PRNT: write to believe

by Miss_K

Summary

Therese Belivet, an up-and-coming twenty-something journalist at PRNT, a journalistic, somewhat progressive, magazine based out in San Diego, CA. She's got the talent but lacks self-belief in herself and her work. Carol Ross (formerly Aird), an acclaimed journalist who joins PRNT after having spent years freelancing while she was married. She's trying to reignite her passion for writing and get herself out of her post-divorce rut by taking on this challenge in what is a new chapter in her life. Sparks fly, both professionally and, inevitably, romantically, between them.

Slow burn modern AU fic with some fluff, some angst, eventual smut, and plenty of Belivaird moments we all so want, so stick around. Chapters written from either Therese or Carol's POV.

Notes

Italicised parts are either inner musings or for emphasis.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Our daily bread: sex and food

Chapter Summary

HEY!

I don't know what happened with all my chapters but this is chapter 3 instead of chapter 1. My actual chapter 1 is under chapter 27 entitled "Welcome to PRNT" and then chapter 2 is "Blonde Hurricane". Something has happened so my chapter ordering is all wrong.

Sorry for the confusion but I really don't know what the fuck has happened.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 1 --> Chapter 27 "Welcome to PRNT"
Chapter 2 --> Chapter 2 "Blonde Hurricane"
Chapter 3 --> Chapter 1 "Our daily bread: sex and food

Correct chapter order thereafter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

The pep talk from Carol seemed to act as a catalyst for Therese, in both her personal and professional lives. Perhaps the most telling change it brought about was her attitude toward dating and, to some extent, sex. Her most recent reference of an intersection between the two was her relationship with Richard, their sex life having been far from thriving. She found herself actively avoiding physical intimacy with him, especially in the last six months of their relationship. She considered herself quite adept when it came to not only the use, but also the recycling of excuses which ranged from simple to overtly elaborate, as she attempted to deflect and hopefully repel his advances. Simply put, she didn't enjoy having sex with him, something she knew to be far from the norm. She found him too eager, too selfish, too easily satisfied, his hands too clumsy and rough, his uncoordinated movement more often than not hindering her from even broaching the idea of an orgasm, let alone having the multiple blissful climaxes she felt she deserved. It was issues in their stuttering sex life that initiated the relationship's inevitable downfall, with countless arguments stemming, either directly or indirectly, from Therese's reluctance to get intimate.

Upon the conclusion of their relationship and Therese's liberation from it, she sought to release months worth of pent up sexual frustration, embarking on a tireless pursuit of orgasm after orgasm after orgasm. All I need is sex. Those five words became a mantra of sorts to her. The depth of emotional intimacy between her and her partner in their trysts were, at best, skin deep. But, sex is all she wanted and, so, sex is exactly what she had. From Derek, a spinning instructor at her gym, to Erica the interior designer, to two nameless women from a few hazy drunken days at a music festival, back to Derek again, and then finally a somewhat longer dalliance with Alex, an artisan
baker. She had more sex in a span of three months then she did for the entire duration of her time with Richard.

But, things changed, as so often is the case in any supposedly purely physical relationships. She began to feel unfulfilled by casual sex, the need for emotional intimacy steadily gnawing away at her over time until it drove her to seek something beyond the all too addictive flood of endorphins and oxytocin. Her attempts at getting to know someone she found even remotely attractive, though, fell royally flat, like trying to light a fire with wet matches. She thought she was being too picky, looking for that perfect, but probably non-existent, overlap between an emotional connection and physical attraction which would alight her sexual desires. Her disappointment after yet more hopeful but ultimately failed endeavours sent her back into the welcoming arms and occasionally between the welcoming legs of another casual acquaintance, the orgasms she'd greedily taken serving to momentarily placate her. Soon after, though, she would inevitably feel the full extent of the chasm between her emotional satisfaction and physical satisfaction bear down on her, effectively forcing her into making yet more unsuccessful attempts at connecting with someone. And, so, the vicious cycle continued, until the alternating discontent and euphoria she felt nullified each other and, in doing so, numbed her altogether. She began to feel disconnected during sex, the ecstasy of the moment or multiple moments not doing enough to prevent her from feeling like she was merely going through the motions, the act itself being relegated to a means to an end. To put it mildly, she was in a rut.

*You just need to be honest with yourself about what it is you want and then to go after it.* Carol’s words rang hauntingly in her mind for days after.

Therese had felt so checked out of late that she was having trouble even figuring out what she wanted. *What do I want?* Therese had felt so checked out of late that she was having trouble even figuring out what she wanted. *I want...someone. No shit, Sherlock! That's kind of the whole point of this dialogue you're having with yourself.* Okay, okay. *I want someone...whose belief in me will get me through times when I don't believe enough in myself.* I want someone...who inspires me in any way, shape or form. *I want someone...who'll remind me to smile and not allow my demons to consume me.* I want someone...that I can cherish. *I want...to love and feel loved, with no conditions attached.*

Therese immediately felt better, the stifling, numbing weight which had taken up residence on her shoulders finally being lifted to allow her to breathe and think easier. *Do I know anyone with those attributes?* And, so, she began running through friends, acquaintances, and more random but interesting associates to determine whether any ticked, if not all, then at least some of those boxes. Her reaction to most was, at best, lukewarm, failing to make her feel even the slightest surge of excitement. That was until she considered the one person who’d persistently cropped up during her musings and general daydreaming of late. *Hmmm... Carol?* Tingles almost immediately suffused her chest, the mere thought of the magnetic woman breathing oxygen onto the smouldering embers of her heart. The severity of the feeling scared her, unsure if it was because it was Carol who had alighted her desires or for fear of failing to form that connection she so desperately wanted. *Stop thinking about it now. It can’t and won’t happen. You’re just a bit infatuated because it’s all still so new with her and besides, she’s given no real indication of being interested in women.* 

A wink and some flirty eye contact does not mean she’s even remotely attracted to you. *Just forget about her and move on.* And, with that, the worrying thought was cast aside, a steely resolve moving to quickly take its place in her mind.

Despite her best intentions, Therese found her supposedly steely resolve tested from the very outset. She couldn’t help but feel attracted to Carol in the days after their conversation on the roof. From her disarmingly direct turn of phrase to her impeccable comedic timing and ability to bring a laugh or smile out of any and everyone, especially Therese; to her surprising and incredibly adorable silliness. *And, to top it all off, she looks like a fucking goddess,* was thought on an almost hourly basis whilst in her company. She felt herself at a complete loss for words the following Monday when she saw Carol striding towards her from the lobby. That day she happened to be wearing a knee-skimming, high-waisted red pencil skirt, allowing Therese a first, and admittedly all too short, look at her...
shapely calves. Her fitted, long-sleeve black blouse that was buttoned up all the way accentuated her
slim figure. Her outfit was finished off with a camel coat that was effortlessly slung over her
shoulders and a pair of simple strappy black heels which essentially ensured she would be looking
down on others for the day. She'd pulled her blonde tresses up into a bun while the front was pushed
up into a slight quiff, giving her an almost regal air. The hairstyle highlighted her cheekbones,
making them do battle with red-stained lips for dominance of her face. Therese had to almost
physically grapple with herself to not give Carol the thrice-over. This all, along with the sway of her
hips as she walked and the smokiness of her voice as she greeted Therese, was almost too much to
handle. Therese didn't trust herself to form, let alone say, a coherent sentence and, so, responded with
an awkward nod of the head and nervous smile.

Wednesday 4 October 2017

Now it was lunchtime on Wednesday, the day of their brainstorming meeting with Tim about their
upcoming Alaska fracking exposé. Therese sat with Dannie at one of those stereotypical
ergonomically designed tables in the communal dining/sitting/relaxation/kitchen area, talking about
anything but work while having their lunch, when Carol came in for yet another cup of coffee.
Therese’s gaze inevitably wandered over to Carol, finding herself addictively stealing inconspicuous
glances at her while she performed the most mundane of tasks.

"What smells good in here?" Carol asked across to them from the kitchen counter, her head inclined
slightly as she sniffed the air.

"That would be Therese," said Dannie. The all too obvious teasing in his voice essentially made his
accompanying snigger superfluous.

"Really?" said Carol, dragging out the word, as her mischief-filled eyes focusing on Therese all the
while.

Therese kicked Dannie under the table and scolded, "Dannie, you dick!"

"What did I do?!" he asked, his face assuming a cherubic but ultimately feigned innocence.

Therese shook her head. "I think it's my lunch you're smelling," she said to Carol as she came to sit
across from her.

"And, what is it that you've got there?" Carol enquired as she leaned forward to glimpse at the
content of Therese's bowl.

"This? Oh, it's dukkah roasted carrot, cauliflower, and chickpea salad with a lemon and parsley
labneh. It's just leftovers from my dinner I made last night."

Carol squinted her eyes at Therese before stating, "Okay, all I caught was carrot, cauliflower,
chickpea, lemon, and... I think parsley." Her creased brow pointed to her perplexity at Therese's
lunch.

Therese laughed before explaining, "Dukkah is this Egyptian nut and spice blend. This one I made
has macadamia nuts, almonds, sesame seeds, turmeric, cumin, and, if I remember correctly, a little bit
of cinnamon and ground ginger in it. And, then labneh is like really thick and tangy Middle Eastern
yoghurt. I used it to make the lemon and parsley dressing. You don't have to have it dressed up,
though. It's pretty good by itself."

"Sounds interesting and smells even better," Carol said as she gazed across at the younger woman.
"You know, Carol, I don't think I've ever seen you eat anything," Dannie admitted, his narrowed eyes scrutinising her. "You must do, though, because you're very much alive and kicking," he nonchalantly added as he gestured up and down at her evidently living self, his face clouded over by an expression of absolute puzzlement.

Carol snorted derisively and laughed. "Of course I eat, Dannie," she answered as she folded her arms across her chest, apparently feigning defensiveness, and leaned back in her chair. She glanced at Therese with a playful quirk of her brow, their almost conspiratorially sharing in a joke that the younger woman herself didn't yet know.

"You know coffee, cigarettes, and the olives you get in a martini don't actually count as food, right?" he asked further.

Carol threw her head back and laughed heartily at Dannie's elaboration, the corners of her eyes creasing and overflowing with mirth. Therese joined in, thoroughly enjoying the back and forth between them, but was admittedly ever so slightly jealous of Dannie's boldness and ease at conversing with Carol.

Carol started after somewhat composing herself, "Okay, first of all, you have to chew the olives so technically they're food. Secondly, just because you don't see me eating doesn't mean I do not eat at all. You just happen to not be around when I do eat. And, thirdly, don't let my looks deceive you because I could eat most men under the table, including you, dear Dannie." She gestured at Dannie's 6'3", 180lb frame. "I'd show you but I don't particularly like how men get when their egos are bruised. So, you're just going to have to take my word that I do, in fact, eat," she finished emphatically, nodding her head as if agreeing with herself.

Dannie, too, responded with his own snort of derision. "I'll believe that when I see it," he retorted with a laugh.

"I don't know what you want from me, Dannie. I've got nothing to prove my point to you."

"Do you want to try some of this to shut Dannie up once and for all?" Therese asked Carol, gesturing to her lunch.

After a quick glance across at Therese, Carol replied, "You know, I would love some of your lunch. Thank you, Therese." Her cheeky eyes were trained on Dannie instead of whom to she was responding.

Therese began to rise from the table to get a clean spoon from the kitchen for Carol to use. To her surprise, though, Carol reached across the table and dragged the bowl towards her. She scooped up some of the salad using Therese's spoon, shot a quick wink at her, before turning to direct her chewing at Dannie. Therese didn't know how to react, being amused by Carol's comical act of defiance and at the same time feeling off-kilter by their sharing a spoon.

After a few more mouthfuls, Carol wiped the corners of her mouth with a napkin and indifferently asked Dannie, "Satisfied?"

His stern look soon gave way to broad smile and good-natured chuckle. He conceded with a simple, "Yes."

A victorious Carol let out a short burst of laughter before concluding with a shake of her head. "That was really delicious, Therese. Thank you, again. Do you like to cook?" After Therese nodded her reply, she asked, "And, do you think you're any good at it?" The now all too familiar mischievous glint had returned to her eye as she again toyed with the younger woman.
Therese shrugged. "I don't know. Isn't that something for other people to say?" she asked awkwardly.

Carol looked her up and down a few times before Dannie interrupted, "I'm other people here, Rez, and I say that you're a damn fine cook! You know my mouth still waters whenever I think about those bourbon maple glazed chicken wings you made? Christ, you should have tasted them, Carol. They were incredible! And, then there was this lobster mac and cheese she made this one time. I'm telling you it was a full-on food orgasm! Oh, and don't even get me started on her cakes." His eyes glazed over as he evidently began to reminisce about her sweet treats before he retreated in search of something to eat in one of the kitchen cupboard, muttering to himself all the while as he went.

Therese laughed at what she knew was Dannie's insatiable appetite, remembering how he willing submits himself to being plied with new and different recipes she was wanting to try out. There's a reason why Phil calls him a human food disposal unit. She smiled to herself before looking back across at Carol to find her staring at her, yet again, a small smile adorning her face.

"What?" Therese timidly asked.

Carol shrugged and nonchalantly answered, "You just surprise me, Therese."

"Oh." Not knowing what else to say or do after such a statement, Therese grasped her spoon once again but almost immediately dropped it to clang against the bowl, almost as if it were scalding hot, after remembering it had been in Carol's mouth. She looked up and saw Carol had noticed her momentary brain explosion, her eyes fluttering as she, for once, turned her gaze from the younger woman. Thankfully, Dannie took that opportune moment to slide back into his seat.

"Hey, Rez, when are you going to make those stout brownies again? Because, those were fucking awesome," he asked, the look of hope all too evident in his dark eyes.

Therese was thankful for the interruption. "I don't know, D. I mean, I'm not even sure you liked them the last time I baked them. You only had like ten in one sitting," she teased with a smile. She chanced a glance at Carol but found her absentmindedly staring at the mug clasped in her hands.

Carol suddenly stood. "Well, I better get back to work and uh...my diet," she said, gesturing to her cup of coffee, succeeding in only making Dannie laugh. She squeezed his shoulder and gave Therese a somewhat nervous smile before turning to leave.

What was that about?

"So, are you going to make them again?" came Dannie's voice through the fog of her subconscious.

"Huh?"

"The stout brownies. Please can you make them again?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure. I'll do them over the weekend."

"Yes! You, my dear, are too good to me! It makes me all the more thankful that I can call you my friend," he said wistfully.

"Okay, no one likes a kiss-ass, Dannie," she said, lightly pushing his arm before getting up to put the lid back on her lunch bowl.

When they returned to their office a short while later, they found it was empty, Carol's mug being the only thing that pointed to her return. I thought she said she was going back to work. She definitely
acted a little weird when she saw me drop the spoon. Oh, yeah, good going there, Therese. Real smooth stuff. Okay, hush now! Why would she be acting weird after that, though? Not wanting to delve into what could quite easily have become hours of deliberation, Therese, yet again, cast her thoughts of Carol from her mind, at least for the time being.

Therese went into the kitchen just before the meeting to make herself one last cup of coffee. She had her back turned to the room, standing on the very tips of her toes as she tried in vain to grab a coffee capsule that sat just out of reach on the top shelf. *Who the hell put them up there?!*

"Here, let me," she heard an alluring smoky voice come from behind. Carol came next to her, easily reaching up to grab a capsule with her right hand while placing the other on the small of Therese's back to steady herself. "There you go," Carol said, her eyes sparkling again.

Therese somehow managed to accept the capsule despite their closeness and the imprinted feeling of Carol's hand from seconds earlier. "Thanks," she said quietly, looking up through her lashes.

Carol leaned forward ever so slightly and whispered, "You're welcome." She smiled her blindingly brilliant smile and left the kitchen once again.

*What the hell was that?!!*

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if you guys have noticed, but I really like food, both eating and talking/writing about it *shrugs* More to come in upcoming chapters I'm afraid *shrugs harder*
Blonde hurricane

Chapter Notes

Big ups to Ligeria yet again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Friday 15 September 2017

Having taken stock that night of what transpired throughout the day over a few glasses of wine, Therese concluded that she had come away from her encounters with Carol relatively unscathed and thus toasted to herself for a job well done. *Aside from our flirting in the office, of course. But, could I really call it 'our flirting'? I mean, I didn't know what the hell I was saying and Carol just seems like one of those naturally flirty people who tends to wink and shit at everyone. There's nothing more to it. So, stop thinking about it.*

But, that night her mind would seamlessly wander back to Carol at any given opportunity, recounting moments from the day. Richard had finally left their office after having dutifully carried Carol's things up from her car, but not before he made a laughable and ultimately failed attempt at striking up a conversation. Under the pretense for working on her laptop, Therese was able to look more closely at Carol who, by happenstance, was on the same line of sight. She stole discreet glances while Carol stocked her desk with essential stationery, a copper reading lamp, and a pair of Moroccan-pattern picture frames, before placing a few succulents, potted in an eclectic array of ceramic cups, Mason jars, and glass terraria, on the windowsill beside her desk.

Therese noticed how effortlessly Carol was dressed, the shock of their initial introduction having previously rendered her incapable of doing so. Carol wore a pair of white Ports sneakers, loose, burnt orange pleated pants, and a simple, oversized, white button-up shirt tucked in at the waist, its collar popped over the lapels of her charcoal wool coat. The rolled cuffs of the pants exposed her ankles, adding illusory additional height to her already considerable stature. Therese noticed, once Carol had shed her coat, that the top few buttons of her shirt were unbuttoned, allowing a glimpse of the alabaster decolletage lying beneath. She shook her head after her eye repeatedly wandered back to its pale expanse and tried to focus on the job at hand, albeit altogether unsuccessfully. Thankfully, though, the arrival of Marcus to give Carol the rundown on all things IT and the timely return of Dannie provided distraction enough for Therese to make more headway on her Florida panther piece.

*I can't act like that every day, though, ogling her instead of working. I'm going to get fuck all done if I continue on like that. Maybe it's just a matter of getting used to how gorgeous she is, you know? Yeah, that sounds almost possible. I mean, that's exactly how I felt about Heather after a while. Heather had started at PRNT a few months ago, joining their health team to cover all things from the dangers of ketosis to customising diets according to your genetics. Therese was instantly attracted, wondering lasciviously what Heather's toned arms and legs could do to her, and promptly went about flirting with her, or at least doing what she considered to be flirting. After a few weeks, though, her attraction had diminished considerably, Therese blaming a lack of emotional spark between them for putting paid to any thoughts of taking things further. Hopefully that will happen*
with Carol soon enough and then I'll be able to get on with things like normal. Satisfied with that conclusion and resolved that such feelings of indifference were inevitable, she was able to push all thoughts of Carol out of mind and settle in for a peaceful night's rest.

Monday 18 September 2017

Monday morning was considerably less frenzied with Therese paying less attention to what she was wearing or how much make-up she applied. That's not to say she didn't put in any effort, she still wanted to look "presentable", as she so aptly put it. She got to work with enough time to grab some coffee and stop for a quick chat with Phil and Carl, a gentle giant of a man apart of the graphic design team, before they made their way to the conference room for the magazine's bi-monthly meeting.

"Is everyone here?" began Tim promptly at nine o'clock, looking around the conference room.
"Where's Carol?" His question was directed at Dannie and Therese, both of whom shrugged unknowingly, allowing the rest of the room to grow ever restless. "Typical," Tim said, clicking his tongue before continuing, "Okay, we'll give her a few more minutes and then we'll have to start without her."

Just a moment later, though, a blonde hurricane swept into the conference room, plopping herself down in an open seat across the table from Therese before launching into an apology directed at the boss, "Shit, I'm so sorry for being late, Tim. How late am I? Did I miss much? I was just all over the place this morning with trying to get Rindy ready for school and then getting my shit together. But, I promise you it won't happen again."

Tim held up both hands to stop her rambling. "Relax, Carol. For once, you're not that late. In fact, this is probably your most acceptable late arrivals. And, don't make promises about you not been late again because you and I both know that's total bullshit! I think I'd die from shock if you ever arrived on time for a meeting." He shook his head and laughed good-naturedly at the flustered woman, having her join in after a beat.

"Okay, okay. Let's dive straight in, shall we? Richard, Jeanette how are things coming along with the piece on the tax reform bill proposed by the G.O.P.? I want it finished by Halloween, guys. That's when peak interest in the story is likely to be."

Therese's brain went on autopilot as if on cue when Richard started on about federal tax, itemized property tax, and what not. She looked across at Carol to find her equally uninterested in the discussion being had. Carol, the ends of her hair still wet from her apparently frantic morning, had slipped on a pair of pink-framed aviator glasses and was scribbling presumably indiscriminately on her notepad. Only she could somehow pull off those ridiculous glasses. As if somehow hearing her thoughts, Carol slowly looked up without lifting her head and locked eyes with Therese. A sly smile crept across her features accompanied by an almost conspiratorial glint in her eye. A quick quirk of her brow meant that Therese was the first to blink, the duel ending almost as soon as it had begun, making her quickly cast her eyes down and shift uncomfortably in her chair. Daring to look up at her provocatrix, Therese found Carol staring at her with an expression of smug satisfaction. Therese couldn't help but shake her head and grin, an acknowledgement of sorts of a battle lost, with Carol reciprocating by beaming back at her. Therese turned her attention back to Tim, attempting to gauge how much she had missed. Well, so much for trying not to look at her too much.

