleasure. Rindy was a polite child, many people commented on such
a fact, but I had never seen her bond with an adult she didn’t know as quickly or as completely as
she had with Therese. She was absolutely, undoubtedly, without question, wholly enchanted by her,
which, I mused wryly, made the two of us.

It felt as though everything was finally coming together, every part of my life, weaving and
entwining in a way I had previously been too scared to even hope for. Tensions between Harge and
me had settled considerably, though I didn’t suppose Florence would ever forgive me for the firm
resolve and serious threat of court I had used against him during the week he had told me he was
rethinking the verbal agreement we had made about visits. I hadn’t been prepared to live under his
thumb, under his rules, I’d given up full custody to avoid doing just that, and I’d reminded him of
that point in no uncertain terms. Things had been terribly strained for a few days, and I spent a lot of
time wondering just how badly my reputation would be damaged in court, just how reckless my
decision to fight to the very end would turn out to be, but it would seem that he had been thinking the same.

To be completely honest, and to give Harge credit where I believe credit is warranted, I believe that this was only part of the reason he had called me up less than a week later to tell me that he would agree to what I had requested, and he would sign written documentation citing as much. It’s only been relatively recently, now that I have the luxury of looking back to that time through clearer eyes, that I can understand how, by putting an end to the possibility of court, he was not just saving his own skin, but had finally been able to accept what had happened between us, and how we needed to progress. It’s my belief that his many mistakes and painful actions were not intentionally a result of malicious behaviour, but of denial. He didn’t want to face up to the fact of how things were between us, of our marriage being irreparably over. He couldn’t admit, to himself, that I had left him, that I had been the one to ask for a divorce, that I could, and would, be happy, truly happy, without him. And so, he lashed out. Were his actions right, justifiable? No. But I understand, now, why he behaved how he did. And I am thankful that he managed to accept the fact that he couldn’t change me, couldn’t change us, when he did. If it had taken much longer, we would have ended up in court and there’s a very real chance that I would have been given even more limited access to our daughter.

As it was, we had been able to settle upon Rindy having fortnightly weekend visits with me, unsupervised, starting with afternoons, with the intention of our time together gradually increasing until I had her from a Friday afternoon through to a Sunday afternoon, as well as alternate Christmases and birthdays. The only further aspect in need of further discussion was how many weeks throughout the year I would have Rindy for, and the only reason it hadn’t yet been added to the legal document was because there simply hadn’t been time to have a proper conversation about it. I knew we would, and, that, at that moment, was enough for me. In April, I had believed I would be fortunate if I could see my daughter every month or so, and, now, three months on, such fears were on their way to becoming a distant memory.

It had soothed me greatly to know that we had come to this agreement between ourselves, that, though Harge had caused me to seriously doubt what I believed I had known of him, he had, eventually, deployed reason devoid of cruel tactics, in order to do the best by our daughter. He had collected her from my apartment twice, and we had succeeded in partaking in civilised conversation, had been able to ask after the other without any bad feeling rising to the forefront. However, Florence’s ability to display cordiality had lessened considerably, apparently apoplectic with rage that I had dared to stand up for myself and my child. I could have told Harge in passing of Florence’s growing intolerance, he would have been mortified, but I saw little point. She could stew in her bitterness as much as she liked, it was of no consequence to me. As much as I disliked her, she loved Rindy, and that was all I could ask for.

I was happy, Therese was happy, Rindy was happy … to me that was all that mattered. I focused on them now, apparently deep in conversation, both grinning as they talked. It was mesmerising, truly amazing. My two girls. The day was nowhere near over, and yet I knew, with every piece of me, that this was already the best birthday I had ever had. I was a very lucky woman. A very lucky woman, indeed.
Birthday Girl

“What’s going on in there?” I called.

The kitchen door open slightly and Abby peered around it. I bit back a smile as I saw a dark brown smudge on her cheek and her hair looking decidedly more mussed than it had only five minutes prior. “Everything’s fine!” she said quickly, about to close the door again.

“Is that why you have what I am assuming … or, come to think about it, very much hoping … to be chocolate on your face?” I asked, trying my hardest to keep a straight face as I saw her dab at her cheeks with her back of her hand.

“Everything’s under control!”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary, Carol!” she spluttered, and I knew that, had Rindy not been there, her language would have ventured into a far more profanity-laced region. “Your best friend, your gir-”

She stopped, eyes widening as she looked over her shoulder, and I continued to watch her through amused eyes. She scowled when she turned back to me. “Therese,” she amended, again for the benefit of Rindy, I knew, “And your daughter are trying to do one nice thing for you on your fu … uuun-day birthday.” I couldn’t refrain from chuckling, then, and it only infuriated her further. “So if you could please just give us two more minutes of your time to get this darn thing ready and off of my face, I think we would all greatly appreciate it! Christ!”

I heard Rindy’s giggle, though it soon became muted as the kitchen door closed again, with perhaps a bit more force than was really required. I shook my head in amused affection and turned to face the living room again. As soon as Abby had arrived, she had banished me from the kitchen, much to Rindy’s delight, and it had only been when I had heard a disgruntled shout that I had so much as dared to even consider rebelling against the temporary rules imposed upon me. I smiled again, and then walked into the middle of the room, looking around. Where, two months previous, the apartment looked little more than a shell of the possibilities it held, now it was a home.

At one end was a large grand piano, purchased after I had realised how deeply I had missed having one, along with the record player and a large holder to store my many records. To its left, resting against the length of the wall was the couch, and then, at the other end, the armchairs. The wall opposite the couch sported two towering bookcases, separated by a long shelf, which held the four photograph frames Therese had picked, each of them displaying photographs taken in recent weeks, one of Rindy and I from when Rindy had first visited the apartment, another of Therese and I, sitting in Abby’s garden, the one of Rindy that had originally been on the table, and, finally, one of Abby, Edie, Therese, and I, which Abby’s mother had taken of us during a dinner that had turned into an unscheduled games night, all of us a little worse for wear but smiling brightly. The photographs stood tall, every last one of them, demanding to be seen the very instant somebody entered the living room. I didn’t have many visitors, but I was proud of my life, of being happy, really, genuinely happy, for the first time I could remember, I was proud, deeply proud, of the few people who made my life full and complete, and I cannot deny that there was a sense of me wanting to show that, and them, off. Was it possible that, in both of the photographs containing Therese and I, we were, perhaps, sitting a little too closely to each other to be deemed as simply friends? Yes. In fact, I very much hoped that that was what people would see. Society may not have allowed me to celebrate my love in the way I would have liked or hoped, in a perfect world, but I refused to hide it in my own home, societal norms and expectations be damned.
I turned my attention to the coffee table situated in the middle of the room, crouching down to look closely at the waterfall decoration placed upon it, surrounded by an array of things – one of Rindy’s storybooks, the latest edition of the Times, a journal I had been leafing through the previous day, a roll of film, a toy car that was currently Rindy’s favourite thing in the world, my car keys … and I found myself smiling. I had such appreciation for the grand piano, I adored my records, and the bookcases saved me regularly during afternoons of boredom, but this … this one table … this was the heart of the room. It was messy, it was usually the first place to look for anything in the apartment because everything somehow ended up on there, and some people would have thought it unsightly. In my opinion, it was perfect. It was homely. There were pieces of all of us, nested together in one relatively small area. It was Rindy, it was Therese, it was me, all jumbled up together. I loved it, really loved it, in a way I suppose few people would understand. I had spent such a large portion of my life having everything, not just thoughts and emotions and fears, but everything, tidied away neatly. I had wanted it that way; it had suited me for a long time. Now, it didn’t. Now, my life was completely different, and, though I still strove to keep the majority of people at bay, I was different, with the people that mattered, and with myself, in the ways that mattered. I treasured the way one simple coffee table could be a representation of that.

I straightened up and was just in the process of stretching my back when I heard the kitchen door open. I turned to the doorway in time to see Rindy leading Abby and Therese in, Therese holding a large chocolate cake that looked so big I vaguely wondered how many days we would be eating it for, Abby smoothing down her hair, Rindy staring at me with wide, shining eyes. I felt my lips pull up into a smile, shaking my head slowly as they erupted into a deafening rendition of Happy Birthday, a chuckle spilling forth as I took note of the gusto with which they were each performing, my heart fit to burst.

As soon as the last word died out, Rindy ran to me and I reached down to pick her up. “Are you going to blow out the candles, Mommy?” she whispered, and excitement and joy was written all over her little face. I kissed her cheek.

“I think I might need some help with that, kitten. Do you think you could help me?”

A smile wide enough to split her face in two appeared and she nodded importantly. “Yes.”

Therese approached with the cake, her green eyes dancing as she looked at me, Abby right behind her. “I did think about getting the right number of candles for your age,” Abby started, her expression so innocent and beseeching that I just knew she was up to mischief, “But, you know, I didn’t want it to be a fire hazard.”

I tried for insulted but one look at Therese biting her lip to try and hide her smile and I failed, though I did lean forward to give Abby a shove. Rindy laughed, and I followed suit. “Don’t forget, dear Abby, that I know a lot of stories about you, and I’m sure Therese would love to hear about the time you-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” she interjected, hands up in surrender. “First, you are so beautiful and lovely, and I am so lucky to have you as a best friend, and I love you,” she added hurriedly, eyes wide, and I had to press my lips together to refrain from grinning. “Second, poor Therese’s arms must be aching …”

“Actually, they’re-” Therese tried to say, the relationship between her and Abby having taken on a sort of sibling quality, consistently trying to wind each other up while sharing a deep platonic love between them. It was wonderful to see, and a laugh slipped from between my lips as I saw Abby shoot Therese a dark glare.

“Mommy?” Rindy tugged at my neck. I looked at her with a smile.
“Yes, baby?”

“You … you need to make a wish before the … before the candles get melted!”

Now, I know I’m prone to biasness, what with Rindy being my child, but, honestly, she was so darn cute when she was excited, all breathless and wide-eyed, a slightly worried look on her face at the prospect I wouldn’t be able to make my wish on time. “That’s right. I’m sorry, Rindy. Aunt Abby was being awfully silly, wasn’t she?”

I had to work hard to contain my mirth as we turned to Abby as one and found her with an appropriately reproachful and contrite look on her face. “Sorry, Rindy.”

“Wish, Mommy!”

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I leaned against the wall, my first, and likely only, brandy of the evening in one hand as I surveyed the scene in front of me. Rindy and Therese were sprawled out across the living room floor, colouring in a large meadow scene, handing each other different colours every couple of minutes, Therese nodding very seriously at each of Rindy’s suggestions. I felt unusually tearful as I watched them together. Perhaps the fact it was my birthday had brought out the sentimental fool in me, but I felt so happy, so content, that my brain didn’t quite know how to cope with such intense emotion. My little girl and the love of my life, heads huddled together as they talked. It was beautiful, it was something I had never really allowed myself to believe that I would witness, not until recently. I sipped my brandy.

“Hey, birthday girl,” a voice behind me said, and I jumped slightly, so lost in my thoughts and my girls. I turned slightly and saw Abby, a warm and gentle smile on her face as she regarded me for a moment, before taking my lead and leaning against the wall, her gaze travelling over to where Therese and Rindy lay.

“Where’s Edie?” I asked. She hadn’t long turned up, having promised to drop by after work to spend an hour before going back to Abby’s.

“Fetching a drink and a slice of pizza,” she replied. I nodded. A second later, I felt her hand on my shoulder. “You okay?”

I nodded again, unable to find my voice.

She was quiet for a moment. “We did good, huh?”

I brought my hand up to squeeze hers. “We did.” I looked back over to her. “Both of us.”

She tilted her head as she watched me, her smile widening. “Both of us. Who’d have thought it?!”

“Precisely no one,” I answered, and then chuckled lightly. “Least of all us, I don’t doubt.”

“You got that right.” She shook her head, a myriad of emotions on her face. “I’m so happy, Carol. I’m so happy for you, I’m so happy for me … I’m just … I’m happy. For a time there, I didn’t think I would be. I didn’t think you would be. But … we made it.”

I studied her for a moment and then looked away when my vision blurred. “Oh, fuck,” I murmured, quickly swiping at my eyes. “Now look what you made me do.”

She waited for me to turn back to her before replying. “Embrace it, honey. All of this, Therese,
Rindy … all of this, you deserve. I thought I’d lost you for a while, you know? Back when everything felt like it had turned to shit? You scared me, more than I could tell you at the time. And it’s so good, so good, to see you so happy. So … embrace this. We made it, when everybody told us we couldn’t. You made it. You made it back from the brink of insanity. And now look.” She waved her hand towards Rindy and Therese.