"Bel, you almost done with the panther piece?" enquired Tim some time later.

"Just about. I'm just playing around with a few snippets from my interview with that professional hunter who was hired to track and capture the panthers. I should have it done by Friday, though,"
"So, you're telling me that a skilled hunter was used to track a critically endangered population of cougar in the hope of saving them from the brink of extinction? Seems a bit counterproductive, doesn't it?" he asked comically.

"Not if he's paid to not kill them," Therese retorted with a smile.

"Indeed. Okay, Friday, good! Alice, how's that high school doping ring exposé shaping up?" The meeting continued in much the same pattern for another hour or so, with Tim touching base with each team, giving guidance here or there and occasionally demanding the pace to be picked up.

"Lastly, I've got something we can really sink our teeth into. It would appear that the environmental impact assessments used by a few major natural gas and oil companies to legitimize and legalize their fracking up in Alaska may have been fraudulent. The shenanigans appear to run pretty deep in the industry as a whole and the web of lies that's been spun is so intricate and complex that it's almost unbreakable. Almost. That's why we're going all out with this one. Carol, Dannie, and Bel – I want you guys to work together on this. No buts, Belivet! This is your time to step up and show what you're made of," Tim said firmly. The look of encouragement on his face, though, did enough to prevent any interjection Therese was hoping to make. "This is too big a story for any one person to run lead on. So, when I say "work together", I need you guys to really work together. I also want someone to crunch the numbers of a scandal like this. Richard, you'll work together with them. I want the financial implications of this cover up to be interwoven throughout the story, but that will come much later, I think. I'll send you guys the contact details of the sources we've got so far and some helpful references. Read through everything, do a bit of digging if you want, brainstorm, and then we can meet again to discuss a way forward. Let's meet ... say Wednesday after next. Good? Okay, that's all. Now, let's get back to work!"

The meeting left Therese wandering around in an almost drunken stupor. She escaped to the roof for some air and, perhaps ironically, to have a cigarette. She didn't smoke often but the anxiety currently consuming her necessitated a quick nicotine fix. The first few deep, unhealthy drags somewhat calmed her shaking hands but did little to slow her racing mind. What the hell is Tim thinking?! I have to go from saving the panthers to a fucking multinational fracking scandal?! He couldn't have pushed me any harder into the deep end if he tried. How the fuck am I supposed to step up when I'm drowning here?! No, no! Carol and Dannie will just have to run lead and have me supplement their work because there's no way in hell that my writing is even close to their calibre. How am I supposed to learn from Carol and elevate my writing when I'm undoubtedly going to stumble at the first hurdle?

"Sneaking a cheeky ciggie, are we?" came an exaggerated Cockney accent from behind her, successfully pulling her from her defeatist musings.

Therese whirled around to find a grinning Carol walking to join her in the corner of the roof. Her strides were long and languid, the fluidity of which screamed cool. She came to a stop before Therese, gesturing to the cigarette clutched in her hand. "Mind if I bum one?"

"By all means," came Therese's reply, pointing to the pack of cigarettes and lighter perched on the edge of the parapet before turning to look out over the valley.

Carol glanced sideways at Therese after taking her first drag. "You all right? You looked a bit ... on edge when Tim said Richard would be working with us."

Therese flushed under Carol's directness. Shit, can she read minds or something?! "Was it that obvious?" she mumbled down at the wall in front of her, cringing at her apparent transparency.
Carol let out a deep, raspy laugh. "Yes! I'm surprised you didn't bite through your pen! I think your blood pressure must have shot off the charts!" she exclaimed. Her voice was teasing, an expansive smile causing the corners of her eyes to crease.

"Shit," Therese said ruefully.

"Oh, come on! I'm just messing with you, Therese," Carol replied genuinely. "But, you did almost add plastic to your diet," she said, amiably bumping shoulders with the younger woman in an attempt to coax a laugh out of her. "So, you're not a fan of Richard, huh?" she asked around her cigarette as she took a moment to hop up and sit on the parapet.

"I wouldn't say that," Therese started cautiously.

"Oh, please! I saw you rolling your eyes at him yesterday when he carried my things in so don't even try to bullshit me," Carol interjected in a matter-of-fact tone.

*How the hell did she see me do that?! Okay, I really need to be more careful around her. If she can see my clear annoyance at Richard, then what else can she see written on my face? Oh, God. She stopped herself from delving any further into those thoughts, knowing full well that doing so was likely to colour her countenance with embarrassment. She eventually admitted, "We have a … history."

Carol nodded in understanding but continued to stare down at Therese, her silence showing her clear dissatisfaction with the explanation.

"We dated for a little while when I first started here," Therese elaborated, not daring to look at Carol for fear of what truths her face would betray of her.

Carol was quiet for a beat before asking, "How long is 'a little while' to you?"

"Almost a year." Therese cringed at her answer. She sheepishly looked up at Carol, already dreading the kind of response that was to come.

Carol balked, her brows instantaneously shooting up, and was lucky to not swallow her cigarette. She removed the offending piece from her mouth and hastily blew out the smoke. "A year?!" she exclaimed. "That's not 'a little while'! 'A little while' is a month or two or, in some cases, a few hours." Her explanation brought about a snort and head shake from Therese. "So, things ended badly between the two of you, then?" she enquired.

"Not really, I don't think. I mean, breaking up and then having to see that person everyday at work is never easy but I think we navigated the awkwardness pretty well. I think I was okay with the break up because I knew it was inevitable."

"So, if things didn't end badly and you were okay that things were over, why does he still provoke such a reaction from you?" asked Carol while taking another drag, her eyes roving over Therese's face as if trying to decipher something in her features.

Therese shrank and began to unravel under the intensity of Carol's gaze. "I don't know. I guess it's because I kind of blame him for what happened between us, even though I'm far from faultless and am probably even more to blame in that regard. I felt the same way about him from the day we started dating to the day we broke up, you know? No growth whatsoever in between. I knew things had stagnated between us for a while but I just didn't have the guts to end it. And, Richard is about as sensitive as a rock when it comes to sensing another person's feeling so things just continued. When I eventually had had enough and ended things, I felt so bitter and resentful and … and angry about the
time I'd wasted … I guess I've still got some of those residual feelings," she grumbled her conclusion, grinding her cigarette butt against the wall with more force than necessary. It was only the scraping of her fingernails against concrete that finally snapped Therese out of her daze. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I told you all that. We barely know each other."

"Don't apologize, Therese. We may not know each other just yet, but I can certainly relate to how you're feeling," she answered truthfully, a touch of sorrow creeping into the depths of her eyes.

Therese looked up at her under furrowed brows, asking an unspoken question. Carol took a deep breath before elaborating. "I was married for eleven years and was unhappy for at least eight of them. When I finally ended things, I resented myself so much for accepting for so long that it was okay to feel unhappy. But, I no longer do. If I think about what I want and can have and then the alternative of what I did have, I'll always choose the former. I'd rather feel hopeful about what I can still have than feel resentful about what I could but never did have. Your feelings of resentment and anger are normal. You just need to be honest with yourself about what it is you want and then to go after it. Having something to strive for sure as hell beats any feelings of anger and resentment any day." She gave an earnest smile, the clouds of sadness slowly beginning to clear from her eyes.

Therese gave a weak but equally earnest smile in return before once again looking out over the valley. *I wasn't quite expecting this change of events. But, she's right. Being resentful isn't going to change what's already happened and I'm not going to get any closer to what I want. But, what do I want anyway? To find someone, yes, but who are they and what am I searching for in them?*

When Therese eventually came to from her musings, she found Carol again looking at her searchingly. She'd had long finished her cigarette by this stage with Therese thus becoming the epicentre of her attention. This time, though, her stare didn't cause any discomfort. "Those were some very wise words," Therese stated with a faint twinkle in her eye, hoping to lighten the mood.

Carol acquiesced. "It's been known to happen every now and then, you know? But, don't get used to it, okay?" she added with a wink. "We went on quite a dark tangent there, didn't we? Let's talk about something a little lighter. Get it? Lighter," she said, gesturing to the lighter as she reached for another cigarette, a dopey smile adorning her face. Her goofiness brought about an eyeroll and chuckle from the younger woman. "So, are you excited about the fracking story?" asked Carol with an almost proud smile on her face.

Therese hesitated too long before forcing out, "Yeah. I can't wait for us to get started." Her smile faltered almost as much as her voice. *Good job, Therese. You couldn't have sounded less believable if you tried.*

Carol read her like a book. "What are you worried about?" she asked, looking quizzically down at Therese once more.

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. What's worrying you?" Carol asked unrelentingly.

"I just … I don't know … I can't," Therese started incoherently, her shoulders tensed up to her ears as her fingers raked through her hair. She willed herself to regain control as she tried to stop her agitated breathing. She finally forced out, "I don't feel good enough...My writing just isn't there yet. Tim's asking too much of me." She made the confession to the air in front of her, not trusting herself under the scrutiny of Carol's gaze.

At this, Carol jumped down from the wall, discarding most of her cigarette into the large makeshift ashtray below, before grabbing Therese by her shoulders to turn her to face her. She squeezed
gently, willing Therese to look up. When she didn't, though, she took a different tack, giving her a small but firm jerk. She relinquished her grip thereafter to cross her arms over her chest and straighten up to her full height, making her an all too imposing figure. "Therese, let me tell you something about Tim. I've known him for nearly twenty years now and one thing I know for damn sure about him is he does not mollycoddle. He has too much integrity to hire or favour someone less skilled to do a job just because he likes them. He doesn't want you on the team for the hell of it, he wants you because he knows you're good enough. And, so do I."

Therese slowly looked up, her eyes raw with wonder. "You do?"

"You better fucking believe it. I, like Tim, don't sugarcoat things. So, when I say you're good enough, I mean you are good enough. I mean, look at your career thus far, Therese. You were hired right out of grad school and went straight to writing actual stories, not those bullshit fluff pieces rookies usually get lumped with. You weren't forced to take the usual detour of interning or being someone's errand boy because you had potential. You have potential. You write a helluva lot better than I did when I was at your career stage. You may think your writing isn't up to scratch but that's because we're always our own worst critic and can't be truly subjective about the calibre of our work. It's always said that stories make the writers. You know, those stories that define your career? But, it's the writers that make any one story. You give any two writers the exact same information and resources and you'll never see identical pieces of work. Shit writers can have the best sources, information, and whatever the hell else and still produce a bad story! It's much the same with good writers using their literary wizardry to somehow produce a good piece despite being saddled with a shoddy foundation. Tim chose you because you are a good writer, Therese. You need to start believing that and then own it because only then will you truly fulfil your potential. Got it?" Carol's tone was firm throughout, begging no further questions or any second-guessing from Therese.

Therese cast her face to the ground upon hearing Carol's praise in what was a vain upon attempt at hiding her burning cheeks and ears. Although she didn't yet believe all that was said, a seed of hope and optimism was planted in her. Feeling too overwhelmed to say more, though, she merely croaked, "Yeah."

"Okay?" Carol asked, stooping a little to make eye contact with Therese.

"Yeah."

"Good! Now, I think I'm in for a long dry spell after dishing out those two servings of wisdom to you," Carol said, smiling good-naturedly at the younger woman as she gave her forearm a squeeze. With Carol's touch and a laugh from herself, the tension and anxiety in Therese began to ebb."We better head back before Tim loses his shit and sends out a search party. I'm blaming you if he does, by the way," chuckled Carol, already angling her body toward the stairwell.

"Hey, I wasn't the one that was doing all the talking." Therese shrugged innocently, already feeling well enough to join in on the banter.

An exasperated gasp escaped Carol before she bumped shoulders with Therese once more on their way to the roof exit.

Chapter End Notes

If it's not obvious, Carol is modelled on Cate Blanchett and her style. In my eyes, she's the only one who could play Carol so she's appropriately the inspiration for my modern
AU Carol.
Therese

Wednesday 4 October 2017

Therese didn't have much time to dwell on the incident with Carol, instead having to focus her attention on their meeting with Tim. She arrived to find Carol and Dannie already seated beside each other in front of Tim's shambolic desk. She chose to sit on Dannie right, needing a protective buffer of sorts that would allow her to focus. Carol looked up from her phone and flashed a quick, dazzling smile Therese's way before returning her attention to the screen.

Richard came in a moment later, choosing to sit next to Carol. He leant forward and genially said, "Hey, Terry. Did you ever think we would be working together on a story?"

"Definitely not," she replied. "I think it could really work, though. The more I look into things, the more I realise how severe the financial repercussions of the whole situation could be. I think it'll add an interesting element to the piece. But, I'll let you tell us all about it," she said with a smile. Her response was honest, not dripping with the sarcasm or contempt that had come to characterise her conversations with him of late. She realised after her conversation with Carol that she needed to put an end to her petulance toward him because continuing to do so wouldn't change what had happened between them nor help her move onto new relationships.

"Yeah, I've got a few things to say. But, I'm keeping them close to my chest for now. I don't want you to steal any of my ideas, you know?" he joked.

"Damn. You've thwarted my plan," she quipped, her dimples showing as she gave a light chuckle. She could see that Carol had watched the whole exchange and was now scribbling indiscriminately on her notepad.

"Good, you're all here. Let's get to it," Tim said as he walked in. "Carol, what've you got for me? I know you must be chomping at the bit to start."

Carol straightened up before commencing, "Absolutely. I haven't even gotten into the nitty gritty bits yet and I can already see what a shit-storm this could create. I did a bit of digging and found that this isn't the first time that one of the companies conducting the environmental impact assessments, Envirocons, has been accused of falsifying their findings. In fact, they've had three class action lawsuits against them in the last fifteen years or so for controversial developments they okayed. All were handled out of court to be swept under the rug and forgotten. The company has also changed its name a few times, mostly to try clear their name after various dodgy dealings. Then I did some Facebook stalking -I know, you don't have to tell me how bad that sounds- but, I found that the owner of Envirocons is married to the daughter of Bill Sharp's cousin. He's the CFO of NatGas, one of the companies fracking up in Alaska. It may be purely coincidental and have nothing more to it,
but I think it's definitely worth looking at. One other thing I found interesting is that Envirocons is affiliated with other international consultancy companies which have some pretty big controversies of their own. They have ties to one that gave the go-ahead to a hydroelectric project in Tanzania that whipped out a few endemic species. They're also linked to a company which allowed more extensive oil mining to take place on Barrow Island. It's considered Australia's Galapagos so there are a lot of endemic species at risk. The last bit isn't dealing with fracking in Alaska per se, but it could be good to show the systemic fraudulency of these gas and oil companies when it comes to legitimising and legalising any project or development they wish to make. And… that's all I have so far."

Tim looked pleased with what he heard. He scratched his stubbled chin before saying, "That's certainly a start. Definitely focus on Envirocons for now, but try find out a bit more on the other companies involved. Find out how Envirocons has a dodgy history and yet have been allowed to continue to consult for these very high powered clients of theirs. There may some money crossing hands or some other kickbacks involved. So, look into Envirocons owner's links with NatGas and any other strange connections like that. And, I agree with you about showing how widespread these fraudulent dealings are, especially when there are millions or billions of dollars involved. It'll add a bit more depth to the story. One thing I do want you to do, though, is look at the falsified findings and see how easy it is to make an incorrect assessment. Good start, though, Carol." Carol nodded her thanks and made a few notes.

"Dannie, whatcha got for me?"

Dannie chose to focus on the oil and natural gas companies themselves. He'd found a few people who could act as whistleblowers of sorts, saying it was just a matter of finding the right incentive that would make them reveal compromising information. Tim acquiesced, only warning Dannie about finding real sources, not posers hoping to lay false and misleading trails, and discretion for fear of sounding any alarm bells within the companies in question.

"Bel, what have you come up with?" Tim asked, turning his attention to Therese.

"I thought I'd focus on the environmental impacts, especially on air and water quality, and then socio-economic impacts, too. Fracking produces methane, a greenhouse gas, and oil and gas companies are no longer required to report methane emissions. So, the companies fracking up in Alaska have no social responsibility for the amount of methane and other air pollutants they produce. Also, fracking is seen as more water-use efficient than other methods of extraction, but it can adversely affect water quality. So, I'd like to check out any localised impacts on water quality that have already occurred or may occur in the future. Maybe interview a few people in areas where fracking is taking place, you know? Then from the socio-economic standpoint, I think it'd be good to find out how people's day-to-day lives have been affected and any negative personal financial implications they've encountered since it began," Therese explained with a new-found confidence.

Tim nodded in agreement. "I like it, Bel. It touches on the human aspect of things that readers definitely connect with. You may want to put your feelers out for citizen scientists up in Alaska who may shed some light on the environmental impacts. I've got a few buddies in the Environmental Protection Agency who may know some people you could get in touch with. You know, I was thinking it may even be a good idea for you to head up to Alaska and check things out yourself," he contemplated.

"Really?" Therese asked uncertainly.

"Absolutely. You can get a greater grasp of people's feelings, especially those who have been negatively affected. You could also double as our photographer for the story. Take pictures of the people you interview, if they're willing; any evidence of environmental impacts, and, if you're
allowed, the areas being fracked, you know? I've seen your stuff, you can definitely do it," he admitted. "You know, it may be a good idea for you to tag along, Carol. You always seem to find something or see something that no one else does. You may find a few angles that we haven't thought of yet. What do you think?" Tim addressed his question to Carol.

"I was actually going to suggest that before you piped up there," she responded dryly, smiling mischievously at her boss. "I think it's a good idea. And, if all else fails, I can help Therese out with conducting interviews or anything else she needs." She looked at Therese and smiled.

Therese returned the gesture but worry immediately began to fester in the pit of her stomach. Great, I have to somehow survive a trip alone with Carol.

Tim boomed, "Great! I think you should try head up there pretty soon before winter really sets in. Maybe stay for a week or so and see what you can find out. I'll handle all the arrangements and it'll of course be covered by the company. Good, I like that plan. Okay, Rich. What ideas have you come up with?"

Richard launched into both the positive and negative financial aspects of the scandal and fracking in general, spanning job creation and revenue generation to potential lawsuits. The meeting continued for a little bit longer thereafter with everyone feeling satisfied with the game plan for the story by the end of it.

"Anyone up for a drink and maybe something to eat?" Tim asked the group after the meeting ended. "Because I could sure as hell use a drink after that meeting." His remark brought about a round of laughs with Therese, Dannie, and Richard agreeing immediately after.

"How about you, Carol? Can you come for a drink or do you have Rindy this week?"

"No, Rindy's unfortunately with Harge. So, I'd love to come! I could also use a drink after that meeting," Carol dead-panned with a wink aimed at her boss.

"That's the spirit, kiddo!" Tim exclaimed to the woman only a few years his junior. "Does everyone want to head home and then meet up somewhere in a bit?" They all agreed and decided to meet at Neighborhood at 6.

Therese arrived at the trendy gastropub a little after 6, finding Carol, Dannie and Tim crowding near the relatively packed bar, talking animatedly to each other. Dannie waved Therese over, making Carol turn in her seat as she approached. She saw her eyes rove up and down her body, a look of appreciation all too obvious on her grinning countenance. Therese was pleased with the reception to her outfit, purposely choosing something she hoped would catch Carol's attention. She had settled on a sleeveless, black V-neck jumpsuit, the apex of the V-neck plunging between her breasts to reveal the slightest hint of cleavage, a pair of simple strappy cream heels, and a black motorcycle jacket slung casually over her shoulders. She slid into the bench seat next to Dannie, coming to sit directly across from Carol.

"Hi!" Carol greeted her delightedly. "You look absolutely gorgeous, Therese!" she said, her eyes taking Therese in once again.

"Thanks." She blushed involuntarily at the compliment. "You don't look half bad yourself," she replied, hoping she sounded flirty. Half bad being the biggest understatement ever made. She only saw Carol's upper body upon her arrival but even that was enough to confirm her sentiment. Carol wore a loose, open-back, dark gray knit sweater, the expanse of her back along with her subtly toned shoulders on full display. Thank God I'm not sitting behind her because I would not be able to
"You got a hot date or something after this, Bel? Or, are you dressed up just for us?" teased Tim.

"Is it too hard to believe that it's the latter?" she joshed in return, eliciting laughs from around the table. "And, this is hardly all dressed up, Tim," she said as she gestured to herself, trying to sound like she hadn't spent over an hour deciding what to wear.

Drinks and eclectic bar food was ordered once Richard arrived, including Therese's favourite ooey-gooey grilled cheese and truffle fries. The conversation was easy and flowed with an alcohol-fueled fluidity. Tim was the first to leave, admitting that his wife would castrate him if he arrived home after 9. Richard followed a little later, supposedly needing to collect a few forgotten things from the office before heading home, leaving Carol, Dannie, and Therese at the table. If anything, the conversation was even smoother after both departures.

Dannie kept them in hysterics with tales of bad dates he'd the misfortune of experiencing. His phone rang as he was in the middle of telling them about a disastrous date mini-golfing where the girl kept swinging the golf club between her legs, like one does a mallet when playing croquet, while making loud whooshing noises. He went outside to take the call, leaving Carol and Therese alone at the table.

"Been on any disastrous dates yourself?" Carol asked before downing the last of her martini.

"A few."

"With Richard?" she asked with an all too familiar naughty glint in her eye.

"Surprisingly not," Therese admitted to make them both laugh.

"Shit, I'm sorry guys but I'm gonna have to leave. The meeting Phil was supposed to have in New York has been brought forward to tomorrow, so he's catching a red-eye tonight. He asked if I could look after Morgan until Sam gets back tomorrow," Dannie said as he returned to the table. "Morgan's his daughter and Sam's his wife," he explained to a confused looking Carol.

"That's too bad. I was just going to ask if you wanted to share some churros with me," Therese joked, jutting her lower lip out and giving him her best puppy dog eyes.

"That's just mean, Therese. And, totally uncalled for, I might add!" he admonished. "Okay, I'm going to head out. Try enjoy the rest of the night without me, okay?" he said, giving Therese and Carol a bear hug and a kiss on the cheek goodbye, respectively.

"Fancy another drink?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, but only if we order some churros."

"I don't usually share my food but I guess I can make an exception," Carol admitted with a sly grin.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't think many people would want a share of your coffee, cigarettes, and martini olives anyway," Therese deadpanned. Her two previous drinks had loosened her up considerably, adding additional lubricity to their banter.

Carol audibly gasped before bursting into laughter. "The cheek of some people," she said, clicking her tongue and shaking her head with faux indignation while gesturing to their waiter. "Please, can I get another whiskey sour for the lady," Carol said, nodding in Therese's direction. "Also, a dry martini with two olives for myself, and churros for us to share. Thank you."
Therese grinned, liking Carol ordering for her.

"How long have you and Dannie known each other?" Carol asked after a beat, her gaze focusing in on Therese.

"Hmmm... I think like... 8 years now," Therese replied, her furrowed brows more typical of someone solving a complex mathematical equation.

"So, you met when you were -what? juniors in high school?"

"No! How young do you think I am?! No, I met Dannie at NYU. He was a TA for one of my classes but we became friends. We stayed in touch after he graduated and then things just kind of picked up right where we left off when I started at PRNT," Therese explained.

"That's really great. Friendships that endure long distances and tough career choices are worth holding on to," Carol said sagely. "Now, tell me. If you didn't meet in high school and you've been friends for at least eight years, then how old are you exactly?"

"A lady never reveals her age," Therese responded coyly.

"I know. That's why I'm asking you." Carol winked with a look of smug satisfaction.

Therese gaped in mock offense before guffawing. "I'm 26."

Carol slowly shook her head and let loose with a low, drawn out whistle. "Aren't you going to ask how old I am?" she asked with a quirk of an enquiring eyebrow.

"I don't see the point, really. I mean, a lady never reveals her age, right?" Therese asked, trying to assume an expression of innocence but having her impish dimples betray her.

"Oh, come on! I can see you're dying to know!"

"Hmmm... Maybe."

"Okay, if you don't want to ask me directly, would you like to guess?"

Therese contemplated for a bit. "I don't know. Guessing could get me into a lot of trouble."

Carol grinned back at her. "Try me," she said, laying down a playful challenge.

Therese leaned forward on her forearms. "27?" she said, her attempt at keeping a straight face backfiring when a laugh bubbled out of her.

Carol swatted her on her arm. "Guess again," she said, lifting her chin and narrowing her eyes at Therese.

"Okay, okay. How old do I think you are?" Therese mused to herself, playfully tapping her finger on her chin as she did so. She was all too willing to accept an open invitation to look at Carol. She noticed the delicate lines around her eyes, then uselessly searched for signs of ageing in their depths, before finding herself staring at her mouth. A slow swipe of Carol's tongue across her lower lip broke Therese's reverie. The knowing smile that followed made Therese look away in embarrassment. *Shit, she knows I was staring at her lips.*

"Can I see your hands?" Therese suddenly blurted out, unsure where the question came from.

"My hands?"
"Yeah...Hands give the best indication of a person's age." She'd heard someone say it before and thus decided to test its legitimacy.

Carol acquiesced, holding out her right hand. Therese held Carol's hand palm down, one of her hands supporting, the fingertips of the other softly tracing the skin she was examining. Carol's hand was larger than her own, but still delicate, her fingers longer, the knuckles more prominent, the tips more rounded. *Do you know how gay you look staring at her hand like this?!* She looked up to find Carol's unreadable countenance staring back at her.

The moment was broken when their drinks and a plate of churros with an espresso cup filled with a dark chocolate dipping sauce were placed in front of them. A relieved Therese diverted her eyes and immediately took a deep, calming sip. Carol mirrored her action a moment later before dunking a cinnamon sugar coated churro into the sauce

"Mmmmmm ... good idea getting the churros. I can see why Dannie would be pissed off that you didn't order them earlier," Carol joked after savouring a few bites. Therese responded with a smile before reaching for her own sugary treat. "You know, you still haven't guessed my age," Carol said, again quirking a questioning brow.

"You're quite persistent, aren't you?" Therese teased. "I'd say you're probably between 35 and 37."

Carol looked impressed. "I'm 38. Good guess, though."

"Can my reward for the good guess be to have more churros than you?" Therese asked, grinning across the table at Carol.

"Don't push your luck."

"So, how long have you been writing for? I mean, working as a journalist. I know you started at The New York Times and you were freelancing before you started at PRNT, but I don't know what you did in between," Therese enquired after a beat, wanting to change the discourse.

"Hmmmm, let's see. I interned at The Times for 2 years or so until I was...24, I think. Then I was actually allowed to write, mostly fluff pieces, but it was a start, you know? I started contributing opinion pieces when I was maybe 26 or 27. Yeah that's right because I got married around the same time. Trying to make the whole long distance thing work, with me being in New York and Harge being in San Diego, was proving to be too hard, though. So, I decided to leave and move out here. I had Rindy a few years later and I thought it was better for me to continue freelancing. It allowed me to set my own pace, you know? And, I felt I produced my best work that way. But, most importantly, I got to spend a lot more time with Rindy,"

Therese nodded and sat thinking for a bit. "Do you mind my asking why you then decided to take a permanent job at PRNT after freelancing for so long?" she tentatively asked, somewhat afraid to make eye contact with Carol but doing so nonetheless.

"I don't." Carol said with a small smile. She took a deep sip, grimacing slightly at the strength of the drink, before continuing, "I got divorced a few months ago. After lots of back and forth and countless arguments, we finally decided to share custody of Rindy. So, she spends two weeks with me, then two weeks with Harge, and we alternate holidays and other special occasions. With the custody agreement, I have a bit more time on my hands and freelancing just wasn't really cutting it anymore. But, if I'm being perfectly honest, I felt like I was in a rut after the divorce and I desperately wanted something to reinvigorate me. Tim had always joked that he would hire me in a heartbeat, so I built up enough courage to ask if he had a job to offer me a few months back when we had dinner and thankfully he did. The rest is, as they say, history." Carol smiled broadly, breaking her
melancholy from moments earlier.

Therese smiled back. "So, how do you think you've been settling in so far?"

"Pretty well, I think. I know it's barely been two weeks but I already feel like I'm getting back in the groove of things, you know? Getting that fire back in me. Besides, the people here have made the transition a whole lot easier," Carol said with a sly smile. It only lasted a moment, though. "It also helps keep me busy when Rindy's not around," she admitted reflectively, her fingers fiddling with the base of her martini glass.

Seeing the change in Carol's demeanor, Therese decided to bring up a topic she knew Carol was all too happy to talk about. "How old did you say Rindy was again?" she asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to change the mood.

Carol immediately straightened up in her seat. "She's 8 going on 80. Wise beyond her years and coltish as hell." She laughed heartily and shook her head, her eyes shining with a mixture of mirth and love.

"Gee, I wonder who she got her coltishness from?" Therese's deadpanned.

"I have no clue whatsoever. But, it's certainly not from someone as innocent as me," Carol said coyly, fluttering her eyelids.

Therese snorted at the absurdity of her remark. "I can't remember if 8 is a good age for kids."

"It certainly seems good for Rindy. She's gotten past that stage where kids hide behind their parents and act all shy. She now asks questions pretty much non-stop, which can be a bit exhausting, but I absolutely love it. And, the gall of her! You should have heard what she said to me the other night when we were having dinner. She asked if she could have some ice cream and I said she could but only if she finished her dinner. She was still picking at her roasted broccoli by the time I'd finished my dinner. So, I quickly left the table to grab her school bag because we needed to start her homework as soon dinner was over. When I got back, though, she'd put her unfinished plate in the kitchen and brought out a tub of Ben & Jerry's. So, I told her again she needed to finish her dinner before she could have any. She then replied in the most matter-of-fact tone you will ever hear, "Mommy, you didn't say I had to finish that dinner. I'll finish tomorrow's dinner, I promise." I swear I nearly died from laughing so hard! Needless to say I let her have the goddamn ice cream!" Carol roared, throwing her head back as she did so.

Therese shook with uninhibited laughter but slowed after a while to watch Carol in her moment of bliss. "The apple clearly doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

"Nope. And, I couldn't be more fucking proud!" Carol replied, triumphantly raising her glass in a mock toast to herself. "You'll meet her soon enough, though. So, you can see how she is for yourself. She'll like you, I think."

"Oh, yeah? And, why's that?" Therese asked before taking another sip of her drink.

"Because, I like you, of course!" Carol replied exuberantly.

She what?! A sudden intake of air left Therese choking on her drink.

Carol shot up out of her seat to sit next to a now coughing and spluttering Therese. "Therese! Come on, raise your arms above her head. There you go, just like that. Good. Try to breathe, okay?" Carol gently instructed, a worried look clouding her features.
Therese slowly began to breathe easier after a few more hard coughs. The cessation of her plight made her all too aware of Carol's close proximity, especially her hands resting on her thigh and over her heaving ribs.

"You okay?" Carol asked while reaching for a bottle of water their waiter had brought. "Here, try drinking some water."

Therese gulped the water down, thankful that it not only soothed her rough throat but gave her something else to concentrate on besides the now languid rubbing of Carol's hand on her back.

"Better?"

"I think so," Therese managed to rasp out.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Therese. I got a bit carried away there. I sometimes go too far when I tease."

"Don't be," Therese said, and she meant it. *I'd choke on air if it meant being this close to you.*

"I think we should call it a night, don't you? Especially after I almost made you choke to death," Carol tried to joke but looked a bit strained while doing so.

"Yeah. People usually kill people they don't like, not people they do like," Therese teased, managing to bring out a throaty laugh from Carol. They settled their bill and went outside to wait for their Ubers.

"Well, thank you for a lovely evening, Therese. I really enjoyed myself," Carol said as her ride pulled up next to the sidewalk. "I'll try to not choke you next time, though," she joked as she pulled Therese into a tight hug.

"There'll be a next time?" Therese mumbled over her shoulder, too distracted by Carol's intoxicating perfume and her hair that fanned gently against her cheek.

Carol pulled back. "I hope so," she answered. She gave Therese's arm one last squeeze and shot her a wink before opening the car door. "I'll see you tomorrow!" She departed with a smile that outshone the restaurant's neon lights.

*She likes me. She hopes there'll be a next time. She likes me. She hopes there'll be a next time. She likes me. She hopes there'll be a next time.* These two thoughts would swirl in her mind that night, and many more for that matter, no matter how hard she tried to push them out.

Chapter End Notes

Companies (Envirocons and NatGas) and persons (Bill Sharp) mentioned in relation to the fracking piece are fictional. Controversies (Tanzanian hydroelectric project and Barrow Island oil mining) and restaurant (Neighborhood) are very much real.

I hope you enjoyed all the gay :D
Therese

Thursday 5 October 2017

Therese sat tapping away at her laptop, her mind still somewhat awhirl from the events of last night with Carol, when Tim stopped by the door. "Hey, Bel, can I talk to you in my office?"

"Sure. I'll be there in a sec."

Carol gave Therese a small, reassuring smile while Dannie proceeded to make incoherent noises that suggested she was in some sort of trouble. She gave him a slap on the back of his head for his troubles as she left.

"Tim?" she said, knocking on the door jamb.

"Come in, Bel. Take a seat, would you?" he said, looking up from a pile of papers. "How was the rest of last night? Carol told me she had a really good time with you."

Her stomach flipped at the casual remark. "Yeah, it was a good night. Carol's really cool," she answered, trying to sound a bit vague, unwilling to expand on the plethora of ways she would describe Carol to Tim.

"Good. I think she's settled in well here." He rocked back and forth a bit in his chair before continuing, "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about another story I want you to write but didn't have the chance to yesterday when the meeting ran long. I want to put a piece together for the upcoming issue about what happened in Las Vegas on Sunday. It's not going to be your usual article, though, because it's going to be more of a photographic retelling of the shooting. I've got a photographer friend who happened to be covering the music festival and he's given PRNT permission to use the pictures he took as events unfolded. I'm hoping that the horrifying reality of the pictures will make people wake up and realise how badly things need to change and have needed to change for a long time. Because, the countless articles written about gun control every time there's a mass shooting don't seem to be doing anything to change public opinion on the matter. It's the same story being rehashed each time, just with a different villain and more up-to-date statistics. That's why I want to rather do a picture article and an opinion piece on gun control written by you."

"Really?"
"Yes. I remember you did a few pieces on gun control while you were at NYU. You have more background on the matter than anyone else here and I want to read your take on things now that you've evolved as a writer. Tell me and tell the readers what you think without getting too bogged down by statistics that everyone should know by heart. I know you've got a lot on your plate at the moment, especially with the trip to Alaska coming up, but would you be up for it?" Tim asked.

As much as it was a question, Therese knew it was an instruction of sorts: Tim challenging her to challenge herself. "Yes, I would," she answered.

"Good. I'm looking for something 1000-1500 words long and it would need to be finished before you head to Alaska. You sure you're up for it?" Tim tested her again.

"Yes."

He studied her for a bit before beaming. "Excellent, Bel. Send a first draft my way whenever you're ready," he said, effectively dismissing her when he turned his attention back to his stack of papers.

Therese tried getting back to work once back at the office but felt somewhat dazed as the repercussions of her decision began to sink in. So, she escaped to the roof to clear her mind. She laid down on one of the rooftop garden's benches to stare up at the sky. She heard footsteps approaching after a little while, deciding to close her eyes in the hope that whoever it was would leave her be. When no further signs of intrusion was heard, she opened her eyes to look at the clouds passing overhead. The leisurely pace of the wispy cirrus clouds seemed to pacify her warring mind.

"Are you a nephelococcygian?" came out of the blue some time later.

Therese looked to the source of the question, finding Carol lying supine on another bench some meters away. She smiled at the image of Carol's feet dangling over the edge, something she herself rarely experienced. "You say that like I'm supposed to know what it means," Therese eventually replied.

"Here I was thinking all writers were wordy," Carol said, finally turning her head to look at Therese.

"We are. But, we also like learning new ones."

Carol smiled and look back to the sky. "A nephelococcygian is someone who does nephelococcygia, the act of seeking and finding shapes in clouds. It's a part of a psychological phenomenon called pareidolia in which we recognise patterns and shapes in things that are random," she explained prosaically.

"And, how is it that you know this exactly?" Therese asked, enjoying the opportunity to look at Carol.

"I have a knack for remembering random, useless facts."

Therese laughed. "It would appear so."

"Watching the clouds and finding shapes and faces in them calms me," Carol admitted to the sky.

"Me, too."

Carol glanced at Therese before looking up again. "I know. You came up here because you needed to calm down," she said.
Realisation crossed Therese's mind. "Tim told you about the opinion piece." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes. He wanted my opinion on your writing it."

"And, what did you say?" Therese couldn't help herself from asking, both fearing and desperately wanting Carol's answer.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Say it."

"Why?" Carol asked, seemingly oblivious to the despair in Therese's voice.

"Just say it?"

"Why is it so important?"

"Because I need to hear you say it!" Therese said in a loud but faltering voice.

Carol shot up into a seated position, her eyes suddenly ablaze. "Why? Will it stop you second-guessing yourself? How many people need to tell you you're good before you acknowledge your ability yourself? How many people do you need to believe in you before you believe in yourself, Therese?" Her tone was as cutting as her gaze.

Therese was so taken aback by her words, the look in her eyes, her demeanor in general making her recoil. She didn't know how to respond but could feel herself begin to flail. She got up and made haste for the roof exit, unwilling to let this Carol see her fall apart.

She managed to escape to the restroom, effectively barricading herself in a stall before drowning in a torrent of despair. She stifled her crying, not wanting to draw unnecessary attention to herself were someone to enter. She dried her eyes and wiped her nose after a few minutes of self-pity before splashing cold water on her flushed face. She looked at herself in the mirror, noticing how the bloodshot whites of her eyes accentuated their greenness, making her eyes almost glow with emotion.

No, you have to get it together. You have to go back in there and show her you've got more fight in you. That you can do this. She squared her shoulders and left for the office, walking in without a word. She set to work in silence for the rest of the day, never once sending a glance Carol's way.

Therese sat reading The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde in the window seat of her apartment later that evening. What she was doing could hardly be considered reading, though. The syntax and, to some extent, the meaning of the words themselves were lost on her. Her mind was awhirl, cast adrift in a tempestuous storm of emotions. Her cup of passionflower tea sat cold next to her, left feeling unconvinced of its supposed calming effects after only a few sips.

A rap on the door an unknown amount of time later finally broke her rudderless concentration. She groaned as she reluctantly got up to see who could possibly be bothering her. She peered through the peephole and took a moment to compose herself before opening the door.

"Therese! I thought I'd stop by and see if you wanted to chill. I brought beer, pizza, and cupcakes!" came Dannie's cheery introduction as he stood beaming from the doorway.

"I don't know if I'm really in the mood right now, Dannie."
"Oh, come on! You're seriously gonna turn down a pepperoni pizza with extra cheese?! You love cheese, especially extra cheese! I can quite easily finish it off by myself, and the beer and cupcakes for that matter, but I wanted to share it with you! Come on, please? You know you want to," he said as he persuasively hovered the pizza box before her.

Therese could only smile at her friend's persistence and thoughtfulness. "Fine. You drive a hard bargain, sir," she acquiesced, finally allowing him entry to her apartment. "Wait, how did things go with Morgan, by the way?" Therese asked as they sat down to eat at her small kitchen table, suddenly remembering Dannie's unexpected babysitting gig.

"Oh, it was super easy. All I did was feed her, get her dressed, drop her off at school, pick her up, and hand her back to Sam when she got back. Simple." He shrugged his shoulders, looking unphased.

"God, you make her sound like a doll! That was probably the worst description I've ever heard! And, you call yourself a writer?!" she huffed playfully.

Dannie laughed at Therese's outburst. "Nah, we had a really good time together, actually. She was quite wide awake after Phil left so we did a puzzle together until she felt tired. It was a Finding Dory one and it took us longer to finish than I care to admit. Then, when I picked her up from school earlier, she told me about this boy in her class who likes her. She said that he tried kissing her today but she stopped him by putting her hand in his face and saying, "Not today". Can you believe her?! Precocious little tyke!" He chuckled, shaking his head at the tenacity of his little niece.

Therese laughed. "Like father like daughter then, huh?"

"Oh, yeah! She's Sam's mini-me but is all Phil on the inside."

The conversation continued easily over a few slices of delicious thin-crust pizza, the extra cheese adding major cheese pullage to each bite, and a couple of Coronas. Therese was thankful that Dannie came over and began to feel better by the minute.

"So … you wanna talk about what happened with you earlier today at work?" Dannie broached hesitantly some time after they had moved to sit on the window seat.

Therese looked up quickly, trying to get a read on his face. "Nothing … Well, no … I don't know. I mean … It's silly, really," she finally stammered out, sounding far from convincing.

"It couldn't have been that silly if it made you that upset."

"I wasn't that upset," Therese attempted defensively.

"Therese, your eyes were all puffy, you were more silent than usual, you did that weird thing with your mouth that you only do when you're sad, and you wouldn't even look at Carol."

Therese looked at Dannie, astonished at his perceptiveness, but remained silent. He knows me too well. Another person who can read me like a book. I should really learn to be more reticent. She turned her eyes to the window but only saw herself reflected in the blackness of the pane. I can't avoid this, can I? She looked at Dannie once more, his face etched with compassion.