I did, smiling as I saw them discussing how to colour in the vast sky. After a moment, I looked back to Abby. “I don’t think I ever thanked you properly for everything you did for me,” I said with a shake of my head. “You were, and always have been, amazing to me.” She went to interject and I narrowed my eyes. “No, listen. I didn’t always do the right thing by you. Although I never, ever, meant to, I hurt you. And I’m sorry for that.” She opened her mouth. “No. Hear me out, please. I saw it, every time, I saw how much you were hurting. But you still were there, by my side, listening to me, making sure I was all right when I thought I’d never know hope again. But now …” I pushed myself from the wall and turned to her properly. “Now … I don’t see that hurt. I see such happiness in you, Abby. Such joy and life. And I cannot tell you how thrilled I am for you. Edie is wonderful, and you are so very lucky to have her. But you, my dear friend, are pretty fucking wonderful yourself, and she is just as lucky to have you. Don’t you dare ever forget that.” I squeezed her hand again, then let mine fall. “You’re right,” I said seriously. “We did make it.” I could see the emotion build on her face, felt my own rise again. “Now, for god’s sake, let’s not fuck this up.”

A small burst of laughter spilled from her mouth, and I joined in. She rolled her eyes, leaning in to nudge me with her shoulder. “I love you, you stupe.”

I looked at her for a moment, and then nudged her back with a rueful smile. “I love you, too, nitwit.”
The Beginning

I slipped into my pyjamas and folded my clothes neatly over the back of the chair before quietly darting into the kitchen to retrieve the bottle of champagne that Abby had brought with her earlier and two glasses, holding them carefully to minimise clinking as I tiptoed back into Carol’s bedroom. I poured us each a glass, setting Carol’s on her bedside table and then moving around to my side of the bed, putting down my own glass and then clambering onto the mattress. A daft smile crossed my face as I thought back over the day, so relieved and pleased that it had run smoothly. It had been a wonderful day, and I’d witnessed the happiness in Carol’s eyes on many occasions; I’m sure it must have matched my own. It had been wonderful, seeing Abby and Edie, spending time with Rindy, but the one thing that had really caused my heart to be filled with such all-encompassing exhilaration, above all else, was seeing Carol being surrounded by everyone she loved, everyone who loved her, and almost feeling the joy radiate from her.

I propped the pillows up against the headboard and nestled back into them, straining an ear to see if I could hear anything. Silence. I smiled to myself and closed my eyes, my hands resting on my stomach as I allowed my thoughts to drift, remembering that look in her eyes as she had watched me that morning, the feel of her fingertips trailing down my side as her warm breath sounded in my ear, thinking about the photograph album, her teary reaction as she flicked through the pages, recalling her beautiful face, adorned with the widest of smiles, as Rindy presented her with a picture she had clearly spent a lot of time drawing and colouring. Every minute of her birthday had been amazing, a moment to behold, a moment to cherish, and I had worked hard to do just that, both mentally and with the aid of my camera.

I already knew that I was going to buy her another photograph album that matched the one I had given her, so that we could start adding more memories as time went on. Because that’s what we had. Time. I was more certain of that than I was of my own name. Our lives were stretched out before us, eternally entwined, because how could they not be? She was mine, and I was hers, and I believed, more strongly than ever, that we truly were made for each other, that I had been put on this planet specifically to be loved by her, and she had been put here for me, both of us waiting, without realising it, for our paths to cross and our destiny to be explained. I know, I know. That probably sounds ridiculously fanciful. I don’t blame you if you’re rolling your eyes at that sentence. Perhaps, before Carol, I would have, too. But I honestly cannot find any other explanation for how … right … I felt when I was with her, how comfortable in my own skin, how loved and loving and free. I’d lived a life where even the thought of being able to feel like anything other than a misfit, an outsider looking in at something I could never really understand, had been a foreign concept, had resigned myself to feeling alone, and out of place, and left out in the cold. And then one woman, one glorious, breathtaking, earth-shattering woman, had walked into my life and my world had exploded into light, into colour, into excitement, into love and lust and wonder.

I jumped slightly when the door opened, my eyes shooting open, though the warmth that embraced me whenever Carol was in close proximity soon caused a smile to settle on my face as I watched her close the door behind her and walk over to the bed, her eyes on me throughout.

“Is Rindy okay?” I asked as she settled herself beside me.

She smiled. “Asleep before I had finished the third page.” She reached for my hand, brought it to her lips, and kissed each of my knuckles with infinite tenderness, blue eyes never wavering from mine. “You are exquisite,” she murmured into the back of my hand. “Do you realise that?”

I felt blood rush to my cheeks as I saw the sincerity in her gaze. “I happen to think the same about
you,” I replied a moment later. She smiled and placed my hand on her knee, her own starting to
rhythmically stroke my hair. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, enjoying the touch of her fingers.
With effort, I reopened them. “Champagne?”

“Mm,” she hummed, running her fingers through my hair once more before turning to retrieve her
glass. I did the same. She took a small sip and then regarded me, her blue eyes searching mine.
“Thank you.”

I hastily swallowed my drink. “What for?”

Her lips turned up into a smile. “Oh, that list would go on for days,” she replied without hesitation.
“Specifically, thank you for today. It’s been … it’s been truly wonderful.”

“It has been. For me, too,” I admitted. She leaned forward, cupping my chin with her hand, slowly
moving into me until I felt her soft lips press against my own. I raised a hand and held the back of her
neck, our kiss quickly deepening, and, as soon as my lips parted to release a heady sigh, her tongue
slipped inside my mouth. I could taste the champagne, but, more prominently, I could taste her, and it
sent my senses into overdrive as I gripped her tighter, pulling her further into me, our mouths crushed
together, tongues seeking out the other, our kiss becoming rougher, messier, my heart starting a
frenetic beat in my chest as I fell into her, as I so always did, helpless to the control she effortlessly
held over me. Seconds turned into minutes, and I was reluctant for our kiss to end, even as my lungs
tightened in protest, screaming to be heard, reluctant to lose her touch, her taste. My need for oxygen
finally caused me to jerk away, and I eyed her ruefully as I panted for air. She grinned at me as she
did the same, raking a hand through her hair and causing it to lose its shape slightly, in the most
intoxicating of ways.

I looked down at my lap, aware that if I stared at her for much longer, I would become lost, and I
couldn’t. Not yet. There was something I needed to say, to confess. I looked up, the words on the tip
of my tongue, only to see that gleam in her eye, the one that told me she wanted to ravish me then
and there. I swallowed, forcing myself to fight every instinct in my body that pleaded for me to
submit, biting down on my lip hard as I felt my mind start to lose its path. She inched closer, her eyes
on my lips, and I knew I was mere seconds away from giving in completely. It took everything I had
to raise my hand, looking away again as I tried to regain my composure. I quickly took a large swig
of champagne, barely noticing the bubbles dancing across my tongue, trying hard to remember what
it was I needed to say, why on earth I was being so idiotic as to deprive myself of what I knew to be
pure nirvana.

“What is it?” I heard her say, her voice soft yet with a hint of husk. I took another swig, almost
draining my glass completely before daring to look back to her.

“I …” I started, only to have to clear my throat to rid my voice of its hoarseness. “There’s something
I want to tell you.”

One eyebrow lifted as she tilted her head to one side, the fire in her eyes diminishing as concern and
curiosity took its place. “All right,” she said slowly.

I took a deep breath, suddenly jangling with nerves. “You know how I told you that I had a deadline
at work and that was why I couldn’t come to see you over the past couple of days?”

She straightened up. “Yes.”

I watched her carefully. “That wasn’t completely true.”

If I hadn’t known her face as well as I did, I would have missed the near imperceptible setting of her
jaw, the very faint tightening around her eyes. However, I didn’t. She didn’t move an inch as she
stared at me. “What do you mean?”

I was silent for a long minute, drinking her in, my heart now in my throat, the bottom of my stomach
threatening to fall out completely. “I was packing up my apartment.”

She hadn’t been expecting that. Her brow abruptly furrowed, her eyes widening infinitesimally as
they flitted across my face. “What do you mean?” she asked again, though the edge was gone from
her voice.

“Well … I mean … I …” I shook my head, frustrated that the perfect words I had been practicing for
days were now apparently determined to elude me. She leaned in a fraction. “I … I mean that …” I
rolled my eyes at myself. “I want to move in with you, Carol,” I blurted, maybe not the most elegant
of sentences, but highly accurate all the same. Her blue eyes widened further as she stared at me,
mouth slightly agape, frown still firmly in place, her champagne all but forgotten. I offered her a
small smile and a shrug. “That is, if you’ll still have me.”

This seemed to penetrate her shock, and her jaw snapped shut, her forehead straightening out as she
continued to look at me. She shook her head, as though to dispel the last remnants of haziness, and
raised herself onto her knees, shifting until she was kneeling directly in front of me, somehow
managing to not spill one drop of her drink. “You’re not kidding,” she stated after a few moments,
her voice quiet and breathy.

“Not kidding.”

She stared at me for a handful of seconds, and then lunged at me without warning, her mouth
crashing against mine as the force of such an action pushed me further into the headboard. She kissed
me hard, once, twice, and then again, her mouth skittering across my lips, searing the skin there as I
felt her hand curving around my throat. She kissed me again and again, hot, heavy, searching kisses
you.” And another. “I love you.” Another. “I love you so fucking much.” And another. My
breathing was becoming shallower with each one. “You …” She paused, her lips behind my ear.
“Are you sure?” she whispered, and I shivered in response. She moaned, trailing her upper lip back
down my jaw, reaching my mouth again and giving me another harsh kiss. “Are you …?” She
stopped then, pulling away, and I felt completely bereft as I forced my eyes open and looked at her.
Her breathing was disjointed as she stared at me, eyes darkening, but she shifted back down the bed
until there was space between us once more, and inhaled deeply. I frowned at her absence.
“Therese,” she said a long moment later, only a trace of rawness left in her voice. “Are you sure
about this?”

I nodded frantically. “Yes!” I went to push myself from the headboard, but she put her hand on my
leg and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“No, my darling,” she said softly, though her eyes told me she wasn’t going to budge on the matter. I
bit back a groan. “I need to know that you’ve really thought about this. It’s not really a coincidence
that we’re having this conversation on my birthday, is it?”

I frowned again. “Why?”

She smiled gently, leaning over to her side to place her glass on the floor before regarding me again
with an expression of loving patience. “Are you doing this for me, Therese? To make me happy?”

I remained nonplussed for a second, and then realisation dawned and my heart suddenly ached. I had
these moments when I would be confronted with just how much she loved me, just how far she was
prepared to go for me, how willing she was to put my happiness before her own, and it would bring tears to my eyes as I tried to comprehend all that that meant. Right then, sitting on her bed, witness to her concern, was one of those moments. I tried to blink away the tears, overwhelming disbelief and adoration and gratitude on the brink of swallowing me whole as I looked at the kindness and understanding and pure, unyielding love in her eyes. She wanted to make sure that I wasn’t rushing into this, that I was ready, and it touched the deepest recesses of my soul.

“It’s all right, my darling girl,” she soothed, lifting her hand from my thigh and catching the tears as they fell. “It’s all right.”

I shook my head, reaching up and grasping her wrist, lifting myself onto my knees and shuffling down the bed until my knees were touching hers. “No,” I said, with another shake of my head, my fingers slipping between hers as I looked at her. “I’m not just doing this for you.” She was about to speak and I brought up my other hand, resting my forefinger against her lips. “I’m not, Carol. I’m ready. I’m really ready.” I could see she wasn’t fully convinced, and suddenly, thankfully, words came to me. “I want to wake up with you every single day,” I told her with a helpless shrug. “I want to go to sleep next to you every night. I miss you so much when I’m not with you, that I think I’m going out of my mind. I want to be with you, share a home with you, experience every moment, make every new memory … with you.” Her blue eyes were wide, and I slowly removed my finger from her lips, trusting that she was too busy processing what I had to say to interrupt.

“You are everything.” I released a small uncontrollable giggle of disbelief as I thought back to how my life had been without her, how much had been missing without my knowledge. “You’re everything, Carol. And … and I know that I panicked at first about us moving in together. And, if I’m honest, I don’t regret not doing it sooner. There was so much that needed to be sorted out before we could do this, and … and I did need to be ready. And I can’t tell you how thankful I am that you understood that, that you let me take those baby steps I needed to take, that you loved me enough to do that. Even when I wobbled, you never let me fall, not once; you never made me feel stupid or unworthy of your time, of your patience, of you.” The tears came again, then, and I let them. They were an expression of my happiness, of my heart, of my words, of the meaning held behind each one, and I didn’t try to hold them back.

“I never thought I could feel what I feel for you. Ever. But … then you came, and you changed everything. You brought me to life, you saved me from an existence of misery and loneliness and banality.” I smiled through my tears, noticing her eyes starting to fill. “I will always love you, Carol. I can’t not.” I shrugged. “And, though I might have waited an extra few weeks until your birthday to tell you this, it is perhaps the most selfish birthday present I have ever given. I am doing this for you, I won’t pretend otherwise, I would do anything to make you happy, but, I can promise you, with every last piece of me, that I’m doing this for me, too.” I rose up on my knees, leaned forward and kissed her tears, feeling her hands sliding through my hair and holding the back of my head as I did so. She took a shaky breath and I closed my eyes, bringing my arms up and wrapping them around her waist, moving my head until my mouth was near her ear. “I love you more than I have ever loved and will ever love anything else. Please can I move in with you?”