She took a shaky breath. "Tim asked me to write an opinion piece on gun control that's going to be in next month's issue," she hesitated, sensing that Dannie may interrupt to congratulate her but he merely nodded for her to continue. "I said yes but pretty much regretted it as soon as it began to sink in. I just kept thinking that I'm not good enough and, and that I don't deserve to write it." The last bit came out in an agonising burst. She stopped for a moment to gather herself. "That's why I left the
office right after I got back from Tim's. I just...needed to clear my head, you know?" she asked pleadingly, her voice quivering slightly. "Then Carol came up there and we talked about clouds and other random shit. She told me that Tim consulted her about getting me to write the story and I asked her what she told him. She said that it was obvious because I got offered the job, you know? But, I wanted to hear her say it anyway. I don't know why, Dannie, but I did. But, she, she just wouldn't do it. She just wouldn't tell me. So, I - I … I told her I needed to hear her say it … And, then she just … snapped." She shrugged, looking at a sudden loss for words to explain what happened, incapable of describing Carol's biting tone nor the ferocity in her eyes. She swallowed heavily hoping to keep the inevitable tears at bay for just a little longer. "She asked me when I was going to start believing in myself more. But, she was so harsh, Dannie, and, and she was acting so differently from a few weeks ago when she kept going on and on about how much she believed in my ability. She said all that today and I just couldn't take it. I don't know why but I couldn't. I - I just couldn't," she managed to croak out before crumbling apart.

Dannie shifted sideways and pulled her into a hug, cradling her head to his chest while she clung onto him. They stayed like that for a while, the only sounds being an occasional sob that escaped Therese.

"Oh, I'm sorry for messing on your shirt, Dannie," she said, giving Dannie a weak, watery smile.

"It's okay. I'm sure I can find a clean shirt somewhere in my apartment before tomorrow," he joked lightly with a small smile.

Therese gave an weak laugh and attempted to stop her wet cheeks and running nose.

Dannie went to grab a few paper towels for Therese before sitting facing her. "Can I be honest with you, Therese?" he asked.

She immediately felt the anxiety in the pit of her stomach begin to whirl until she looked up at Dannie and saw a look of utmost concern on his face, his brown eyes pleading gently with her. She nodded.

"I want you to understand that what I'm about to say is coming from a good place, because you know how much I care about you, Therese," he started, his voice heartfelt and earnest. "I agree with Carol. You need to believe in yourself more, Therese, because you're an incredible writer. You know the first time I read anything you'd written was when we were at NYU and the first thing I thought was, 'This girl's got something here. She's got something to say. She's got something to write about.' And you wanna know something, Therese? I say the exact same thing to myself every time I read a new piece from you. You've only been improving since you got here. You've got a gift, Therese. You really do. But, you'll first need to believe in yourself before you can see it for yourself. I know you've struggled with self-belief for a long time and that this is very much a personal battle you're going to have to fight with yourself. But, just know that I'll be here supporting and believing in you until the day comes when you finally begin to believe in yourself, and then thereafter, too. And, if that day never comes, I'll still be here believing in you. If you're not willing to believe in yourself just yet, I, and many others, are all too willing to do so."

Therese wanted to cry all over again, not from her previous anguish, though, rather at the raw conviction in Dannie's gentle tone. She flung her arms around him and hugged him as if her life depended on it. "Thank you," was all she could saying, knowing that she could not adequately describe how much his words meant to her. They only separated when Therese was ready to do so.

"I really didn't think I'd be crying when you brought over pizza, beer, and cupcakes," she joked lightly.
"I bought beer and pizza just because. But, I got the cupcakes for you because I knew you needed cheering up," he said truthfully.

"You're too good to me sometimes, you know that?"

"Just trying to pay you back for all the times you've been too good to me, hun." He shrugged, giving her a wide toothless smile.

"So, can we have the cupcakes now?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Oh my God! I thought you'd never ask!" Dannie bellowed in mock exasperation, jumping up to get the box of cupcakes. "I got a few different kinds because I know you like to try a bit of everything. So, there's double chocolate, caramel popcorn, Nutella lava, vanilla Piñata, mocha, maple bacon, bourbon pecan, and gin and tonic," he said, pointing out the different flavours.

"Did you really think I'd eat all of these?!" she asked, laughing at how over-the-top Dannie went.

"No, but I was hoping you'd give me whatever you didn't eat," he replied, wiggling his eyebrows. After a few bites, Dannie mused, "You know, Therese, as much as Carol was really harsh to you, I somehow think it's coming from a good place." The look of scepticism on Therese's face forced him to quickly elaborate. "I mean, you said so yourself that she was unwavering in her belief in your writing just a few weeks ago, right? Before she even really knew you. And, she was one who brought up your Florida panther story when I was speaking to her at lunch on Monday, saying how impressive the piece was and how far your writing's progressed in the last few years. I think what she said today was just a really bad case of tough love. You know, give you a hard time but for your own benefit? All I'm saying is don't shut her out completely. Talk to her if she comes to talk to you at some stage."

Therese sat silently picking off caramel popcorn pieces from her cupcake's caramel buttercream icing and eating them. Dammit, he's probably right. Again.

"I should probably head home. We do have work tomorrow after all. But, just remember … IT'S FRIDAY, BAAAAAAAABY!" Dannie exclaimed when he stood in the doorway about to leave, making Therese laugh and shake her head in wonder. "And, you know what that means, right?"

"What?" Therese humoured him.

"It means it's one day closer to you making me those delicious stout brownies of yours!"

"Jesus, Dannie! You just ate four cupcakes and you're taking another seven back home and yet you're still thinking about brownies?!" Therese asked exasperatedly.

Dannie shrugged and said, "What can I say? I've got a sweet tooth." He pulled Therese into a bear hug, making her gasp exaggeratedly at the strength of it. "See ya, Rez!" he said as he walked away.

Therese laid in bed that night, staring at the French oak ceiling, finding herself unconsciously searching for faces in the grain. Memories of her conversation with Carol suddenly came back to her like a crushing wave of agony.

What exactly did I get so upset about it? She didn't say anything that should make me feel upset. She didn't say I'm not good enough. She didn't say I don't deserve to write the piece. She didn't say she believed in me any less. And yet, she absolutely tore me to shreds. But, you know why you're upset, don't you? You like her so much that you'll do just about anything for her, do anything to get her approval, do anything she asks of you. But, she's now challenging you to confront your demons, she wants you to believe in yourself more, and you'll do it even though you're petrified to do so. That's why you got upset. That's why I got upset.
Chapter End Notes

A bit of angst is inevitable, is it not? Maybe a bit from Carol's POV will give us a more insight as to why she flipped her shit at Therese.

I hope you still enjoyed the chapter! Cheers, guys! :)


Warring with yourself

Chapter Notes

So, we're taking a bit of a step back in time to the morning after Carol and Therese's evening together at Neighborhood to get some insight into Carol's frame of mind before she blew up at Therese. I struggled a fair bit with this chapter, especially with trying to convey the inner machinations and backstory of the Carol we've gotten to know thus far. But, I'm fairly satisfied with the end result and hope you enjoy the chapter nonetheless :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday 5 October 2017

Carol

Carol woke with a start, her body jerking to attention to leave her in a state of limbo between alertness and blissful unawareness. Her mind began to come to after a few wide-eyed blinks with foggy vignettes of her dream filtering and assembling themselves in her consciousness. She came to remember a black jumpsuit hastily discarded at the foot of the bed, lip-sucking kisses, neck bites, nipple pinches, a delicate pair of underwear being ripped by a sudden twitch of the arm, the uninhibited rhythmic grinding and thrusting of two bodies, the coiling and clenching of her belly. The clearest and most startling remnant of her dream, though, was bound to stick in her mind. It was of Therese extracting herself from between her legs to lithely climb her naked body and capture her lips in a hungry kiss as she took Carol over the precipice with her nimble fingers.

Although Carol's mind was snatched from the dream, her body still felt its all too pleasurable aftershocks, from her taut nipples which strained against the silk of her camisole to the ebbing but still insistent throb between her legs. She slipped a hand inside her underwear only to have her fingers be enveloped by the slickness of her folds. She groaned. 

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Again?!

It was the third time in about two weeks that she'd woken from a sex dream, this time Therese undoubtedly being the source and stimulus of her lascivious dream. Great, now I have to try look her in the eye without imagining her face appearing from between my legs.

She reached for her cell, noticing on the harsh digital display that it was still over three hours before she had to even leave for work. She knew, though, that she would be unable to fall asleep again, for fear of being stalked by a certain green-eyed seductress. So, she instead decided to haul herself out of bed and start her day.

After enjoying a cup of green tea and a slice of whole grain toast with avocado, Carol proceeded to her newly converted gym to do a quick workout. A slow warm-up jog on the treadmill preceded some dynamic stretching, something she did religiously before starting her workout proper. She did a 15 minute high intensity workout on the stationary bike, leaving her breathing hard and her heart beating equally fast. A few minutes of gut-busting ab exercises soon followed before closing out the session with a box with the heavy bag. She was a bit tired after but invigorated nonetheless, feeling back in control of her body that had earlier gone wayward.

She stood naked in front of her floor-length closet mirror after having a cleansing shower, looking at herself from top to bottom. At 38, she still looked damn good. Not her own assessment, but rather
that of Abby Gerhard, her best friend and former lover, and others who so often indiscreetly leered at
her. Her legs were long and subtly toned, the line from her hips to her shoulders gave her a distinctly
hourglass shape, her stomach was flat and taut, and her breasts retained enough perkiness to please
her. She turned sideways and scrutinized herself once more, mentally keeping track of her body's
transformation over the last few months. She had felt less than confident with her body after her
divorce and thus set about overhauling her workout regime. The addition of various shaping, lifting,
and toning glute exercises along with the occasional upper body strength training session were
certainly paying off. She liked the gentle curve of her derriere, giving it a squeeze of appreciation for
its rediscovered firmness, and noticed the new soft definition of her arms and shoulder. I feel and
look good. Now, if only someone could see me like this. If only someone could want to see me like
this.

She huffed at the thought, painfully remembering just how long it had been since she last had sex,
and thus allowed her mind and hands to wander in search of another rapturous release. She cupped
her breast to gently knead its underside but torturously deprived her already rigid nipple of the
attention it and she desperately wanted, treating herself to slow burn of sorts which she knew only
heightened her pleasure. Her other hand had a mind of its own as it slid down the flat of her stomach
before the parting of her legs allowed her fingers access to where she most desired to be touched, her
index and middle finger finding their way either of her clit to alternately squeeze and slide slowly up
and down, up and down, up and down. I want someone to do this for me, to me.

She thought back to her dream with Therese and her body's overwhelming physical reaction to her.
She knew she was attracted to Therese from the moment she saw her, their initial interaction evoking
a visceral response in her, the strength of which startled her. Those eyes and goddamn dimples of
hers. As days and now weeks passed, though, Carol's attraction morphed into something which
transcended a mere physical attraction to the younger woman's alluring features, the list of which she
found only continued to grow. She found Therese's honesty and immediate trust in her when she laid
bare her feelings and insecurities that day on the rooftop utterly disarming and it, surprisingly to her,
 brought out her fiercely protective side. That conversation established a level of comfort and
understanding between them that made for ease of conversation and, more recently, flirty banter. The
more she spoke to and interacted with Therese, the more her seedling of attraction grew, shooting
tendrils of warmth through her chest every time her dimples popped to reveal themselves or she made
a witty remark or merely looked her in the eye as she spoke.

Their dinner and drinks together the night before had only exacerbated things for Carol, her mind
flashing on moments which she would undoubtedly revisit for days to come. The whole age
guessing episode being particularly memorable as she was allowed to not only openly gawk at
Therese while she in turn studied Carol's face and hand, but her hand was held tenderly in the
younger woman's own. What surprised her most, though, was that she found herself willingly
opening up to Therese, something she was accused all too often of not doing enough of by Harge.
To say that she was enamoured by Therese wouldn't be far from the truth and that was perhaps why
the younger woman had now pleasurably infiltrated her dreams.

This is ridiculous! She's over a decade younger than me for Christ's sake. And, as much as I want
something to happen between us, it can't and isn't going to. I don't even know if she's into women. But,
even if she was, she wouldn't be interested in a 38 year old divorcée with a young daughter.
The last thought stilled both hands on her breast and between her legs, comprehensively putting paid
to any thoughts of another release. I'm just going to have to stop thinking about her and then the
dreams will stop. Simple as that.

Carol huffed in dissatisfaction before she slipped her woollen tartan robe over her naked body and
headed downstairs to the kitchen to fix herself a post-workout breakfast. She decided to try give
Abby a call after gobbling down a hearty vegetable omelette for one of their ritualistic chats. She
took her cup of sweet, creamy coffee outside onto the deck with her, stretching out under a knit throw on one of the loungers for what was never a short conversation.

"Carol! Hi!"

"Hello, Abigail. How are you, dear? I feel like we've barely spoken since you got back from Milan"

"I agree. I think we've both been busy, though. You know, with me being gone and you now actually having a job," replied Abby with her characteristic sarcastic tone, not missing a beat to land a playful jab.

"Ha! This coming from a woman who opened a furniture shop she only occasionally works at for the sole purpose of meeting women," came Carol's retort.

"It's called being innovative, dear. You should try it sometime," Abby replied, the end of her sentence punctuated by a long, loud yawn.

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Well, waking up would imply actually going to sleep last night ...." The stifled snort on the other end and the all too familiar suggestive tone of Abby's voice told Carol all she needed to know.

"Ah. Another night filled with bedroom activities, then? Who was the latest girl? I seem to remember it being another Heather the last time," Carol teased. Trying to keep track with Abby's dalliances was a skill in itself.

"Let me tell you, activities were not restricted to the bedroom!" Abby let out a bark of a laugh which never failed to make Carol laugh.

"Abby! You're incorrigible!" Carol playfully admonished, shaking her head at her friend's lascivious comment.

"What?!" Abby asked innocently. Carol could almost picture the doe-eyed, coy semblance of her face. "Her name was Maddie, a redhead. And, you know what they say about redheads, right?"

"No, I don't actually," Carol answered before hastily adding, "and I don't want to know either!"

"Fine! Geez, what's eating you this morning? Or, in this case, not eating you," Abby sniggered.

"Fuck off! Not all of us are like a dog in heat!"

Abby guffawed. "Now, enough about me and all the sex I've been having," she joked before continuing, "How have things been going on your end? You feel settled in at PRNT yet?"

"Things have been going better than I expected, to be honest. I thought it would be difficult coming back into that kind of workplace environment after -what? nearly ten years. But, it's been, dare I say, surprisingly easy. I don't feel completely settled just yet but I think it's just a matter of time. I think I'll feel better once I actually start writing something, which should be in the next few weeks or so," Carol replied.

"That's so good to hear! I'm glad you stuck to your guns and went through with this, you know? I'm really pleased that things are working out for you. Most people would have been too scared to go back to this kind of work after a long absence like that and after what was -let's be honest- a few really shitty years and a rough divorce on top of that! But, not you, Carol. Not. You. I'm really proud of you, you know?" Abby said earnestly.
"Thank you, Abby," Carol said bashfully, fiddling with a loose thread of the rope of her robe as a small dopey smile began to play on her lips. "But, I can't take all the credit. I mean, you were the one who suggested I ask Tim for the job after all."

"That may be so but I wasn't the one who actually ended up asking him, now was I?" asked Abby.

"No, that was the martini's doing. Remember I had to have five before I even worked up the nerve to ask him about the job?"

"Five?! You told me you needed some Dutch courage before asking but not five fucking martinis! Jesus, Carol! You're lucky you can handle your drink. I hope to God Tim didn't try match you drink for drink, though! Because, you and I both know he's a total lightweight. Wait, was that your plan all along? Ply him with enough alcohol to get him to just give you a job?" Abby joked.

Carol chuckled. "Of course! No, he stuck to water for most of the night. Helen had him on a strict no-alcohol diet after what was apparently a very indulgent holiday season."

"Ah, Helen. She's still got him by the balls, then, huh?"

"Oh, yes."

Abby laughed into the phone, "God, I miss Helen. I should give her a call again."

"You should. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you. Just keep the sex talk to a minimum, okay? She's a bit more of a prude than you and I."


"You nitwit!" They both laughed down the line to each other.

"And, how is that amazing goddaughter of mine doing?" Abby asked.

"She doing very well. She's loving school and has really taken to math of late, which I can only imagine she gets from her father. She also just got pushed up an age division in soccer, actually. So, she's now playing against girls who are just that little bit bigger than she is but she's absolutely loving it. I'll send you a picture of what she looked like after her game last Saturday. Her uniform just about matched the field with the amount of grass stains on it! But, of course Jennifer isn't happy that this 'soccer thing', as she puts it, has stuck. She'd prefer Rindy to stick to horse riding or tennis. She even bought Rindy another expensive pair of riding boots just the other day, hoping that she would take the bait and do more horse riding, "Carol said, shaking her head at her former mother-in-law's insolence. "Thankfully she didn't, though. In fact, she dumped them in her closet as soon as she got home and dragged me into a game of kickabout,"

"Good on Rindy! Jesus, that woman is insufferable. Why the hell can't she just be happy that playing soccer makes Rindy happy? It's not like having a granddaughter who likes to get a bit dirty will tarnish the precious family image."

"That's Jennifer and the Airds for you," Carol mused, not at all surprised by Jennifer's antics.

"I know you went to hell and back to get through that divorce but I swear to God, Carol, I'm so glad you did it. You needed to escape that family. I don't think I would have been able to see you do it for much longer, to be perfectly honest, if you hadn't."

"You and me both, Abby. You and me both."
It was Abby who had ultimately convinced Carol to get a divorce. She had bared witness to how miserable Carol had become over the last few years of her marriage, how deteriorated her sense of self had become, and how she channelled all the love and hope she had into Rindy, leaving nothing for herself. Abby had told her that if she continued to stay married, she would go past the point of resenting herself and may even end up resenting Rindy, instead moving to blame her own daughter for her self-inflicted unhappiness. She also said that children are a lot more perceptive than they're given credit for and that even a young Rindy would begin to look beyond Carol's smiling facade to see the despair that was brimming in her eyes. Abby was the one who lamented that she deserved more than her lot at that soul-sucking moment in her life. She stood by Carol through nasty divorce proceedings and an even nastier custody battle. A custody agreement was only reached once both parties agreed that their shared custody of Rindy was tantamount to her happiness and so a truce was called between Carol and Harge. The supposed truce, though, was fraught with temperamentality.

"So, how are the people at PRNT? Meet anyone interesting?" Abby asked, offering a welcome change of subject

"They're a really lovely group, to be honest. I haven't interacted that much with people from some sections like sports or lifestyle, so I can't really say much about them. But, the rest seem like a good bunch. I've gotten to know Dannie, Richard, and Therese the most because we're working together on an upcoming story. Dannie is a bit of a no-holds-barred kind of writer who's got some real potential. You may have seen his piece lambasting Trump's decision to repeal those two climate and clean energy plans and for pulling out of the Paris Agreement in last month's issue. I think the two of you would get on like a house on fire so I'll try introduce you the next time you're in town. Then, there's Richard. He's a finance guy, so I can't really pass judgment on the kind of writer he is. He's sweet, though, if not a bit dull, but still a lovely guy nonetheless. He's one of those guys that would try strike up a conversation with anyone and continue to do so even if the other person is no longer interested. So, he's definitely someone who will rub you the wrong way. And, then, there's Therese. She's … great." Carol felt at a sudden loss to describe how she felt about Therese.

"Great? What the hell does that mean?" enquired Abby, immediately picking up on Carol's hesitancy and the vagueness of her answer.

"What do you mean?" Carol asked, feigning oblivion in the hope that Abby would drop it.

"Well, for Dannie and Richard you went into detail about how they are but for this Therese you didn't. Why's that?"

"There's nothing to it, Abby. Okay?" She could hear her attempt at nonchalance had failed miserably making her immediately fear Abby's reaction.

"Carol, you're not telling me something. Wait a minute … Oh, shit! Do you like her?!"

_This one is like a fucking dog with a bone._ "I don't know … maybe. Okay, yeah I think I do," said Carol, her confession coming out in a forced and staggered breath.

A loud whistle came from Abby's end. "Finally!" she exclaimed. "I was beginning to wonder when you were going to try get back out there again! So, do you know if she's interested in you or not?"

"I'm not putting myself back out there and no I don't know if she's interested in me. But, it doesn't matter anyway."

"Why the hell not?!"

"Because she's too young for me and, besides, I don't even know if she's into women. But, I
especially don't want to start anything at a job I just started. I want to focus on getting my professional life back on track and fucking someone I work with won't help matters," Carol said defensively.

"I understand what you mean about sleeping with someone you work with. Well, at least I think do. But, the young ones are the best ones to sleep with! They're so much fun and have loads of energy. She doesn't have to be attracted to women, she just has to be attracted to you and I've yet to meet someone who isn't."

"It's not going to happen, Abby."

"Why not? Carol, focusing on your professional life doesn't have to come at the complete expense of your personal life, more importantly your almost non-existent sex life."

The lighthearted tone of Abby's last comment was lost on Carol. "Enough, Abby! Just drop it, okay?!" she bellowed down the line.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry," Abby said, followed by a silence that stretched for a few beats. "Carol, you know you can talk to me about anything. If you have anything you want to talk about, you can talk to me about whenever you're ready, okay?" Abby asked in a gentle tone.

"Okay," Carol stubbornly acquiesced. She knew what Abby said about her professional life-personal life balance was true but just didn't want to think about it, not right now at least. "I'm sorry for snapping at you. I...I've had a bit of a rough morning and it's just...fucking with my head," she huffed apologetically.