Her hands found my back as she pulled me closer, and I inhaled her scent as my face came against her throat. God. I loved her. Always would. She said nothing for a few minutes, just held me tightly, one hand travelling up and down my spine. I listened to her breathing, matched my own with it, clinging on to her as we stayed in that position, frozen in that moment. After a while, she moved back, and I looked up at her. She tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, her tears as forgotten as my own, and gave me a tender smile. “As if you even need to ask,” she murmured, her eyes shining.

My heart did a somersault then, I’m sure of it, and I grinned before leaning forward to kiss her lightly on the lips. “Thank god for that,” I said once I’d pulled back. “I only have my apartment until the
She stared at me for a moment and then threw back her head and laughed, that beautiful, wondrous laugh that I cherished so much. I couldn’t help but laugh along with her, giddy excitement rising in my stomach as I thought of what this meant. After all these years, after all this time, searching aimlessly, waiting without realising it, I had a place in this world, I finally had a home. I loved, so very deeply, and I was loved, by the most beautiful, wonderful, imperfectly perfect person I had ever met. This was only the beginning, and what a beginning it was.
Well, that’s that. It is April 16, 1973, and tomorrow will mark twenty years since Therese came to the Oak Room and offered me salvation, offered me a chance of redemption. It’s rather disconcerting. In some ways, I cannot think back to a time when Therese was not a part of my life, in others, I can remember as though it was yesterday the morning I saw her in Frankenberg’s, that cutesy Santa hat perched atop her head, her wide green eyes, that shy smile upon her lips. I still smile at that memory; my heart still flutters.

Rindy is 25 now, which I can hardly believe, and she has grown into a beautiful, smart and strong young woman. Every time I see her, I am reminded of just how right the choice that I made back in Fred’s office so many years ago was. She is a credit to me, and I know that I have been the very best mother I could be to her. She is wonderful—charming, and witty, and loving—and, though it might sound odd, I see so much of Therese in her. Their relationship has only solidified in the years that have passed, something which has brought me endless pleasure to see, and I truly believe that Therese, or ‘Trez’ as Rindy still calls her, has been my daughter’s biggest role model. They’re out together now, taking lunch, and I’m so happy to be able to write that this is a normal occurrence. We usually meet once a week, schedules allowing, at that little white café with the blue-rimmed windows, for lunch, often followed by shopping. I feigned a headache earlier when Therese asked why I wasn’t yet ready, and, though I hate keeping secrets from her, I tell mistruths so rarely that she believed me completely. Despite how terrible I feel at the white lies I have been telling her over the past few months, I know that to see her face when she knows my secret will be so thoroughly worth it.

I remember vividly a conversation we shared one night on our ill-fated road trip. It was late, we were both getting tired, flagging after another long day spent driving, and Therese was wearily looking out of the window in an attempt to locate a motel in which we could spend the night. We’d been driving in silence for a good hour or so, exhaustion starting to take over as we turned to the radio to provide some sound, and I suddenly found my head about to droop. I jerked, quickly shutting the radio off, my mind wading through treacle as I tried to think of something to start up conversation. After a long moment, I asked her what it was she wanted to do in her career, not just in the short term, but her lifelong aims and dreams.

She sat up faster than I had ever seen her, abruptly animated as she told me of how she wanted to become a renowned photographer, passion in her voice as she explained that she wanted to make a name for herself, to make a difference somehow, though she admitted she didn’t yet have that part figured out. She told me she wanted to do something she was proud of, to be someone she was proud of. I glanced at her for a second, and one look in her brightened eyes showed me that she would do just that. I had no doubt. Recalling that now, I wonder if she ever thought she would have made as big a difference to as many people as she has. I wonder if she ever believed she would have such reason to be so proud of herself. I wonder if she knows how proud I am of her.

I didn’t always do a good job of showing her, to my eternal shame. If you are still here, reading the last few pages of the story of Therese and I, then I suppose I need not tell you of the impact that the Stonewall riots had on Therese, and the rippling impact it had upon us as a couple. Both Therese and I have written about it, shared our individual views, and you likely recall our descriptions of how covering such an event led Therese to become deeply emotionally involved in the cause behind the story. I am loathe to bore you with repetitions, but I do need to touch on it once more to explain a few things.

I remember sitting in the darkroom with her, about a week after the first riot had taken place, just to
be near her, to have a chance to spend some time with her after she’d spent another long day out in
the Greenwich Village neighbourhood, watching her hunched over the developing tray, her hair
scraped up into a ponytail as she treated one photograph after another, taking care to ensure each one
was perfect before clipping it up to dry and moving onto the next. I was so proud of her, watching
her work, and I knew it had triggered something within her, had stoked the flames of her passion and
her drive. She spent hours during that time talking to rioters and eye-witnesses, quietly walking the
streets with her camera in hand, using her finely-tuned intuition to take photographs that captured the
anger, the rebellion and the determination in a way as to tell the story without the need for words, for
those pictures said what a million written articles would never be able to.

Such photographs had catapulted her into eternal prominence, had left her heralded as a warrior of
the people, within some circles, and while I could see how daunted she was by the prospect, I could
also see that she finally felt as though she had found a real way in which she could make that
difference she had so dreamed of. Within a month, as you know, she left the Times, unsatisfied and
disillusioned by how quickly the media world had moved on from such an event that had affected
her so deeply, and spent a few months as a freelance photographer, before being approached by a
subsection of the Gay Liberation Front who were forming a new publication, set to launch in the
December, specifically for the gay community.

I am embarrassed to admit that I had reservations when she told me, meeting me from my work and
almost literally bouncing with excitement and nerves as she informed me of the proposition. It was
clear to me from the start that she wanted this, badly. She’d sat in on many interviews with members
of the GLF, had recounted to me in an awed voice their earnest dedication in making themselves
heard, in changing the laws that had kept them oppressed and fearful of arrest. I cannot state clearly
enough that I felt for them, that I wanted such reforms to take place just as much as they did, that I
felt as though change really could be on the horizon. However, I was reticent to Therese taking this
step. Perhaps that came as a shock to you when you read it earlier in this book; I can understand why
it would. When writing about that time, my darling Therese only skimmed the surface of my inner
turmoil, I assume in an attempt to protect me from any possible wrath you might feel. I didn’t deserve
it.

I wish I could pretend that I had supported her as much as I should have done, but I refuse to lie. I
have been so open with you; right from the beginning, I have made the choice to be completely
honest about my flaws, of which I have many, for, without such honesty, the world I have written
about would be fake, meaningless, and the love Therese and I share deserves so much more than
that. How could you understand the highs we’ve experienced, if you know nothing of the lows? It
has been uncomfortable at times, embarrassing, especially given my private nature, but when I
committed myself to doing this, I committed to it fully. And so, in the interest of retaining the truth I
have held on to throughout, I was determined to admit to the fact that we shared a few arguments on
the matter, which is a rarity in itself, for us.

The reason for my reticence boiled down to fear. We had lived a relatively charmed life, Therese and
I. Our close friends knew of our relationship, of course, but it travelled no further than that, and we
were both, for the most part, okay with that. I didn’t feel it was anybody’s business how I lived my
private life. I didn’t hide Therese away, but I also didn’t go around openly talking to everybody I met
of our love. Even if there hadn’t been the view within society of it being immoral and lambasted,
even if I hadn’t gone through that godawful experience of attending the Saddlebrook Institute where
I had been made to feel like I was sick and a sexual deviant, I honestly believe I would have been
just the same, whether that bolsters or hinders my quest for forgiveness. I’m not the type of person to
share what is in my heart with the rest of the world, I never have been, it’s simply not in my nature.
Of course, Therese and I lived together, and I made no bones of that, but, while people might have
raised their eyebrows and whispered amongst themselves, neither of us felt the need nor want to
flaunt our love and our relationship.
After Stonewall, however, people grew interested. Therese had been transformed from a Times photographer with a good reputation to an ambassador for the gay community in less than a week. People she met through other jobs now openly asked her of her sexual orientation; when we attended functions together, we would be the focal point, where people either wanted to constantly be by our side in case of a photo opportunity, or to prove they were gay allies, or avoided us completely, muttering under their breaths as they kept a wide berth. By this time, I was the head of the buying department at four Madeleine’s stores, and I had suppliers who simply disappeared from the radar, ignoring my efforts of contact, or explaining to me that they had heard rumours and didn’t want their businesses to be associated with such ‘controversial’ matters. I believed that, if Therese accepted the proposal offered to her, it would become harder and harder to live a life without scrutiny, and I was reluctant to give up the last vestiges of privacy that we had.

Ultimately, it was my love for her, my desperate need to see her happy, that won out over my fear. She phoned me up one day, I suppose roughly a week or so after they had asked her, while I was working and told me she was going to reject the offer, and the overpowering anguish I felt as a direct result of those words far outweighed my selfish desire for privacy, no matter how deep-rooted and established that desire was. I asked her where she was, told her to wait, and jumped in the car, parking haphazardly in the driveway only a few minutes later. That evening, she called Joan Nestle, the leader of the GLF subsection, and agreed to join their cause. That cause has gone from strength to strength. Therese has been making the difference she once dreamed of. I could not be prouder if I tried.

It was perhaps a year ago when Joan came to our house for dinner and told us about a new organisation she and a few others were setting up, called the Lesbian Herstory Archives. It was to be an organisation that solely housed the stories of lesbians, in every art form there was, in order to prevent such stories being dismissed or reinvented in the years to come. She said she hoped that Therese would like to join their team and prepare for its launch in 1974. I knew, without looking at her, what her answer would be. Determined not to follow past mistakes, and relieved that much of my fears from three years previous had either not come to fruition or had proved inconsequential when compared to the pride I felt for Therese, I supported her with all that I had.

That said, when Joan told Therese that each of the founders were donating personal materials to the LHA in order to get the archives running, I balked. Joan, Deborah Edel and Sahli Cavallo, two other founders of the LHA, had become friends of ours over time, and, as a result, had learned of our past, of everything from when Therese and I first met, to Tommy Tucker and Chicago, to Rindy and Harge, to the obstacles we have faced throughout our lives, just as we had learned of what had brought them to the points they were at now. It came of little surprise to me when Therese came home one evening with that look on her face that spelled anxiety. Our story was, as Sahli repeatedly told us, so beautiful, so endearing and engaging, so strong and filled with hope and happy endings, and we had been asked if we would chronicle our lives together and donate it to the LHA.

Can you imagine my reaction, knowing all that you know of me? At first, I point-blank refused. I could not envision anything more terrifying and intrusive, and I could not think of anything worse than having my life on display for the world to see. In the end, after learning that our story would remain in Joan’s apartment—the designated base for the Lesbian Herstory Archives—and convinced that no one would pick the damn thing up anyway, I relented, but only to the extent of agreeing that Therese could write of our journey, using the many journals she had written over the years as references. I wasn’t any use with words, anyway, that had been one of my main problems throughout my life – being unable to verbalise my emotions and thoughts. It didn’t exactly bode well for chronicling a story filled with such depth and complexities.

We spoke to Rindy first, of course, and I had half expected—or, rather, half hoped—that she would be horrified at the prospect of her mother’s love life being documented in public. Instead, she was not
far from being its biggest cheerleader, giving us tight hugs and telling us how proud she was. She believes it to be intensely important, to give voice to those who are heard the least, to provide representation to those who have none, to give hope to those who have been taught that there isn’t any, simply because of who they are. As I’ve said, I see much of Therese in her. During the first Gay Pride, exactly a year after the Stonewall riots, she marched proudly, head high as she held up a banner. She has done so every year since.

In the months that followed, Therese embarked upon telling our story. I have lost count of the number of times I have come home from work or wandered out of our home office to find her hunched over a thick pad of paper, scribbling furiously. I would often find myself being regaled with stories of our past, as she reminded me of a certain moment that she was currently bringing back to life. It made me think of the photo album she had bought me for my birthday back in 1953, and of the many others that we have filled since, except she wasn’t using pictures to tell a story, she was using words. It came fairly easy to her, I think. Since joining the GLF (or, the GAA, as the once small subsection is called now) publication, she has found herself occasionally having to write articles to accompany her photographs, what with the group being a darn sight smaller than wider publications, and years of being surrounded by writers has held her in good stead.

It was in January of this year when Therese was asked to fly over to the West Coast for two days to cover a piece regarding the growing gay nightlife in San Francisco. Under normal circumstances I would have been by her side, and had been many times before when she had been given similar jobs, but it had coincided with a string of meetings taking place which were focused around expanding Madeleine’s further, and I simply couldn’t be absent. She had hesitated in accepting the job for this reason, but I had encouraged her to take it. It was jobs like these that she loved, getting to go and explore different places, different cultures and societies, and, as I reasoned to her, we still had the telephone. It was only when I returned home from dropping her at the airport that I noted the thick pad splayed out on the couch. I picked it up to put it somewhere safe, all the while thinking of how annoyed Therese would be that she had forgotten to pack it, when I felt an abrupt surge of curiosity rip through me and I lifted the cover.