"That's alright. It happens to the best of us. However, I can't speak for myself, especially this morning," Abby joked, evidently wanting to move on from what was an uncharacteristically heated moment between them.

"Oh, right. Are you actually going into work today or are you going to call Justin again to run the store?" Carol teased.

"Way ahead of you. I called him last night to ask if he could take charge today instead of dropping the bombshell on him first thing in the morning like I usually do," Abby explained, her voice dripping with self-pride.

"Wow. If that isn't personal growth, I don't know what is," Carol deadpanned, eliciting a cackle from Abby. "Well, some of us do have to go to work. I better go get ready before Tim chews my ass out for being late again."

"Would he really do that?"

"Probably not. But, I really don't want to test that theory out. I'll call you soon, okay? Bye, darling."

"Bye. Have good day and work hard. Whatever the hell that means."

Carol let out a throaty chuckle before hanging up and getting on with her day.

Finally at work, Carol set about compiling a list of things she may want look at while in Alaska. While she was doing so that morning, Tim called Therese into his office, already knowing the meaning of their meeting. Please may she take the job. Please don't let her get in her head.

Tim had met with Carol on Tuesday, asking for her thoughts on Therese writing an opinion piece on
gun control. He gave her a few student papers Therese had written on the subject during her time at NYU to gain some insight into her background. It didn't take long for Carol to notice that Therese's knowledge was considerable and that even as a student, she was able to impassively convey the arguments of both pro-gun and pro-gun control lobbyists while navigating the moral implications of gun violence with empathy and understanding. It was a no-brainer to her to have Therese write the piece.

Carol immediately noticed, though, that something was up with Therese when she returned. Under the pretense of reading through some notes, she saw how Therese stared blankly at the screen of her laptop, noticing the restlessness of her lips as she evidently chewed on the inside of her mouth and how her fingers idled in mid-air over the keys. *Shit, she's in her head.*

She saw how Therese left in a sort of trance a little while later, already knowing exactly where she was heading. She followed to the roof soon after to find Therese lying face up on one of the corner garden's slat benches. She saw Therese close her eyes at the sound of her approaching footsteps, obviously wanting to be left in peace. So, instead of starting a conversation, Carol decided to quietly join her in a bit of sky gazing. She couldn't help but steal glances at the younger woman, though, noticing how despite her looking calmer, her fiddling hands suggested otherwise. *Why does she war with herself like this?*

Wanting to start on a light note, and hopefully distract from the fact that she'd, unbeknownst to Therese, been lying there with her for the past 15 minutes or so, Carol chose a question right out of left field. "Are you a nephelococcygiac?" She forced herself not look at Therese's reaction, hoping that her nonchalance would disarm but not startle the younger woman.

Therese answered after a beat. "You say that like I'm supposed to know what it means."

Carol felt relieved after hearing Therese's light but playful reply. "Here I was thinking all writers were wordy," Carol said, finally allowing herself a look at the other woman.

"We are. But, we also like learning new ones," Therese answered, her eyes shining back at Carol.

Carol gave her a smile, attempting to suppress the butterflies that were fluttering inside her at Therese's gaze, and looked back to the sky. "A nephelococcygiac is someone who does nephelococcygia, the act of seeking and finding shapes in clouds. It's a part of a psychological phenomenon called pareidolia in which we recognise patterns and shapes in things that are random," she explained prosaically.

"And, how is it that you know this exactly?"

"I have a knack for remembering random, useless facts."

Therese laughed and with it went the last of Carol's unease at the younger woman's earlier demeanor. "It would appear so."

Carol continued to look up at the blue sky overhead. "Watching the clouds and finding shapes and faces in them calms me," she admitted.

"Me, too."

Carol chanced a glance at Therese before looking up again, hesitant to broach the subject. "I know. You came up here because you needed to calm down," she said, hoping that her gentle tone would do enough to get Therese to open up to her.

"Tim told you about the opinion piece."
"Yes. He wanted my opinion on your writing it."

"And, what did you say?"

Carol could almost hear the dread in the simple question. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked lightheartedly, hoping to diffuse Therese's anxiety by making light of the situation.

"Say it."

"Why?"

"Just say it?"

"Why is it so important?"

"Because I need to hear you say it!" came Therese's pleading response, her voice faltering during its deliverance.

Carol jerked into a seated position, Therese's tone sparking a strong unknown reaction in her. Before she could stop herself she said, "Why? Will it stop you from seconds-guessing yourself? How many people need to tell you you're good before you acknowledge your ability yourself? How many people do you need to believe in you before you believe in yourself, Therese?"

Carol regretted it as soon as she said it, her tone coming out cutting instead of lightly probing. The hurt and devastation on Therese's face went right through Carol, knocking her off-kilter and leaving her speechless. But, before she could react to try to make amends, Therese had already darted toward the exit without a second look back.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

So, where to next for these two? Hopefully the next chapter from Carol's POV will clear things up between them (and for you, of course).

Let me know what you think know about Carol now that you know a bit more about her. Cheers, guys :)


Self-sabotage

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Carol

Thursday 5 October 2017

The look on Therese's face before she made her escape from the roof immediately began to haunt Carol, leaving an indelible mark of anguish in her mind. The image served to taunt her about what she managed to so comprehensively screw up. The trust and understanding she had developed with Therese was still in its infantile stage, still fragile, needing nurturing to grow further and blossom. And, yet, she had managed to destroy it all in one devastatingly callous breath. By the time she came to from her almost out-of-body experience of the situation, she knew it was too late to go after Therese. She would have to let her alone for now. But for how long? The thought frightened her, leaving her wallowing in a pool of self-inflicted regret.

Carol couldn't remember how she got back to the office, her daze only being broken when Dannie gently shook her shoulder. She looked at him as he spoke to her but failed to hear him properly, his dulled words coming to her as if she were under water. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked, her own voice finally breaking the spell and her abeyance.

"Have you seen Therese around? I haven't seen her in awhile," asked Dannie, his tone more inquisitive than worried.

"No … no. Neither have I," she answered, unsure and yet uncaring if her little white lie sounded convincing or not.

"She's probably down in the archives or something." He shrugged and went back to his desk.

Carol could not bring herself to look at Therese when she returned a few minutes later, for fear of the reaction it would cause in herself. It was because of that that she sat rigidly at her desk for the rest of the day with a semblance of concentration, all the while her penitence and desolation settled in like ice under her skin.

Carol allowed herself to unravel only once the automatic doors of her double garage had fully closed behind her, shrouding her in a comforting and protective darkness within the confines of her black Mercedes-Benz G-Class. Her self-pity initially manifested itself in mournful sobs which bubbled up and shuddered through her before transforming into something more violent. She alternated between landing balled fist blows to the curve of the steering wheel and grabbing it in a vice-like grip. "Why. Did. I. Say. That," she agonised, each word accentuated by a strike.

All she was asking was for you to admit that you recommended her for the story. That's all. But, you couldn't do that. You couldn't fucking do that. No. Instead, you went the harebrained route of trying to provoke a reaction in her that you stupidly hoped would somehow stop her from second-guessing herself. She's not you, though, Carol. She's not you. She's not someone who a bit of tough love will light a fire under her ass. You've seen and know how sensitive she is and yet you still went ahead and said all that idiotic shit. But, maybe that was your intention all along. A bit of self-sabotage, you know? Yeah, that's probably it. You wanted to hurt her, you want her to no longer want to spend time with you, and that, you hope, will help you stop having feelings for her. You hurt her to make
Carol haphazardly discarded her handbag and coat on her way upstairs to the library where a decanter of whiskey sat waiting for her, the need for hard liquor seemingly the only thing driving her forward at that point. She poured three fingers worth of whiskey into a tumbler and tossed it back, causing amber rivulets to escape from the corners of her eager mouth and begin their descent down her chin. She winced at the strength of the drink, feeling it burn her throat as it made its way down to her stomach where she hoped it would drown the regret and self-pity that was festering in its depths. The first drink was almost immediate followed by another, which she sipped this time instead of inhaling like the last. She winced, not at the strength but rather at the harsh taste of the warm whisky. So, with decanter and tumbler in hand, she moved back downstairs to the kitchen.

Carol dropped a few granite whiskey stones she'd retrieved from the freezer to the bottom of her glass and gently swirled the liquid about. She initially thought the gift of whiskey stones from Abby was ridiculous, given that she hardly ever drank the spirit and only did so when it was chilled. She was thankful for them now, though, as it allowed her to drink the whiskey and somewhat enjoy its smoky nuttiness instead of drinking it for the sake of drinking.

She sat at the kitchen island, the now cooled tumbler held to her throbbing temple, and looked out as the sun began its descent for the day. The hues of orange and red ablaze in the sky were lost on Carol, as were the rippled saffron clouds that reflected the fading light back onto the water and anything else for that matter. She stayed like this until the only evidence of the day's sun was a thin, faintly glowing line that separated the sky from the inky ocean surface. By that stage, she had almost numbed herself and how she felt, the previous swirling vortex of loathing replaced by a chasm of nothingness.

Carol reluctantly extricated herself from the bar stool and went into the pantry in search of something to eat, not because she felt hungry but rather because she needed to eat something that would soak up what ended up being five whiskeys. She settled on a handful or two of dried fruit and nuts which she chomped on until she heard her phone chime from somewhere inside the house. Upon locating it, she immediately noticed it was past the time she usually called Rindy, evidently having lost a few hours in disquieting silence. She called the third number on her speed dial and anxiously waited for it to be answered.

"Hello?" came the gruff voice of her ex-husband.

"Harge, hi. I'm so-" Carol started in what she hoped was a friendly but somewhat faltering tone, finding herself desperately hoping that talking to her daughter would lift the gloom that had settled in around her.

"What the hell, Carol? Why are you calling so late?" he interrupted in a hushed voice.

"So late? Harge, I'm calling barely 30 minutes later than usual. I'm sorry I got caught up at work and only got home a few minutes ago," she said apologetically, biting back a more withering retort to his brusqueness, hoping to placate him with her little white lie and keep things civil between them.

"She's in the middle of doing her homework right now. I don't know if it would be such a good idea having you distract her right now. Maybe you should just call on time tomorrow."

"Please, Harge. Just a quick hello, that's all I need, and then she can get back to it," she pleaded, again choosing to ignore his snipe. I shouldn't have to beg to talk to my own goddamn daughter.

After a moment's hesitancy, Carol heard Harge let out a deep sigh before answering, "Okay. Hold on
while I get the phone to her, okay?"

Carol's patience was paid off when the voice she loved to hear most came on the line. "Hi, Mommy!"

"Hello, my darling! How are you?!" Carol's voice almost cracked as she uttered the customary opening, the mere sound of her daughter's tinkling greeting doing enough to banish any negative feelings that lingered from earlier.

"I'm good, Mommy. But, Florence cooked Brussels sprouts for dinner tonight and I didn't like them much."

Carol smiled at Rindy's candour and what was becoming her characteristic matter-of-fact tone. "Oh no! I don't like them either, you know? They're all bitter and mushy."

"Yeah, yeah. Tonight Florence cooked them with bacon and apple so I just ate all the bacon and apple bits and then left most of my Brussels sprouts," Rindy admitted.

Carol laughed for what was undoubtedly the first time today, feeling warmth suffuse her chest. "I do the same thing. Shhhhhhh. Don't tell anyone, okay? That has to be our little secret," she whispered conspiratorially, eliciting a musical giggle from Rindy. She stopped, though, and put her mom hat on along with a more serious tone, "Sweetheart, I know you don't like Brussels sprouts but you really need to eat all your vegetables, okay? They're good for you and you'll need them if you want to be healthy and keep playing soccer."

"Okay. I'll eat them. But, only because I want to play soccer," Rindy vehemently replied.

"Good girl. Now, how was school today?"

"It was fine. We had a spelling test and I got 10 out of 10 for it!"

"Well done, you clever girl! Can you teach me some of the words because I'm always forgetting how to spell them correctly," Carol asked, knowing how Rindy loved explaining things to people.

"You do?!" came Rindy's gleeful question. "We had "country" which is spelled c-o-u-n-t-r-y. Then we had "yellow" spelled y-e-l-o -no wait!- it's spelled y-e-l-l-o-w. Then we had "bright" which I remember is spelled like "light" but with a "brrrrrrr" at the beginning. So, you spell it:"

"Rindy, you need to finish your homework. So, say bye-bye to Mommy, okay?" Carol heard Harge's voice say in the background. Jesus, that wasn't even 5 minutes.

"Mommy, Daddy says I have to go finish my homework now," Rindy said in a small voice.

"That's okay, sweetheart. You can teach me the rest of the words tomorrow after you've told me all about your show-and-tell, okay?"

"Cool! I love you, Mommy!" Rindy's voice sang.

"I love you, too, sweetheart. Sweet dreams," Carol said, the line going dead soon after.

The warmth that had set up camp in Carol's chest while speaking to Rindy began to ebb as the night wore on, allowing the despair and remorse of what happened with Therese to come back with a vengeance. It was on nights like this that Carol missed having Rindy home the most, when the quiet of the house was deafening and the loneliness smothering. She missed the way her voice would reverberate through the house, filling it with a lightness that eased Carol's tension or stress. She
missed the way she'd take over the entire dining room table, leaving her puzzles, drawings, and books haphazardly strewn all over its surface. She missed their conversations had in the kitchen while she made dinner or in a blanket fort they'd built or around the fire pit outside. She just missed her.

The chime of her phone, that had laid idle in her hand for some time after she finished speaking with Rindy, brought Carol out of her musings. She opened her messaging app to find three messages from Abby, one from Henry, a former colleague of hers from her days at The New York Times who she still kept in touch with, and two from her sister, Elaine.

After messaging back, Carol noticed that Therese was next on her list of open chats. Carol's chest tightened at the thought of their text exchange from the previous night. Therese had initiated the conversation, asking if Carol arrived home safely from Neighborhood, to which Carol replied by asking if Therese encountered anything nearly as life-threatening as the end of their dinner on the Uber ride back to her apartment. The conversation went back and forth with some easy banter for a little while longer before they both turned in for the night.

She clicked to enlarge Therese's profile picture, seeing her large green eyes glowing back at her and the mischievous grin on her face which showed the full depth of her dimples. What if those dimples don't show themselves for me again? Her fingers hovered over the keypad, itching to type a quick-fix apology of sorts but knowing full well that doing so would be a cop out and may end up doing more harm than good. She thought back to Therese's hurt-etched face, its stark contrast with the one from her profile filled Carol with immense guilt. Unlike before, though, when the guilt pushed her into a pit of despair, this guilt suddenly lit a fire in her belly. You must make this right. Even if it takes you weeks, you must make this right. I will make this right.

Friday 6 October 2017

Despite Carol's best intentions and resolution to make amends as soon as possible, her efforts were effectively stonewalled when she arrived at PRNT the following morning, finding Therese already busy at work with her earphones adding an additional barrier to any kind of communication. Instead of interrupting, Carol proceeded to get on with her own work, namely finding any evidence on collusion between Envirocons and NatGas. She wanted to gather as much background information as possible before leaving for Alaska in what could be a matter of weeks or even days. So, she kept herself busy by meticulously combing through every piece of information at her disposal that she had yet to read through, hoping that she would be able to talk to Therese sometime during the course of the day.

Carol would have no such luck, though, instead finding every possible opportunity to approach Therese outside the office thwarted either by someone who accompanied her or, most incredulously, by Carol herself. She followed Therese at one stage that morning after she'd left for the kitchen, only to find her engaged in conversation with Jeanette by the coffee machine. She stopped mid-stride in the doorway of the kitchen upon seeing their chatting, something that didn't go unnoticed by a confused looking Therese. The eye contact they had suddenly made was promptly broken by Carol when she unceremoniously did a U-turn to leave.

Her next opportunity was scuppered by Richard, who had sat down to have lunch with Therese at one of the dining tables. Hoping to not make a fool of herself by leaving before at least grabbing something from the kitchen, Carol made some Earl Grey tea and rummaged in the cupboards for some crackers to snack on. Her attempted stolen glances were intercepted more often than not by Therese, who had seemingly checked out of her conversation with Richard. Their eye contact unnerved Carol, though, finding herself almost escaping to the office to regain her composure.
The rest of the day followed suit with yet more opportunities, some only half chances while others presented themselves to her on a silver platter, being dashed. When Therese made no move to finish up for the day at 4:30 that afternoon, Carol was left with no choice but to pack up and leave without a single word having been uttered between them.

Carol cursed her bad luck and her own hesitancy and indecision, muttering to herself as she made her way downstairs to the PRNT parking lot. She barricaded herself inside her car before allowing her mind to truly go to war with itself. Does anything else want to conspire against me here?! All I want to do is to talk to her, just fucking talk. But, even when I got the opportunity I somehow manage to fuck it up.

She thought back to their interactions, if you can even call them that, from throughout the day. In each instance, Therese had not avoided her gaze nor looked away when eye contact was made. That's got to mean something, right? Maybe I didn't fuck things up as much as I thought I did or maybe I made a bigger deal of the situation than it actually was. But, then she compared the look in Therese's eyes from yesterday and today. Her eyes were overflowing with hurt immediately after Carol's outburst. By contrast, though, today her eyes still retained their hurt and sadness but there was also a glint of defiance and a strength of sorts in their depths. It doesn't matter if she looks like she's over it or if she's even handling it, you still need to apologise for the shit you pulled. You need to make things right.

And, so, Carol decided to hunker down in her car and wait for Therese to leave for the day.

She ended up waiting a lot longer than anticipated, with five o'clock coming and going, as did six and seven o'clock. Her wait afforded her enough time to call Rindy and hear all about her taking Speedy, her pet tortoise, to school for show-and-tell. She had to scratch around the glove compartment and her handbag at one stage in search of something to eat, finding an energy bar and some rather banged up looking dark chocolate sea salt almonds to stave off her hunger, not wanting to leave to buy something in case she missed Therese. Carol's patience finally paid off a little before eight o'clock when Therese emerged from the building and began towards her car without noticing Carol's.

"Therese!" Carol called out as she crossed the parking lot, approaching Therese from behind.

"Carol?!" Therese exclaimed in surprise, turning around to find Carol jogging towards her as she stood at the boot of her car.

"Therese, I need to talk to you," said Carol, feeling ever so slightly out of breath as she came to a stop before Therese.

"You left hours ago, though. Have you been waiting here the entire time?"

"Yes. I didn't want to wait until Monday to talk to you," Carol admitted. The confession made her cheeks burn but she refused to look down to hide her blush and risk missing the surprise and awe on Therese's face.

After composing herself, Carol proceeded with the intended purpose of her waiting. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I was just … horrible, really," she said, raising her hands to stop Therese's attempt an interrupting. "I was, Therese. I've gotten so used people giving me shit throughout my career to kick me into action that I went ahead and tried to do the same to you. I did that even though...I did that even though I know you're more sensitive than I've ever been," Carol admitted softly.

Therese looked up at Carol, her wide eyes now raw with vulnerability. The sight made Carol adopt an even gentler tone as she elaborated, "You are, Therese. I can see that you think that's a bad thing and you try hide it, especially in an industry like this where people intentionally criticise, antagonise,
and undermine each other; where provocation and withering retorts are almost the status quo. But, you're wrong. There's nothing wrong with being sensitive and not wanting to disappoint others or, more importantly, disappoint yourself. It shows that you give a damn, that you care. Your stories thus far have been so meticulously researched and written and that's because you give a damn. I know you're the type of writer that would be the first to admit that a story is bigger than yourself or admit when you won't be able to do a story justice, and that's because you care about the work you produce. Writers who do that show incredible integrity and honesty, two things that most writers today lack. That integrity and honesty you already have is what makes you a good writer now but it's what will make you an even better writer in the future, Therese."

Carol stooping to better make eye contact with Therese, her hands gripping the younger woman's shoulders as if to better convey what she was trying to communicate. She gave one final squeeze before dropping her hands to her sides as she straightened up to her full height. She somehow still felt like she shrunk under the weight of what she was about to say. Here goes. "I'm ashamed of the way I said what I said… but I stand by the point I was trying to make. What I was trying to say, but failed so miserably at, was that I want you to realise and understand your ability. I want you to have confidence in yourself and your writing because you're so talented, Therese. You are. I know you're talented. Tim does. Dannie does. Richard does. There are so many people that do. I know you don't believe it, though, and that's why you second-guess and undermine yourself. But, Therese, there are people out there that will always second-guess and undermine you and you don't need to add yourself to that list. For those of us that know you're talented, all we want is for you to see what we see and to believe in yourself as much we believe in you," Carol said gently.

The tears that brimmed in Therese's eyes broke forth at Carol's conclusion and began to stream down her cheeks. Carol looped an arm around Therese's waist and the other over her shoulder to embrace her. Therese mirrored the pose but her grip was tighter, her fingers flexing on Carol's back as if she was trying to pull her even closer to her. Carol responded to the younger woman's urgency by tightening her arm around her waist to eliminate any remnants of a gap between them.