I cannot tell you of all the emotions I felt during the next three hours as I read page after page. I know I wept, I laughed, I smiled. I know my heart ached, and soared, and skipped a few beats. I know I hung onto her every word, eyes wide and transfixed as I turned the pages, transported back to the times she wrote of. I also know that, by the time I had slumped, exhausted and drained, against the back of the couch, I had realised that I had been presented a real, shining opportunity. Something had been triggered, a switch had been hit, while I had read those pages, and it still amazes me now how quickly the plan formed in my head for what I was going to do.

I had been struggling for over a month to try and decide on a gift for Therese on our twentieth anniversary. Though I could be romantic on occasion, I had never had the creativity within me that Therese possessed, that flair for the sentimental, for those gifts of a thousand memories, but I had been adamant that I wanted to do something special, something that held deep meaning. It was the very least that she deserved. However, my determination hadn’t birthed any epiphanies, and so I had continued to rack my brains without luck. I suppose it is obvious now, with even just a few months of hindsight, that the answer was right there, staring me in the face, as I watched Therese furiously scribble into her notepad, but I think I had been so convinced that my words could never do us justice, so fearful of the entire thing and how exposed it would leave me, that it hadn’t even entered my mind. Until that night.

I have spent every possible snippet of time since then writing. It is hard, harder than I had expected, to keep such a secret from Therese, both in a practical and emotional sense. It has included the help of Rindy, Abby and Joan, who have all been keeping her extremely busy, and my deputy at Madeleine’s has been doing a marvellous job of temporarily filling my shoes in the weeks that have
passed. It took me six attempts to be happy and comfortable enough with what I wrote to progress past the first page, and it hasn’t been an easy process for me to take. I’ve had to leave comfort behind and not look back as I have opened myself up, shared my memories, my thoughts, my flaws, my regrets, my hopes and dreams, but, as I recall stating in an earlier chapter, the more I have written, the easier it has been to buy into the idea that I am merely writing for me, for Therese, and not for people who could read this in years to come.

In a way that I had not anticipated, I have found this experience to be therapeutic, to be … enlightening, I suppose. Being able to reflect upon my life, to remark upon it, to journey through it again, has been beneficial, I think. I have come to understandings about myself, about Harge, and Therese, and Abby, and Rindy, about life, and loss, and grief, and love that I don’t believe I would have reached without doing something like this. I have found myself in tears, either of sorrow or joy, many times throughout this period, have experienced many things all over again, and, though I never expected to feel this way, I have to admit that I feel almost saddened that this has drawn to a close. Perhaps, when this is over, I shall follow Therese’s lead and take up writing a journal. With that expression of sadness written, however, I must add that the excitement I feel about being able to give this to Therese, to give her all of the thoughts and feelings and emotions that I could have only ever hoped to verbalise, is almost nauseating in its fervour.

In a long list of surprises, though, perhaps the one that surprises me the most is how excited I am to donate this to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. In writing about this, about my love, my struggles, the journey I, we, have undertaken, I finally, truly, understand what Therese and Rindy have said all along. I am still sceptical that anyone will actually pick up this collection of mine and Therese’s scribbles—which will, before being put into the public domain of Joan’s living room, be assembled as one—but I recently discovered that I now hope that they do. I hope, with all of my heart, that you do. Evidently, if you are reading this, you have. I apologise unreservedly for my probable lack of writing skill, and for all of those little details that I simply couldn’t bear to skim over. I apologise for not being able to write a perfectly happy story, with no hardships or obstacles. I apologise for the plentiful mistakes I have made, and will continue to make. What I have come to understand, though, and accept, is that this is life. Real life. It is hard, and painful, and terrifying, and, at times, utterly deplorable, and the true magic, the magic that we all possess—you, and me, and Therese, and everybody else—is to find happiness and love in a world that can be cruel, to find strength and hope when it seems that all is lost, to find within ourselves a sense of pride that so many people try to take away from us. Because there is always hope. And that is why I want this story of ours to be read. There is always hope. Therese proved that to me. And you, too, will find, or perhaps have been lucky enough to already find, your Therese, your light, your heart, your everything.

I could write more, many pages more, but I fear my darling Therese will be home soon, and there is one last thing I need to do. Besides, what more is there to be said? I was lost, and Therese found me. I am grateful for that every single day. She remains to be the air that I breathe, the beat of my heart, the woman of my dreams. She always will be. As for my plans for the future, who knows? As long as she is there, and Rindy, and Abby, I truly do not care.
April 16, 1973

Dearest,

Tomorrow will mark twenty years. Do you find that as hard to believe as I? Twenty years since I opened my heart up to you, in such a way that it could never be closed again. Twenty years since you found within yourself the strength, the determination and the maturity to see beyond my mistakes, to see what we had together, how rare and beautiful it was, and come back to me. I’ve told you before, many times, how you saved me. Can you comprehend that yet? I wish there were enough words to describe just how much I mean it, but there aren’t. I hope I have shown you, though, through my actions. It terrifies me to think of what would have become of me if you hadn’t come to the Oak Room, if you hadn’t given me that chance, because I don’t believe I would have made it, in all honesty. You didn’t just save my heart, my happiness, my soul … you saved my life, Therese. I have no doubt of that.

Twenty years. And each of those has been the very best of my life. We have, of course, had our ups and downs, our highs and our lows, for that, too, is a part of life, and to pretend otherwise would be to do ourselves, and the love we hold for one another, a disservice. But throughout it all, I have never stopped loving you, wanting you, needing you, being proud of you. God, I am so proud of you, Therese. You inspire me, every single day, in more ways than I can count or even begin to accurately explain. I worry, at times, that I haven’t told you that enough. I worry that I haven’t told you enough about all that I feel for you, over the years, though I promise you I have tried. Such worry is the reason why I first decided to pick up my pen and join you in the telling of our story. I want you to know, to really know, all of those thoughts and feelings that I have never been able to fully express. I want you to understand the depths of my love, my gratitude, my endless devotion. Every chapter I have written is a love letter to you, my darling, every word an echo of my heart.

I am sure, while reading this, that an array of recent happenings is starting to fall into place for you, namely my suddenly very busy schedule, and why Rindy, Abby and Joan have been determined to spend every spare minute of time with you. You know how I detest keeping secrets from you, and only do so around birthdays or Christmases, but this has been the hardest secret of all to keep. Penning my memories of our lives has been such an illuminating process for me, and there have been a few times during which when I have felt close to imploding due to the ferocity of my need to share and recount particular moments with you.

I suppose it has been akin to a road of self-discovery, in being able to write down all of my thoughts and experiences, one I hadn’t expected, though I do recall you saying similar as you embarked upon this journey. You’ve always been wise, darling girl, more than you give yourself credit for. I’ve always been grateful for you, I’ve always felt blessed, I’ve always known that you have made my life infinitely better, but I think doing this, seeing all of the words I never seem to be able to properly say, has helped me gain a better understanding of it all. Of the hows, and the whys, and the whens.

When I met you, I was adrift, having spent a lifetime distanced from my own emotions, a lifetime of living behind invisible walls that I believed made me a stronger, invulnerable person. In actual truth, I was weak, starved of the things I had willingly deprived myself of, living in a world devoid of intimacy and laughter and so many other things that make life worth living. My life was mundane, both as a result of my self-imposed prison and of my stature and what was expected of me. And then
there was you, Therese. Employee 645-A, as your card was signed. With your wide eyes a shade of green that was so captivating and beautiful, filled with a depth that intrigued me far more than I could previously remember, with your flustered appearance, the very beginnings of a blush rising in your cheeks, and your evident intelligence … you were a shock to my system, a jolt to my heart, a wildcard I hadn’t been expecting, hadn’t known I so desperately needed. You write of your entire world tilting on its axis when I entered your life, and how deeply I hope you know how reciprocated those words are.

Your love, your kindness, the very essence of your being … it has made me, without question, without doubt, a better person. I am whole when I am with you, the very best version of myself that I can possibly be. You have taught me how to love, how to be selfless, how to be kinder, and wiser, and braver, and … happy. With your love, I have found a peace I didn’t know I could achieve, a contentment that has only grown over the years. You tell of how I made your life better, but, sweet girl, do you fully appreciate how you have enriched mine? I hope, when you have read my many words, have viewed yourself through my eyes, you will finally understand. Without you, I am, I was, nothing. For you are my everything. You are the light to my darkness, the sweetness to my sour, the warmth to my cold, my beacon in the storm. My darling, you are my perpetual sunrise.

I love you, Therese. It wouldn’t have been inconceivable for our love to have turned from passionate and all-consuming to comfortable and slightly dulled over the period of twenty years, but I love you as viscerally, as profoundly, as I ever have. More so, in fact. You can still seduce me completely in the space of a single second with just one look, one movement, one sound. My heart still feels that almost palpable sense of anguish when you are not near. My stomach continues to erupt into butterflies when I know I will see you shortly. I continue to adore you with every fibre of my soul.

You will be home any minute now—the butterflies in my stomach tell me so—and, as I am not planning on giving you my gift until tomorrow morning, I have to hide this little secret of mine for just a small while longer. I could write forever, and it still wouldn’t be enough to tell you how I feel. Just know, you have my heart. All of it. Everything I have to give is yours. It always has been. Even before I knew it. Because, as you so aptly put, we were made for each other. I had been waiting for you all along, Therese. And though words will never truly be enough, I will continue on in my mission to show you my love, until my very last breath. You are my angel. Flung out of space.

All of my love, for now and evermore,
Your Carol

Chapter End Notes

Well, to quote Carol, that’s that!

Firstly, big, huge thanks to everybody who subscribed/bookmarked/left kudos on my work; I can’t tell you how thoroughly I have appreciated your support. Also, so many endless thanks to those of you who have commented on my work. It has meant a great deal to me, and your feedback has motivated and encouraged me to keep going, to keep pushing past the occasional writer’s block/meltdowns/lack of self-belief and persevere. I went into fanfic retirement a good while ago, and if it hadn’t been for the magic of Carol, both film and book, I would still be there now. To receive such overwhelming support and enthusiasm right from the very beginning of this tale o’ mine was a truly humbling and amazing experience, and helped shape what was originally just a couple of rough chapters into a 30 chapter story. Your comments have made me laugh, think,
relate, debate, grin inanely, blush, and, on occasion, become teary. Thank you, a hundred times over, for being such a wonderfully kind, thoughtful, smart, and generous community, and for welcoming me as completely as you did. It’s not always easy, putting your work in a public space to be judged, the work that you have slaved over, and it can be quite a daunting and … intimate, I suppose … experience, but I realise now that I needn’t have worried. I have received such an array of incredible, mindblowing comments that have never failed to leave me feeling a heady combination of awe and disbelief, and I honestly cannot thank each of you enough. It is a hard slog, at times, writing and researching and proofreading and editing, and every last comment helped to spur me on further.

A few of you have also expressed sadness that this story has come to a close. I share those sentiments. However, as I’ve mentioned, this entire thing started out as two chapters that I thought would go nowhere. As it progressed, I had to figure out what I wanted to do with the story and how I wanted to approach it. I think I was about six chapters in when I realised that a) I had made a mistake in starting where I started, and b) my writing style really isn’t suited to a story lasting many years. After a day or so of racking my brains, I came up with the idea that I would put the epilogue 20 years ahead of where Carol and Therese were, and, after much research to try and find a way to make this fit, I kind of fell in love with the idea of their story being used in the Lesbian Herstory Archives. With this idea, came another one. I realised that, had I the opportunity to start over, I would have started from the beginning. I wished that I had given myself the chance to explore the mindset of Carol and Therese from their first meeting, to delve into those silences, dig deeper behind those looks and actions that each led to the moment in the Ritz Tower that I had started with.

So, I am debating whether to write a prequel which would cover the above, as well as adding a few additional scenes that I personally would have loved to see. I would greatly appreciate your input before I proceed. It takes so much time, dedication and effort to put together a story, and I am more than willing to do it, but only if the interest is there. I don’t know if this sort of thing has been done to death in the fanfic world, or even if it just isn’t as fascinating or interesting to others as it is to me. If the interest is there, I will likely be back posting again within a few weeks.

As for why I decided to put the epilogue 20 years ahead, my prequel idea somehow led to the possibility of writing a sequel, which will, if it goes ahead, explore separate passages of time (such as first proper Christmas together, first Valentine’s, birthdays, anniversaries, some further insight into Abby, some ups and downs that Carol and Therese have faced, their careers, Rindy, etc.). The sequel will take more time and research, I fear, than the prequel, and the prequel will provide further background information that I hope will add more context to this part and the sequel, if all turns out well, and so I will be writing the prequel first. As I’ve mentioned, your input as to whether there is room for this is essential, so please feel free to let me know, either in comments or via Twitter/email (I’ve just put these up on my profile).

Well, holy shit. That was one hell of a note. Apparently, I had a lot to say! ;) I so truly hope that you enjoyed the epilogue (I’d forgotten how hard they were to write. If anyone saw my comment a few chapters back about being close to abandoning writing completely, these two chapters were why!), and, again, my sincerest thanks for the encouragement, support and love I have received throughout.

Damn, I wish there was a writer’s alternative to a mic drop :P
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!