"I'm not used to people believing in me," Therese said after a few minutes. Her voice was clear, as if there was no doubt in her mind that that was the absolute truth. The resignation in her voice almost broke Carol but she knew she couldn't and wouldn't break, not when Therese was already broken in her arms.

Carol pulled back a little, enough to search and find Therese's eyes, her one hand coming to rest at the juncture between the younger woman's shoulder and neck. "You better get used to people believing in you because it's only going to continue to happen," she said resolutely before pulling her in once again. Therese let out a weak laugh before burying her face in a comforting shoulder. Although Carol heard Therese stop crying a few minutes later, she made no attempt to break their embrace, instead allowing the younger woman's urgency by tightening her arm around her waist to eliminate any remnants of a gap between them.

"Thank you, Carol," Therese eventually said, her arms loosening to free herself before taking a step back to add some distance between them.

"You're thanking me for making you cry?" Carol teased gently, hoping her lighthearted remark would begin to banish Therese's woe.

Therese threw her head back and laughed, causing her watery eyes to crinkle and her dimples to pop. The sight caused relief to wash over Carol. "No!" Therese chided, waving her hand about as if to swat away Carol's ridiculous question. "Thank you for saying all … that. It means a lot to me," she said, her glistening eyes now wide with earnestness.
Carol took a step forward to wipe Therese's tear strewn face. "It's the truth, so no thanks are necessary," she said, looking up from her task to smile. She slid her hands down Therese's arms, giving them one last squeeze before dropping them all together. "Are you okay?" she asked. After receiving a nod and a weak but reassuring smile in return, she ventured, "Are you hungry? I didn't have much to eat while I sat in the car, so I'm a bit starved. I could cook for us both if you'd like?" She floundered a bit as she suddenly threw her question out there.

"I think I need to be alone for a little bit. If that's all right?" Therese asked timidly.

"Of course, Therese. Of course," Carol reassured Therese, hoping the touch of disappointment she selfishly felt would go unnoticed by the other woman. "Wait ... is that your subtle way of telling me you don't want to try my cooking?" she asked, her eyes narrowed as she feigned scrutinising the younger woman.

"Was it that obvious?" Therese replied. The impish grin that had begun to curl Therese's lips was soon broken by a bubbly laugh that Carol couldn't help but join in on. "Definitely some other time, though," she said once they'd quieted down.

A quick course of adrenalin shot through Carol, elevating her heartbeat as it went. "Definitely," she finally said. "Well ...I guess we better get going, it's pretty late after all. I'll see you on Monday then. Enjoy the rest of your evening and your weekend, okay?"

Carol began to slowly back away in the direction of her car but her progress was halted when Therese reached out and grabbed her hand. "Thank you," Therese said earnestly, her eyes overflowing with gratitude obvious. She gave Carol's hand a departing squeeze before climbing into her car.

Carol practically waltzed back to her car with a smile on her face that not even a lonely night ahead could break.

Chapter End Notes

So, what are your thoughts on Carol now we've gotten to know her a little better?
Getting comfortable

Chapter Notes

So, we're back with Therese after a brief glimpse into Carol's mind. But, fear not, there shall be more chapters from Carol's POV soon enough. Cheers :p

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Therese**

**Friday 6 October 2017**

Therese was unsure how she got home nor when she ordered the roast pork fried rice she currently sat eating. All she was sure of was that her and Carol were back on good terms and she couldn't feel more relieved and thankful for it. The heaviness that had come to occupy her chest after their heated exchange was obliterated by Carol's heartfelt apology and uncompromising support and belief in her. *Being held in her arms didn't feel bad either,* she thought with a smirk. The most impactful part of their conversation, had in the middle of the PRNT parking lot of all places, was how tenderly Carol had assured her that being sensitive is not an impediment to her becoming a good writer. Her compassionate approach struck her, having it contrast so starkly with what she had experienced in the past when her supposed sensitivity was a topic of much scrutiny.

From a young age Therese was told she was always too sensitive, too ready to fall apart at the slightest of tease, reproach, or reprimand. Her mind flashed back to countless occasions when others, kids and adults alike, had accused, lamented, and bullied her about her sensitivity, some deliberately goading her into breaking down in a fit of tears. The clearest and most painful memory of such incidences, though, was when she was 10, during one of her mother's sporadic visits to the Home, the Order of St. Margaret children's, her home since she was 8. They'd sat in the courtyard terrace, its floor a mosaic of fallen leaves in all their glorious colours of Autumn, awkwardly engaging in a conversation where heartfelt sentiments were rare and the silences anything but comfortable. Her mother had told her she *must* learn to use the makeup kit she had gifted her because she would be wearing lots of it when she was older. The inarticulate manner in which she spoke meant that Therese thought she *needed* to wear makeup, that she wouldn't be beautiful without it or simply be perfect as she was.

Naturally, Therese welled up in the middle of the terrance while the other children gaily engaged with their visiting loved ones or with each other. Instead of being reassured, though, she was quickly placated by her mother for fear of drawing more attention to their already strained reunion. She was told not to read too deeply into things and that she simply *must* be less sensitive. Her mother's shifting eyes, the corners of which seemed to tighten as she scrutinised a weeping Therese; the belittling tone of her hushed voice as she chided her for making a scene, and the saccharine smile she plastered on her face immediately after told Therese everything she needed to know, that keeping up appearances was more important than comforting and reassuring her own child. That harsh, bitter truth struck her but did little to shock her, instead feeling herself grow ever melancholic after its realisation. Their reunions deteriorated rapidly thereafter, her supposed hypersensitivity widening the chasm that already existed between them, mostly resulting from her mother sending her away and, most painfully for her, starting afresh with a new family without her; until she requested, at a mere 12 years old, that the visits cease altogether.
Therese grew reticent after, not allowing the emotions that simmered just below the surface to reveal themselves. Despite her best efforts, her reticence never fooled those who knew her best, those who noticed the subtle changes in her demeanor or the faintest hardening of her features. It was only Dannie and Sister Alicia from the Home who could see when she was warring with herself or on the brink of breaking, often telling her that her eyes were their portals to see into her inner self. But, now Carol can, too. She could tell from the day we met. She can see right through me. I couldn't hide anything from her even if I wanted to. But, I don't want to hide things, not from her. And, the craziest thing is that that doesn't scare me. But, it should, though, right? Why do I not feel scared? Maybe I don't because I just feel comfortable around her. I feel comfortable even though I act like a bumbling idiot whenever she flirts with me or jokes with me or just looks at me … but still. There's just something familiar about her, like I know her from somewhere. And, I can't help feeling like I want to know her more. Therese went on with her musings for much of the night before the exhaustion from the day's emotional reunion lulled her into a deep sleep.

**Saturday 7 October 2017**

Therese hardly ever went in to work on Saturdays and would grumble about it to no end on the odd occasion she did. But, the upcoming trip to Alaska and the gun control piece she had to finish before then necessitated her dragging herself to the office to do some work. Maybe it won't be that bad. Maybe I'll actually manage to get a lot done today. Yeah, that's it!

Her hopes, though, were thrown into question when she saw Carol's black SUV in the PRNT parking lot. Shit! Now I'm not going to get any work done! Wait, don't be stupid! If she's here on a Saturday then she got work to do, too, and will definitely be too busy to pay you much attention and distract you. Stop making excuses and get your ass in there.

A refreshingly quiet lobby gave its silent greeting to Therese as she exited the elevator, the usual hubbub gone from all corners. She came to a stop just before her office, suddenly very conscious of her woeful choice of outfit for the day. Therese hadn't paid much attention to what she wore, thinking she wouldn't be encountering anyone let alone Carol. She'd slipped on her old faithful light gray NYU sweatshirt, teaming it with her favourite ripped black skinny jeans, and some high top white Vans. Her messy bun and tortoise shell glasses, worn especially to ease her scratchy eyes, completed her look of maximum comfort. Great. I look like a college freshman who just threw something on the morning after a heavy night at a frat party.

With no other choice, Therese walked in to find Carol sitting side-on, hunched over some papers she was reading with her head resting on her hand, effectively blocking her view of the door. Thinking that her sneakers would have sounded her arrival, though, Therese proceeded with a cheery, "Hi, Carol."

Carol jumped in her seat, her eyes widening with fright as they landed on the source of the unexpected interruption. "Jesus, Therese! You scared me half to death!" she exclaimed, her shocked expression soon giving way to a look of utter relief, her hand stretched across her chest as if to slow her racing heart and somehow ease her heavy breathing.

"Sorry, I thought you heard me come in."

"I didn't. I think I was just too absorbed in my reading there," Carol replied with a wry shake of her head. "I'm sorry. Hi, Therese. How are you? And, what on Earth are you doing here on a Saturday of all days? Don't young people like yourself like to go to brunch or a farmer's market on Saturdays?" she asked, leaning back in her swivel office chair.

"Not only "young people" do that, you know?" Therese teased. Her use of exaggerated air quotes
elicited a deep chuckle from Carol. "I usually would, yeah. But, I wanted to get a start on the opinion piece because Tim wants it finished before we leave for Alaska."

Carol took off her glasses as she let out a low whistle. "That could be a matter of days, though. How long did he say he wants it to be?" she asked.

"Between 1000 and 1500 words."

Carol hemmed and hawed for a beat before replying, "That's a decent length for an opinion piece, not too long or too short. You think you can get it done in time, though?" Her question was curious but also gently challenging, nothing like her cutting tone from days ago.

"Yeah, I can," Therese answered, believing it more now than she did when she accepted the job. "And, what are you doing here at 11 o'clock on a Saturday morning? Shouldn't you be at brunch or a farmer's market?"

The laugh that preceded Carol answering made Therese grin. "Unfortunately not. No, I thought about something last night that I'd want to look into on Monday, but it was just eating away at me this morning. I thought instead of stewing over it all weekend, I'd come in and do a bit of reading and digging around. So, here I am," she said, making a wide, sweeping motion at the office with her hands that elicited a laugh of her own from Therese. She looked Therese up and down after a beat. "Don't you look all cute and comfy today?" she said as she leaned forward in her chair to playfully tug at the younger woman's oversized sweatshirt.

"Ahhhh … yeah. I, I wanted to dress for comfort without actually wearing my pyjamas," Therese managed to joke despite feeling slightly flustered by the 'cute' comment and Carol's tugging on a sweatshirt under which she only wore a bra.

"Me, too," Carol said as she stood to gesture at her outfit. She wore an oversized black cardigan over a plain white t-shirt, which she'd partially tucked into a pair of ripped boyfriend jeans, and silver platform brogues. Her blonde tresses were pulled into a loose bun with a few wayward locks hanging either across her forehead or were tucked behind an ear. The lightest application of mascara appeared to be her only hint of makeup for the day, somehow accentuating her already exquisite natural beauty.

Dressing for comfort and yet you still look like a goddess. "Our definitions of dressing for comfort differ quite a bit," Therese joked. "And, what, you wore those shoes because you were feeling short today?" she teased, glancing down at the shoes which now made her an additional two inches shorter than an already towering Carol.

"Hmmmm … maybe," Carol nonchalantly replied as her characteristic cheeky grin slowly began to grow. "But, I especially wore them so I could look down at you."

"You look down at me every day, though," Therese exasperated, feeling her own smile begin to tug at her lips.

"Yes, but, I wanted to look down on you even more today." She took a step forward while saying this to stand directly before Therese, their breasts now only an inch or two apart, and looked down her nose at the younger woman with a smirk.

Despite the sudden rush she felt at being this close to Carol again, this time without her being a blubbering mess, Therese couldn't help but grin up at her. "You're unbelievable, you know that?" she joked.
"I know. But, you bring it out in me," Carol shrugged, effectively passing off responsibility for her actions to Therese.

"Oh, of course it's my fault," Therese admitted, slowly nodding her head in mock agreement. They continued to size each other up for a few seconds before Therese's brain kicked into action. "This could go on for a while," she said, gesturing between herself and Carol. "But, I really need to get on with work." She walked to her desk, going against the magnetic force trying to pull her back to Carol.


"I'm gonna make some coffee. Do you want a cup?" Therese asked.

"I'd love one."

"Cream with two-and-a-half sugars, right?"

"Yes. Thank you, Therese." Carol smiled broadly at the younger woman as she nipped out of the office.

Carol’s phone rang an hour or so later, breaking their comfortable working silence. "Harge?" she answered. "What? … Of course. What happened? Is everything alright? … That's fine, Harge … Do you need me to come pick her up? … No, I'm at the office … I just had some work I wanted to get through … Are you sure? … Okay, I'll see you in a bit … Of course, bye."

"Everything okay?" Therese asked, her concern suddenly piqued.

"Yes. Harge has been called into some urgent meeting up in San Francisco that he apparently cannot miss, so he's asked if I mind taking Rindy a bit earlier than scheduled. His parents are in London at the moment, otherwise he would have asked them to look after her until tomorrow evening when I'm supposed to have her again. He's coming by in a few minutes to drop her off. I hope that's all right?" Carol asked somewhat nervously.

"Of course. I finally get to meet Rindy then," Therese replied with a reassuring smile.

A little while later, Carol went downstairs to meet Harge and Rindy. A melodious child's laugh soon filled the quiet surrounding Therese, effectively drowning out whatever Carol had said to induce the laughter. Therese turned as Carol stepped into the office with her arm slung around her young daughter's shoulder. Rindy was Carol's mini-me, save for her slightly more tanned skin, with the same fair blonde hair, blue-grey eyes, and already being gangly herself despite her young age.

"Sweetheart, this is Therese. She works here with me. Say hi."

"Hi, Therese. Nice to meet you," Rindy said, confidently stepping toward Therese with an outstretched hand and a wide smile on her face.

Therese stepped forward in turn to shake Rindy's hand. "Hi Rindy. It's so nice to finally meet you. Your mom talks about you all the time."

"Really?! Did she tell you about me playing soccer?" Rindy enthused.

"She hasn't yet. But, you can tell me all about it instead," she said with a dimpled smile.

"Cool!"
"Let's quickly get you set up at Dannie's desk, okay, sweetheart?" Carol interjected before their conversation could go any further, ushering Rindy towards the corner closest to the door.

Therese went back to her desk while Carol pulled out a few books and two sets of colouring pencils and crayons from Rindy's pineapple print backpack. She came over and leaned on Therese's desk soon after, angling her head down as she spoke in a low voice. "Would you mind watching her for a little bit? I just need to go downstairs to talk to Harge."

"Sure."

Carol thanked her with a squeeze to her shoulder and a brilliant smile before leaving.

"Therese?" came Rindy's sweet voice only a few moments later to break the fleeting silence.

"Yeah?" Therese answered as she turned in her chair to face the girl.

"Do you like to draw?" Rindy asked with a quizzical frown on her face, her pencil hovering in mid-air above her colouring book.

"I do, actually."

"What do you like to draw?"

Therese rolled her chair over to Dannie's desk to talk to Rindy, instead of their trying to talk across the room to each other. "All kinds of things, really. Animals, flowers, trees, sunsets, different patterns. Whatever I feel like at the time, I guess," she answered with a smile. She had to stop a laugh that wanted to come up at the inappropriate thought of a swearing adult colouring book Phil had given to her as a joke a few weeks earlier, its pages adorned with intricately detailed phrases like "Bullshit", "Asshole", and "Zero Fucks Given". After shaking her head she asked, "What do you like to draw?"

"Hmmmm ... I like to draw butterflies and giraffes and dogs and pandas and, and fish. Yes! I love drawing fish! I like drawing different fish and the other animals I saw at the aquarium when Daddy took me there. Here, let me show you," Rindy said as she reached across Therese to grab another book from her stack. "See, here's a clown fish I drew," she said, leaning into Therese to show her a clown fish swimming above what one could only assume was a green anemone. "And, this is an octopus but it only has six arms because I ran out of space to draw the other two," she explained, making Therese smile at her candour. "This is a hammerhead shark. It kind of looks like a whale, though," she admitted, pointing out a hammerhead shark with a block for a head, two bulging eyes, and a mouth full of triangular teeth which she'd coloured in with a menacing red. She continued paging through her book, pointing out starfish, sea turtles, seals, and other marine creatures before abruptly stopping. "Do you wanna draw with me?" she asked, her eyes widening in anticipation of Therese's response.

"Yes, I would."

"Yes! Here, you can draw in here," Rindy said, opening to a clean page of yet another book that she then placed in front of Therese. "And, you can use these," she continued, dragging her crayon and pencil sets across to sit between them.

Therese decided to draw a jellyfish, trying to remember what they looked like when she saw them at the Monterey Bay Aquarium a few months earlier. Once she got the basic domed hood and tentacles down, she set about colouring in. She tried to recreate the vivid colours of the jellyfish exhibit, shades of orange and peach for the hood and tentacles, respectively, and contrasted that with an
incandescent blue of the surrounding water. She looked over at Rindy to find her drawing a seahorse complete with a long, pouty snout and curled tail.

"Do you like seahorses?" Therese asked.

"Yeah, they look cool and they swim funny," Rindy responded with a giggle.

"They do swim funny, don't they?" Therese admitted. "Do you want to know something about seahorses?" she whispered conspiratorially.

Rindy stopped mid-pencil stroke, her interest immediately piqued. "Yes, please."

At that point, Therese could see in her periphery that Carol had returned and stood in the doorway. She advanced no further, though, instead choosing to lean against the door frame and watch Therese and Rindy. So, Therese continued, "Well, daddy seahorses look after their baby seahorses and they keep them safe and sound in a little pouch that they have on their bellies. Then, when the baby seahorses are big and strong enough swimmers, their daddy sets them free into the water to swim wherever they want."

"Really?! The daddy does that? That's so cool!" Rindy squealed, her face lighting up with a smile that had a few gaps in it. "I'm going to tell my teacher that because she loved hearing about the animals I saw at the aquarium. Do you know stuff about other sea animals, Therese?"

"Rindy, I know you want to draw with Therese all day but she has work to do, sweetheart," Carol interrupted gently, moving from the doorway to stand beside Therese.

"Really?" Rindy asked Therese, her brows furrowing as her face clouded over with disappointment.

"I unfortunately do," Therese replied, scrunching up her nose to show Rindy her own disappointment. "But, we can definitely draw together next time if your mom's okay with it," she said, looking up at Carol only to find her eyes already trained on her.

"Please, Mommy. Please can I draw with Therese again? Please."

Carol answered as a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth, "All right."

"Yay! Thank you, Mommy!" Rindy practically yelled as she beamed up at her mother. "Therese, I'll show you my other book that's got all my flowers and butterflies in. Oh, and I have one with-"

"Rindy, Therese needs to get back to work, okay?" Carol interrupted a little more firmly.

Therese leaned toward Rindy and whispered, "You can show me all of them next time, okay?" She shot her a quick wink before smiling impishly at Carol as she pushed herself backwards towards her desk.

"Mommy, when are we leaving?" Rindy asked some two hours later, her voice dulled by the boredom she so obviously felt.

"Soon, sweetpea, soon. I'm sorry. I know how badly you want to leave. I just need to photocopy a few things and then return these books and files and then we can go, okay?" Carol replied apologetically.

Upon hearing Carol's response, Therese rolled over to her desk, the bumping of their chairs announcing her arrival. "I'll photocopy and return those things for you," she said.
"Therese, that's very kind of you but there's a lot I need to photocopy," Carol conceded with a small smile, distractedly leafing through a ring-bound file.

"So?" Therese challenged. "Just write down what you need copied and I'll do it for you. Or, better yet, you could use that year's supply of sticky tabs you've never touched before to mark the pages you want copied," she teased, her dimples beginning to make themselves known as she grinned.

Carol threw her head back to let out a deep, throaty laugh. "Are you sure?" she asked once she had calmed, her eyes now wide with apprehension.

"Of course!" Therese replied without hesitation. "I'm sure you don't want to be here any longer than you absolutely have to. And, Rindy definitely wants to leave," she said, nodding her head at Rindy. They watched as the young girl repeatedly picking up and dropping one of her pencils point-side down while she opened and closed her mouth like a fish.

Carol laughed at her daughter's obvious boredom. She looked back at Therese before leaning in to give her a crushing bear hug, the awkward positioning of their bodies fortunately reducing its full force. "You're a star, you know that?" she said as she pulled back with a reverent look in her eyes, her hand coming to rest on the back of Therese's neck.

Therese flushed under Carol's gaze and the intimate placement of her hand. "Just trying to help you out," she finally replied, shrugging her shoulders in nonchalance with all the might she could muster at that moment.

Carol finally removed her hand. "Well, thank you, Therese. I'll get everything to you in a bit," she said, her face almost splitting in two with the size of her smile.

Therese's chest constricted at the sight. Carol's smile had rendered her unable to stand let alone walk, making her all the more thankful for her chair for both its support and for being able to wheel her back to her desk.

Carol offloaded the books and files she had embellished with an assortment of neon coloured tabs onto Therese's desk a little while later. "Are you sure you want to do all of this, Therese?" she asked, gesturing at the piles before her. By this stage, Rindy stood by the door in anticipation of their departure, the straps of her backpack already secured over her shoulders.

"Yes, Carol. Now, get out of here before I change my mind," Therese replied firmly but with a distinct playful glint in her eye.

"I really owe you one," Carol said with a grateful smile. "Rindy, come say goodbye to Therese, please."

Rindy loped up to Therese and gave her a quick hug. "Bye, Therese. Thanks for drawing with me. It was really fun!" she exclaimed before bolting out the door.

"Thank you, Therese. Enjoy the rest of your weekend, okay?" Carol said. She shot one last blinding smile Therese's way before disappearing from view.

Well, that just confirms I'm not going to get any work done today.

Chapter End Notes
I thought a little hit of fluff was in order after the heaviness of the last three chapters. Hope you enjoyed it :)

A sobering touch

Chapter Notes

This chapter may seem a bit long but it’s mostly dialogue. Cheers :)
Yet again, thanks to Ligeria!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Therese

Saturday 7 October 2017

It took about an hour after Carol left for the effects of that hug and the one-two sucker punch that was the aftermath of said hug to wear off before Therese was actually able to focus. Once she came to she managed to get through a considerable amount of work, namely reading through and summarising everything she could possibly want to include in the gun control piece. She was fairly pleased with her progress by the time she left later that afternoon and resolved to start the skeleton of the story tomorrow. For now, though, she was off to have a quick shower and change before meeting Dannie and a few other friends at barleymash for dinner.

The place was packed by the time Therese arrived, the tumult from the bar spilling out onto the street to be heard a fair way away as she approached. She thankfully spotted the shock that was Xander's bleached man bun among the crowd at one of the long tables situated in the centre of the room along with Dannie, Hannah, Jermaine, Richard, Scott, and Izzie. Xander had lived in the same apartment block she moved into when she first came to San Diego, the then surf instructor being the only tenant to warmly welcome her to the building and immediately went about helping her get settled in. He was a happy-go-lucky, self-deprecating, womaniser that, despite their yin and yang personalities, she immediately clicked with. He'd since moved out following the booming success his surf school, but both made time to hang out. Hannah was a friend of Richard's who Therese had remained friends with even after they'd broken up while Therese had met Jermaine, one of the photographers for PRNT, soon after she started working there, their shared love for photography and craft beer forming the foundation of what was soon a blossoming friendship. Finally, Scott was Dannie's roommate at NYU who had moved back to San Diego to open a coffee roasting company with his wife, Izzie. It was a good mix of friends she hadn't seen in awhile and some she saw just about every day.

"Hi guys!" she exclaimed to the table before going around to hug everyone hello. She shrugged off her leather jacket and took up one of the winged Chesterfield chairs at the head of the table with Dannie and Xander seated either side of her.

"You're looking good, babe. I like the leather jacket, it makes you look tougher than you actually are," Xander started in on Therese with a cocky smile, the brilliant whiteness of which was almost blinding against his tanned skin.

"Thanks! You're looking good, too, Xan. I like what you're wearing tonight, it's very funeral-esque. Hey, it kind of matches your soul," she playfully retorted. "And, I thought with my leather jacket and your all black get up we could start our own throwback 90s grunge band."

"I don't know, T. I can only kinda play Chopsticks on the piano and that doesn't exactly scream
'grunge'. I don't know what else I could possibly bring to the band."

"You'll bring your looks to the band. Your pretty face would be a major drawcard?.""

"Well, I suppose, if one of us has to bring the pretty it may as well be me," he added confidently, batting his eyes for effect. They both laughed at the little exchange, easily falling back into their characteristic talk-about-nothing-in-particular conversations. "Hey, do you want a drink?" he asked Therese.

"I'll have an Old Fashioned. Thanks"

Xander leaned forward to ask the rest of the table if they needed anything else to drink before heading to the bar with Richard in tow. Dannie turned to Therese after and said, "Hey, T, I invited Louise tonight."

"Oh, yeah? That's cool, Dannie! I finally get to meet the mysterious Louise. I was beginning to think she was just an imaginary girlfriend," she teased

"Nah, you know I stopped having imaginary girlfriends in like college," he replied incredulously to make Therese chuckle. "And, we're not officially going out yet, so please don't call her my girlfriend or me her boyfriend, okay?" he added more seriously.

Therese assented by tapping her finger to the side of her nose just as Xander returned with her Old Fashioned and a draft of Stone Ripper pale ale for himself. Dannie continued as she took her first sip, "She messaged me a few minutes ago to say she was leaving her apartment, so she should be here pretty soon. She's apparently bringing one of her dancer friends, too."

"Dancer friend?!" Xander just about shouted. The sudden jerking of his head up from his glass left the slightest of foam moustaches on his upper lip. He promptly wiped the offending remnants of the ale's aromatic head before saying, "You know I have a thing for dancers, D?"

"Xander, you have a thing for any woman. Don't pigeonhole yourself just dancers," Therese derisively interjected, shaking her head at her friend's laughable assertion of being interested in only one type of woman.

"I can't help that I've just got so much love to give, T," Xander responded with a shrug and wink to succeed in making Therese cringe and roll her eyes.

"Oh, there she is. I swear to God, Xander, you better behave tonight," Dannie warned before getting up to meet Louise.

Therese's eyes followed him as he went, seeing him hug and kiss a dark-haired woman on the cheek, who she assumed was Louise by their rather tactile touches, before briefly hugging Louise's friend. As the group proceeded towards the table, the friend's eyes landed on Therese for an instant longer than anyone else, the faintest hint of a smirk adorning her face before her gaze shifted a moment later. Therese felt an instant rush go through her, making her almost instinctively reach for her glass to occupy her now fidgeting hands. Dannie went about introducing the two new arrivals to everyone individually all the while the friend's glances continued to linger on Therese.

"Louise, this is Therese," Dannie said as they rounded Therese's end of the table.

Louise initiated a hug with Therese. "Therese, it's so lovely to finally meet you. I can't tell you how many times your name comes up when Dannie tells me about his time at NYU and even now at PRNT. It's good to finally put a face to the name and not just on Instagram, you know?" she said, giving Therese a warm smile. "This is my friend Genevieve. We're both instructors at the Culture
Shock Dance Center," she said, angling her body towards her friend, one stunning Genevieve."

"Genevieve Cantrell," she said, holding out her hand for Therese to shake, which she timidly but
duly accepted. Genevieve was maybe 5'10" even without the heels she wore and had gorgeous olive
skin, the glimmering surface of which was adorned by an eclectic selection of small, intricate tattoos,
the largest of which was a branch of cherry blossoms that snaked up her bicep. Her sandy brown hair
was cropped into an asymmetrical pixie cut, the longer side of which hung over one eye down to her
chin. Her dark brown almost black looking eyes were unwavering in their gaze.

Therese had to force herself to not allow her eyes to sweep over the incredible body that now stood
before her. On Genevieve's walk over, though, Therese had noticed the subtle curve of what
undoubtedly were a pair of muscular thighs in her fitted white, high-waisted skinny jeans. Now on
closer inspection, she could see the fine definition of her abs that peeked out from below her cropped
black bustier top which appreciatively showed off her toned shoulders and arms.

"But, you can definitely call me Gen," she said with a dimpled grin. Her hand was cool but the
thumb she slowly rubbed along the back of Therese's hand nearly ignited their handshake. Therese
stiffened under the subtle caress but managing to get out the customary response without bumbling
her name too much.

Louise ended up taking a seat next to Dannie while Gen sat across from her on the other side of
Xander to almost immediately be subjected to the full force of his flirt mode. Lively conversations
were had as soon as everyone had a drink in hand. Dannie and Therese were entrusted with
choosing the food for the table because they apparently knew what would go down well with
everyone, which basically meant everything on the barleymash menu. They settled on a few orders
of bourbon-bbq chicken wings, pretzels and dip, skillet chips laden with three different cuts of pork
and a beer-cheese sauce, pepperoni and roasted garlic flatbread, mac 'n cheese loaded with roasted
Brussels sprouts and whiskey-caramelised onions, buffalo chicken and four-cheese flatbread, and
confit duck mac 'n cheese for the table to share. Everything, both food and drink, that was put before
the group was guzzled down with the evening quickly being marked down as a thoroughly
enjoyable one.

Throughout the night, Therese would steal glances at Gen who, in turn, did very little to hide her
ogling, effectively ignoring Xander as he tried in vain to flirt with her. At one stage, he left for the
bar with his vacant seat next to Therese quickly being taken by Gen.

"Hi, Therese," the Amazon said.

"Hi, Gen," Therese forced out as her cheeks began to burn under the intensity of her gaze.

Gen moved her chair closer to Therese. "You know I've been wanting to talk to you all night but I
didn't quite know how to lose Xander," she said.

Therese saw her shift in her seat but felt her foot slide down her calf as she crossed her legs under the
table. She flinched at the unexpected touch and proceeded to dry swallow the sudden lump in her
throat. Both actions of her nervous disposition didn't go unnoticed by Gen as she came to adopt an
expression of absolute smug satisfaction.

"Why is that?" Therese managed to ask.

"Well, I honestly don't think I can listen to him go on about the different styles of surfboards for
another hour," Gen replied. "And, besides, I'm sure I'll find you a lot more interesting," she said with
a sly smirk as she slowly ran her foot up Therese's leg.
And, with that, the spell was broken. The crudeness of the Gen's flirting along with her overtly forward touches immediately sobered Therese up, effectively putting an end to the strong physical but ultimately fleeting all-around attraction she'd felt.

Gen's dark eyes bore into Therese but she didn't look away, instead steeling herself for what promised to be yet more flirting. "I can't make any promises about being more interesting," she joked, hoping to diffuse the tension Gen was so obviously trying to create.

"I *highly* doubt that. So, what do you do with yourself, Therese? What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a journalist, like Dannie, at PRNT."

"A journalist? Wow, that's pretty cool. What do you write about? Would I have read anything of yours?"

"I write about a lot of things, really. Last year was obviously all about the election, so I did a piece comparing Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton's campaigns to become the Dem's nominee for president. I've also done stories on the refugee crisis in Europe, then one on California's Black Lives Matter movement, and one that was on private security companies fighting pirates off the coast of Somalia. The most recent one, though, was about the critically endangered Florida panther. It was in the issue that was released just the other day," Therese finished. She'd noticed Gen's eyes glaze over ever so slightly as she spoke, all the while an unfaltering smile graced her face.

"That's quite incredible, Therese. I must admit I usually stick to the Art, Travel, and Health sections in PRNT, so I'm a little unfamiliar with the work you've done. But, I'll be sure to check out your panther piece when I get the latest issue," Gen said, her smile persisting but now having taken on an almost saccharine quality. "The topics you write about sound quite intense, if I can put it that way. Do you ever want to write about more lighthearted topics? I don't mean to sound condescending or anything, but I didn't think someone as young as you would want to write about things that are...heavy."

The look on Therese's face would have been the embodiment of the phrase "Are you fucking kidding me?". The supposedly unintentionally condescending question stunned her into a momentary silence, making her suddenly feel jealous of Xander having escaped Gen's clutches. Not wanting to make things uncomfortable, she forced on a gracious smile before providing what she hoped was a satisfactory answer. "Yes and no. Yes, because some of the issues I write about have a lot of moral implications, so it can be hard to cover and give a fair account of all of them. Also, in order to write a subjective piece, you may have to separate your own beliefs and values and that can be quite tough and confronting. But, then again, I'd say no, because these are issues that really interest me. I feel like I learn a lot more about them and have a greater understanding and appreciation of their complexities when I'm able to write about them."

Gen scrutinised Therese for a moment before saying with yet another wide smile, "I can't fault someone for finding something that interests them and then going after it."

Wanting to move the conversation along and away from a subject Gen clearly had little interest in, Therese asked, "Louise said you and her are dance instructors, right?"

The fog cleared from Gen's eyes as she answered, "That's right. At the Culture Shock Dance Center, actually. We both mostly do hip hop. We're even a part of the dance troupe Afta Shock which performs at NBA and WNBA games every now and then. But, I'm not strictly a hip hop dancer. I also do jazz and burlesque."

Therese chose to ignore Gen's somewhat suggestive tone when delivering her last comment. "That's
really cool. When did you decide to become a dancer?” she asked instead.

Gen took a deep breath before answering, "Well, I took ballet, jazz, and tap when I was a kid. But, when I got to like 13, I kinda rebelled and wanted to do something that I knew would piss my parents off the most. So, I chose hip hop and I've never really looked back. Burlesque came along quite a while after that but I'm really into it." She stared at Therese for a beat before continuing, "Do you like dancing?"

"A little, I guess. I mean, I dance when I'm in a nightclub or some place like that. And, then I'll dance around at home if I've got some music on. But, other than that, not really," Therese answered honestly.

"Well, we need to change that, don't we? You should come to a class at the center some time."

"I don't know. I don't think I'm good enough to even get into a class."

"We offer different levels of classes, including a beginner's adult class. You should come. They're really fun and a damn good work out, too," Gen said. Seeing Therese's hesitancy, she continued, "I promise you the class is super easy because I've even seen over 70 year olds do them. You'll end up having a total blast if you come. Come on, please? We can have a laugh together and build up a sweat while we dance an hour away." Her playful countenance soon changed as she then leaned into Therese, looking up at her through her lashes before whispering, "Or, we can find another way to build up a sweat." Her eyes took on an sultry intensity yet to be seen by Therese.

Therese would have gaped back at Gen after such a suggestive comment if Dannie hadn't chosen that exact moment to interrupt, "Hey, Therese, Genevieve. Everyone wants to settle the cheque and leave for the night. But, Louise and I are keen on going somewhere else for another drink. Do you want to join us?"

"Absolutely," came Gen's immediate response.

"I think I'm actually gonna head home, D. I'm just feeling quite tired from today and I also need to get started on that new story early tomorrow morning," Therese answered, only slightly embellishing the truth, noticing in her periphery the slight sagging of Gen's shoulders.

"That's too bad, Therese. I think we'll have to have dinner all together some time, so we can talk a little more and you can tell me a few stories about Dannie here," Louise said, giving Therese a smile while she playfully nudged Dannie.

"I'd like that." Therese said. Despite her rather limited interactions with Louise throughout the night, she had already warmed considerably to her, finding her a good complement to Dannie.

The table filtered out onto the street soon after with a few lengthy goodbyes being given before everyone dispersed for the night. Therese stood with Xander and Jermaine while they waited outside barley mash for their Uber to arrive, arguing about whether the confit duck mac 'n cheese was better than the the pork-loaded skillet chips they'd had.

Gen came outside after she'd stopped to talk to someone at the bar and pulled Therese aside. She pressed a piece of paper into the palm of her hand while leaning down to hotly whisper in her ear, "Call me sometime." She winked before rushing off to catch up with Dannie and Louise.

Therese looked down at the scribbled phone number and thought, Yeah, that's gonna be a 'no' from me. She gave a grateful Xander the number before they jumped into their Uber.
First thing that Monday morning, Carol and Therese sat waiting in Tim's office for a meeting he'd arranged.

"I feel like a disobedient student waiting in the principal's office. Do you think we're in some sort trouble?" Carol asked with what could only be assumed was her best attempt at an expression of absolute innocence.

Therese snorted derisively before replying, "Maybe you are in trouble but I doubt I've done anything wrong."

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Belivet?" Carol asked, feigning ignorance.

All Therese could do was laugh, as she so often did when around Carol. God, she's cute when she's like this.

"But, you're probably right. I mean, some of us don't have an adorable pair of dimples to get us out of trouble like you do," Carol nonchalantly added as she absentmindedly picked lint from the leg of her slacks.

"I do not use them to get out of trouble," came Therese's passionate denial, despite feeling slightly off-kilter by Carol calling her her dimples 'adorable'.

"Oh, please!" Carol exclaimed. She shifted in her seat, switching positions of her crossed legs as she did so to bring her high heel-clad foot dangerously close to Therese's, making an instantaneous rush course through the younger woman. "You're telling me you've never used them to get you out of a speeding ticket or to cut in line or something like that?" she asked as she playfully scrutinised Therese through narrowed eyes.

"Never," Therese answered. She waited until Carol began fiddling with the collar of her jacket, seemingly satisfied with her answer, before adding, "Okay, maybe once or twice."

Carol's head snapped to the side to be met with the most impish of grins on Therese's face that made her guffaw. They descended into a chorus of laughter with both shaking and sinking in their seats as they went. Thankfully, they'd somewhat calmed themselves by the time Tim arrived.

"Sorry I'm late. Time ran away from me this morning. What were you laughing at?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing. Just … skiing, you know?" Carol casually answered, conspiratorially glancing sideways at Therese as the younger woman tried to disguise her chuckle as a cough.

"Skiing, huh?" Tim asked with a suspicious arch of his brow, clearly seeing right through Carol's bullshit. "Anyway," he said before continuing as he read from his laptop, "Most of the arrangements for your trip to Alaska have been made. You're gonna leave very late this coming Sunday and you'll stay until the Thursday after next. So, that's the 15th until the 24th. You first fly to Seattle then up to Anchorage and from there you'll fly to Prudhoe Bay up in the North Slope where fracking is taking place. I'll have our travel agent email you all the flight details and such. You've been booked into The Aurora Hotel. It's apparently the best in town but it's overrun by gas and oil workers. I'll put you in touch with Amka. She's a local anti-fracking activist who'll show you around while you're there. I haven't rented a car but she says you can use her truck if you need to drive anywhere. Be warned, the town is tiny. So, don't expect to see shopping malls or anything even remotely like that. It's already fucking cold, so pack accordingly. I suggest that if you have anyone you want to talk to
while you're up there, you should organise it very soon. Sound good?"

Therese felt a bit overwhelmed by the torrent of information but acquiesced with a nod.

Carol answered after a beat, "Yes it does. Thank you for organising everything, Tim. I can't believe we'll be leaving so soon." Therese noticed a slight but definite tightening at the corners of her mouth before her smile broke out.

"Okay, one last thing. Bel, are you sure you can finish the gun control piece by then? I can have someone help you finish it off if you need," Tim asked, his face etched with concern.

"That's all right. I'll have it finished by then. I should have the first draft done by Wednesday and then hopefully have it finished by Saturday or Sunday morning at the latest," Therese confidently replied.

"Good to hear! Well, that's all from me," he said as he stood up to call a close to their meeting.

Therese was having her lunch later that day when Richard walked up to her table. "Hey, Terry. Can I talk to you real quick?" he asked, his brow furrowed ever so slightly.

"Yeah, sure. Everything all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's fine. But, I just...Uhhh...Well, you know at dinner the other night? I saw you and Genevieve talking and she looked really into you. Like...Anyway. But, you just - I don't know- didn't. So, I, uhhh... were you not showing any interest in her because I was there?" he asked, his eyes fleetingly meeting hers but predominantly focused down at her plate.

"What do you mean?" By this stage, Therese had turned her full attention away from her sandwich onto Richard, barely hearing someone else enter the room, finding his expression adolescent in its innocence, like a young boy fumbling away at explaining something he'd done wrong.

"Well, you know? Uhhh … Exes that still hang out sometimes don't -you know? want to flirt with someone new right under their ex's nose because they don't want to make things -you know? awkward or uncomfortable. But, I'm cool with you flirting with other people, Terry. Probably more so when you flirt with women, but I st-"

A choking sound came from behind Therese to interrupt Richard's bumbling elaboration. She turned in her seat to find Carol doubled over in the throes of a coughing fit, her knuckles white as she gripped the kitchen counter for support. She immediately went to hand the wheezing woman her bottle of water. She felt Carol flinch as she placed a comforting hand on the back of her arm just above her elbow. "You okay?" she asked, her voice laced with concern, after Carol had taken a deep gulp of water.

"Yes. I think some coffee just went down the wrong pipe," Carol answered without looking at Therese, her usually smoky voice now having taken on a raspy edge, before she abruptly took a step away from the younger woman. "Thanks for the water. I, I'll let you get back to your lunch," she said with a weak smile. She made eye contact with Therese with an indiscernible expression now occupying her countenance, before turning on her heel to leave.

Therese watched her as went, her brows furrowing deeper as the distance between them increased. Why was she acting so weird? The confusion she felt soon gave way to realisation. She heard what Richard said.
What do you guys think of Genevieve? Would she also get a 'no' from you like she did from Therese?

If anyone's interested, I modelled Genevieve on the Italian swimmer, Federica Pellegrini. I don't know why I chose her because she doesn't look like the Genevieve described in *The Price of Salt* nor does she look anything like Carrie Brownstein from the movie. I think I chose her simply because I think she's hot *shrugs* Check her out if you want;)

So, who's excited for the Alaska trip now?
A bit of both

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, this isn’t the Alaska chapter you may have been hoping for but it’s a little prelude to the trip I really wanted to include. I promise, though, that we’ll be deep in Alaska in the next chapter. Cheers, guys :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Therese

Monday's incident with Carol in the kitchen put Therese on high alert, making her hypersensitive to any and everything the older woman did when around her. She scrutinised the tone of her voice, the expressiveness of her eyes, the simple arch of her brow, the twisting of her lips, everything, in the hopes of unearth any clue that Carol was somehow affected by what she may have heard. But, there was nothing noticeably untoward or different about Carol after Therese returned from lunch, especially not when she shot her characteristic wink the younger woman's way as they passed each other in the corridor. She either did hear that I'm interested in woman and doesn't care or she simply didn't hear what Richard said. Going on her initial reaction and how she's acting now, I'm inclined to think it's the former case. And, so, Therese cast any recurrent thoughts of "what if" or "maybe" from her mind.

The rest of the week passed relatively quickly and without further incident. Therese had stayed late every night working on the gun control piece, progressively moving from large scale edits to fine-tuning the syntax of each and every sentence. She was mildly satisfied with her work, even feeling brave enough to ask Carol and Dannie to give her first draft a read-through. She sent it off to Tim on Wednesday night before finally submitting the finished product late on Friday evening. So, after grinding out the week and working her ass off, Therese felt she more than deserved to enjoy her weekend before heading off to Alaska.

Saturday 14 October 2017

Therese met up with Xander and a few friends at the Little Italy Mercato on Saturday morning, hoping to find a some delectable bites and to buy a few turmeric shots to stave off any coming cold, along with some preserves and a ceramic pot or two for her apartment. After enjoying a breakfast crepe loaded with turkey chili, cheese, scrambled egg, and avocado, Therese ambled up and down the rows of market stalls. At one point she stopped by a flower vendor selling bucketloads of beautiful king proteas when something, or more precisely someone, collided with her side before feeling a pair of arms wrap around her waist.

"What the?!" Therese started before looking around to see a certain blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl grinning up at her. "Rindy, hi!"

Rindy took a step back but still beamed up at Therese, obviously pleased that she had caught her unawares. "Hi, Therese!"

"What are you doing here? Where's your mom?"
Therese followed the direction of Rindy's head as she turned and was met by a sight that floored her. *Sweet Jesus*. Carol was coming towards her almost in slow motion, like that corny moment just about every protagonist in romance movies has when the mere sight of their love interest seems to slow time down around them. Her light hair was haloed by the morning sun overhead with Therese's favourite smile curling her neutral lips, wide and brilliant. That smile alone was powerful enough to bring Therese to her knees, but today Carol's outfit nearly destroyed her. She was wearing a navy and white striped romper that stopped mid-thigh to show off a pair of legs Therese had yet to see on full display. The romper's drawstring cinched in at her waist to better show her sublime figure while its spaghetti straps displayed her subtly toned shoulders and arms. Therese felt so feeble at the sight that she couldn't even bring herself to meet Carol halfway in her walk over. And, so, she endeavoured to survive the next few excruciating long seconds before being rewarded with the goddess's presence before her.

"Fancy seeing you here, Therese. Looking cute, yet again," Carol said after her eyes had swept over the younger woman.

Therese sceptically looked down at her outfit, highly doubting that what she'd put on that morning could possibly be considered 'cute', certainly not by Carol. Her outfit of denim short dungarees, cropped white t-shirt, black choker, and a pair of strappy black sandals hardly whispered 'cute' let alone screamed it. After realising she'd been silently scrutinising herself for longer than really necessary, she jerked her head up to respond, "Thank you. You look very … summery." *What the fuck? That's the best you could come up with? Summery? Jesus.*

"Well, I wanted to soak up this gorgeous weather before we freeze to death."

"Carol, do you want to- Oh, I'm sorry," said a woman who came to a stop beside Carol to confusedly look between her and Therese.

"Therese, this is Abby Gerhard. Abby, Therese Belivet," Carol gestured for their introduction.

"Hi," Abby said, her features noticeably relaxing with realisation as she initiated their handshake.

"Hi, Abby. It's nice to finally meet you," Therese replied. *So, this is Abby.* She took in Abby's short, dark blonde bob, the soft waves of which were pulled over into a dramatic side parting to reveal her darker roots. The corners of her full, round-lipped mouth were pulled into up into an almost satisfied smile while her large, undoubtedly expressive eyes presently had curiosity brimming from their dark depths. She was a bit older than Carol, shorter by a few inches, and their dress styles differed considerably, hers being, in this instance, more formal. All-in-all, she wasn't quite who Therese had imagined.

Abby addressed Carol with a humoured expression on her face after she'd dragged her eyes from Therese, "So, this is *your* Therese?"

*Your Therese?* Therese looked back at Carol in time to see her flush before she focused her attention on smoothing down Rindy's mussed hair.

"Carol's told me so much about you," Abby continued after she gave Therese a quick once over. The briefest of glances she shot Carol's way made the blonde shift where she stood.

Sensing Carol's evident unease, Therese decided to lighten the mood by joking, "That's the kiss of death right there." She shot a cheeky but reassuring grin Carol's way just for good measure.

Both Carol and Abby laughed, the tension in the former's body visibly leaving in the process as she beamed back at Therese while casually slinging an arm around her daughter's shoulders. "I said only
"good things about you, Therese," Carol reassured before a devilish grin snaked its way onto her lips.

"Somehow I don't believe that."

"Have I done anything to make you think I would say anything but good things about you?"

"No, you haven't, but you always have that sly look on your face that makes me think you're up to no good," Therese playfully retorted.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Carol nonchalantly added with a shrug before joining in laughing with Therese. Her chuckle was short-lived, though, having it die in her throat after glancing at Abby.

Therese turned to find Abby looking at her with a smile that toed the line between indulgent and something else she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Therese, we were just about to go get some cookies. Would you like to join us?" Abby asked, her eyes wide with expectancy while a challenge laced her tone.

Carol answered first, "I'm sure Therese has-"

"Therese, babe! Hey, do you wanna- Woh! Who are the hot blonde and brunette?!!" came Xander's booming voice from behind.

"I'll be right back," she said before storming toward her brazen friend, her need to give him a dressing-down driving her forward.

"Xander!! You're such a fucking asshole! Do you not have a filter?! Did you have to say that while I was right in front of them?!" she said through gritted teeth, trying to keep her angry voice low as to not draw any more attention.

"Geez, take your anger down a notch, T. So, are they friends of yours or what?" Xander asked, seemingly unphased by Therese obvious vexation as he looked over her head at Carol and Abby.

"Stop staring at them!" she admonished, slapping him lightly on the stomach to drag his attention back to her. "You are unbelievable, you know that?" she exasperated with a more humoured tone. She shook her head in disbelief but was far from surprised by his antics. "I'm going to hang out with them for a bit, so don't wait for me, okay? Just go ahead and I'll catch up with you later."

"Sorry about Xander. He can be a total as-uhhh-idiot sometimes," she said as she returned, remembering just in the nick of time that there was a child present, to make both Carol and Abby snigger at her skilful dodging of that slip of tongue. She turned to Abby to finally answer her question. "I'd love some cookies but only if they're from The Cravory." She flashed her dimples in a sweet smile as if to sway Abby.

"You read my mind," Abby replied, her face now breaking out into a genuine smile. "They're mine and Rindy's favourite. Isn't that right, Rin?"

"Yeah. They're the best because they have so many flavours of cookie and the cookies are always really soft and fresh. And, and they sell small bottles of milk that you can drink while you eat your cookies ," Rindy answered, making Therese smile with her thoughtfulness.

As they went to find The Cravory stall, Rindy came beside Therese and tugged on her hand.

"Therese, do you like cookies?" she asked, squinting up at the younger woman as they walked.

"No, I don't like cookies," Therese replied. She threw a mischievous grin Carol's way after the
blonde had curiously glanced across at her. She waited a beat for her answer to register with Rindy before elaborating, "I love cookies!"

It took a split second for Rindy's confused countenance to be transformed by absolute joy as she exuberantly giggled in a way only a child can. "Me, too!" she exclaimed in a musical voice.

Therese chuckled at the little blonde as they continued on, talking with Rindy all the time as they went. She glanced across at Carol at one stage to find her staring ahead with a lovely, content smile on her face. It was another smile Therese would have to add to her already long list of favourites.

As they perused the available cookie flavours at the stall from which smells of buttery sugary goodness wafted, Rindy urged Therese down to her level with the flapping of her hand. "I don't know what flavour I want," the young girl huffed after Therese had dutifully knelt.

"Well, what flavours do you like?"

"Hmmmm … I really like the one with the sprinkles on. But, I also like chocolate chip, peanut butter, chocolate, the red one, and the trick or treat one. Mommy doesn't like me having that many cookies, though," Rindy admitted, her brows knitted together in concentration as she bit down on her lower lip.

"Okay, how about this? Why don't we get all of the flavours you like but we share each cookie so you can have all of them but you won't eat too much?" Therese asked. She could almost see the cogs in Rindy's mind go to work as she considered her offer, noticing in her periphery that Carol continued to silently watch their little exchange.

After asking for her mother's opinion and approval, Rindy exclaimed, "Yes, please!" And so, the desired cookies were purchased with Therese getting a few more adult-orientated flavours for herself before they headed to a designated sit-down tent to enjoy their treats.

"So, Therese, how long have you been working at PRNT?" Abby asked soon after Therese had split a red velvet cookie with Rindy.

"It's going to be two-and-a-half years in December."

"That long, huh? That's a decent amount of time. Do you feel like you've established yourself there or are you still feeling like a bit of a rookie?"

"Hmmmm … a bit of both, I think," Therese answered before continuing, "I still feel like a rookie because I have a lot to learn and will probably continue to do so. But, then again, I also feel more established because of the types of stories I've been entrusted to write, you know? They aren't nothing pieces that are typically passed off to rookies or interns. The topics I've been covering have become progressively more serious, so I think that maybe shows I'm becoming more established. And, I guess I'm beginning to feel more like I belong because I'm becoming more confident in my writing." She was met by a tender but proud smile after looking across at Carol.

"Good answer," Abby said with slight smile of satisfaction. "Is PRNT your first gig as a journalist? I only ask because you look a lot younger than the journalists I'm used to seeing."

"Yes, Tim hired me right out of grad school. So, yeah, I moved out here when I was 23."

"Where did you move from?"

"New York," Therese said as she accepted the other half of a peanut butter cookie from Rindy.
Abby pursed her lips and whistled. "That must have been quite daunting at 23. Not only starting your first job but having to move across the country to do so. Were you scared at all?" she asked, a hint of a challenge twinkling in her eyes.

Therese had a mouthful of cookie to mull her answer over. "I definitely was scared. I think New York was very much my security blanket - you know what I mean? because I grew up there and everything was very familiar to me. I almost turned down Tim's offer because I was terrified of stepping out of that comfort zone. But, someone convinced me that it would be a good opportunity for me to grow, not only as a writer but just in general, and instead of worrying about the things that scared me, I should rather focus on what excited me. And, the things that excited me far outweighed what I was afraid of. But, yeah, like you said, it was quite daunting. Luckily for me I met some really good people right away who helped me settle in. People like Xander who you had the fortune of not meeting in person earlier," Therese joked.

Abby chuckled before asking, "Oh, yes, that's his name. Is Xander your boyfriend?"

"Xander? God, no!" Therese exclaimed, shaking her head at the absurdity of the thought. "That sounded really bad. I didn't mean for it to come off like that. Xander's a really amazing and lovely guy, but he's not my boyfriend. I met him when I first moved out to San Diego and he kinda took me under his wing, introduced me to people and showed me around, you know? But, no, we're definitely not together."

"Oh, I just assumed because he called you “babe”." 

"He's always called me that for some reason. He's just not my type, to be honest, and he's not a one-woman kinda guy. So, yeah, we're better suited as friends," Therese answered with a shrug.

"I see. So, if he's not your boyfriend, are you seeing anyone else?" Abby asked, her eyes brimming with curiosity.

"Abby, what is with the third-degree?" Carol incredulously interjected before Therese could answer.

"What? I'm just making conversation, Carol." Abby turned to answer Carol with an unabashed expression on her face. Therese noticed Carol's jaw tighten as she shot daggers at Abby who, in turn, didn't even flinch. "And, I'm getting to know Therese in the process," Abby continued, looking back to give Therese a wink.

The sudden tension in the air was timeously broken by Rindy as she handed yet another half cookie to Therese, this time the chocolate truffle, before asking, "Therese, what's your favourite cookie?"

Therese turned to the young girl to answer, "That's a really hard question because they're all so good. But, I'd say the chocolate truffle is my favourite." She emphasised her choice by triumphantly holding up her crumbly piece of chocolate heaven.

"That's my favourite, too!" Rindy exclaimed before shoving nearly all of her half into her mouth.

Therese looked across at Carol to find her biting down on her lip as she tried to not laugh at her daughter. "You know what, Rindy? I have this flavour all the time, so I think I can go without it for today. Here, you can have my half," she said, holding her piece out to Rindy.

Rindy's eyes widened in wonder. "Are you sure?" she asked in a hushed voice, almost as if speaking any louder would somehow make Therese go back on her offer. Therese nodded her assent before dropping the cookie into Rindy's outstretched hands where upon the little blonde proceeded to merrily chomp away at the treasured treat.
"Rindy, what do you say to Therese?" Carol gently asked.

Rindy momentarily tore her mouth away from her treasured cookie to say, "Thank you, Therese!"

Therese laughed at a ravenous Rindy. She looked across at Carol as she did so to find the blonde's tender but awed expression looking back at her. "So, Abby, Carol tells me you own a furniture store in LA," Therese said, wanting to steer the discourse away from herself but mostly to distract her from thinking about the look in Carol's eyes.

"I do. Yes, I own and occasionally run it. It keeps me busy and out of trouble," Abby replied, a comment which was immediately followed by a derisive snort from Carol. She tried to maintain her reserved countenance but a bark of a laugh broke her resolve, causing the longtime friends to peel over with laughter. "I just couldn't keep a straight face there!" Abby exclaimed, the corners of her eyes beginning to water with mirthful tears. She took a deep calming breath before elaborating, perhaps wanting Therese to share in the joke, "You see, Carol seems to think that the reason I opened the store was to meet women. Which is," she paused to hem and haw before continuing, "Okay, it's partially true. But, I also opened it because I like good furniture and the buying and selling part of it is quite fun."

"You know there are easier ways to meet women, right?" Therese joked, desperately hoping that her attempt at banter would not fall flat.

"There is? Gee, you think you could teach me a few things that have worked for you?" Abby asked as she propped her chin atop her hand with a wide-eyed expression of wonder, thankfully catching on without missing a beat.

"I can certainly try. Although, I don't know if I'd be teaching you anything you didn't already know. But, maybe you could teach me a few of your tips and tricks."

"I'm all for passing on my wisdom to the next generation! Just as long as you don't use it against me to steal a woman I'm interested in," Abby playfully warned, before they both laughed. They stopped soon after, though, perhaps noticing that Carol hadn't joined in.

Therese dared a look at Carol, finding her eyes unfocused and almost vacant, seemingly lost in her thoughts. After a few protracted seconds of silence, Carol finally met her gaze with a smile. The younger woman noticed, though, that the smile failed to reach her eyes, and so reciprocated with a smile of her own, hoping that her supposedly adorable dimples would get through to Carol. Disappointingly, they didn't. "I think I better head back before my friends wander too far off," she said.

"Oh, right! How could I forget about Xander? I do appreciate him calling me "hot" even though he's barking up the wrong tree. Do pass my thanks onto him, Therese, and compliment him on his candour," Abby joked to finally succeed in making Carol laugh.

Rindy and Abby got involved in an animated discussion about which Halloween candy is the best on the walk back to the market's entrance, involving analysis of their taste, look, and how much your tongue and teeth are discoloured after eating them. Carol and Therese hung back a bit to walk side-by-side.

"I'm sorry about Abby earlier. She can be a bit...full on," Carol said with an apologetic smile.

"Don't be. She's really funny. I can see why you're friends with her," Therese answered truthfully. *I just wish I could make you laugh as easily as she can.*
"She's certainly entertaining. She came down because she hadn't seen Rindy in quite a while. She's big on godmother-goddaughter bonding time because she's finally got someone to corrupt with her tricks and stories about her mischievous adventures from our childhood," Carol explained to make Therese chuckle. "So, are you ready for Alaska?" she asked after a beat or two.

"Definitely! I'm really excited for it, actually. The only thing I'm not keen on is the cold. You know I found out the average temperature in Prudhoe Bay for October is 14°F."

"Jesus Christ," Carol huffed under her breath. "Remind me again why we chose to go?"

"Well, Tim wanted me to go, so I had no choice in the matter. You, on the other hand actually chose to come with. It even would have been your idea if Tim hadn't suggested it first. So, you only have yourself to blame for your predicament," Therese stated matter-of-factly.

"Is this sass coming with you to Alaska?" Carol asked, a smile doing battle with her mouth as she tried to talk.

"You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?" Therese said, her attempt at keeping a straight face failing miserably under Carol's mirthful gaze. "I just want to make the most of the trip, you know? Do the job but also embrace whatever comes because who knows when there'll be another opportunity to go up there. It's not every day that you get that close to the North Pole or get to see a polar bear or go to the most remote place in America, right?" Therese began to think about the possibilities of their trip, about the places they'd see, about the experiences they'd have together. So lost was she in thought that she didn't notice Carol close the gap between them until she felt an arm drape over her shoulders to pull her flush against Carol's side.

"You, my dear, are the type of person I need to travel with more often," Carol said as she looked down into Therese's eyes. The combination of her gaze and beamed smile along with their proximity almost overwhelmed Therese. "This will be our little adventure and I can't wait for it," she whispered, her smoky voice now light with overflowing excitement.

Our little adventure.

Sunday 15 October 2017

Therese made her way to the San Diego International Airport on Sunday evening, her stomach aflutter with unbridled exhilaration. The travel time would be considerable, though, about 9 hours in total. They were to fly to Seattle first before catching a red-eye to Anchorage where they would layover for a few hours and then finally leave for Prudhoe Bay in the early of Monday morning. She thought she could use just a few of those hours to catch up on the sleep she'd lost the night before, when Carol's whispered assertion being on loop in her mind kept her awake. Thankfully, she was able to distract herself this morning by focusing on packing the essentials for the trip, namely her newly acquired down parka, rain jacket, a pair of Danner Mountain Pass boots which the salesman said she absolutely had to have; and plenty of sweaters and thermals. She also took the time to check and recheck that her camera bag was stocked with all the equipment she could possibly need. Only then was she finally ready to embark on what she hoped would be a memorable adventure.

Therese just about skipped up to Carol when she saw her standing near the check-in counters. "Hi!" she enthused, her cheeks already hurting with the force of her smile. She knew something was the matter with Carol as soon as she turned to face her, seeing right through the pink glasses to her puffy, slightly bloodshot eyes.

"Hi, Therese," Carol said, her smile wide but only lasting a moment, the corners of her mouth being
dragged down almost as soon as they curled up. "Ready?" she asked in a voice that had not an ounce of her abundant excitement from just yesterday.

Although Carol's demeanor troubled Therese considerably, she acquiesced with a simple, "Yes."

Therese desperately held onto the slim hope that the blame for Carol's downcast mood lie in her being a nervous flyer. Her conduct suggested quite the opposite, though, that of a seasoned flyer merely going through the motions, through check-in, boarding, takeoff, cruising, and descent. And, so, both flights to Seattle and Anchorage went by in relative silence, with Therese being more engaged with the rather sullen flight attendant than with her travel companion. The few words that were exchanged between them mostly came from the infrequent questions Therese asked with Carol contributing, at best, monosyllabic answers in return. The difference between the start of the trip Therese had envisaged and the reality of their now strained silence crushed her, the only remnants of her hope being the forlorn glances she cast the way of the distant Carol she sat next to.

Chapter End Notes

Now what?
"Is everything all right, Carol?" came Therese's voice through Carol's haze of dejection as they sat in the one of the few bars open at this ungodly hour of the morning in the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport.

Carol dragged her eyes away from the tumbler of whiskey she'd been silently sipping to look at Therese. Worry was etched across the younger woman's face, from the slight furrow of her brow to the tightness of her mouth, with subtle accents of alarm thrown in to complete her expression of absolute concern. It was her eyes, though, that immediately drew Carol's attention, seeing in their green depths an amalgamation of tenderness, apprehension, vulnerability, and the slightest hint of fear. It took just one look into those eyes, those eyes that could say more with a single glance than a thousand words ever could, for Carol to concede that she couldn't pass her current crestfallen state off as nothing untoward. "No, everything is not all right" she replied, the small, sad voice she heard sounding foreign to her ears.

"What happened?"

*What happened?* The mere thought of the question made Carol's blood boil, her grip dangerously tightening around the tumbler until she felt her palm fill every groove it pressed into. "*Fucking Harge happened*," she answered, her top teeth biting down into her lower lip to drag out the 'f' sound. She tossed the rest of her drink back and signalled for a top-up with a quick double tap to the rim of her glass.

She set her jaw and gritted her teeth in an attempt at regaining the calm which had deserted her well before leaving San Diego. After a deep, somewhat controlled breath she continued, "When I went to drop Rindy off with Harge, he *told* me I would only have her again in three weeks time even though we agreed just days ago that I would get her back on Sunday, the week that we return, because that would mean him having her for exactly two weeks, just like our custody agreement stipulates. He said I should have contacted his lawyer to make a slight amendment to the schedule so I could have her back when I originally wanted. Obviously I didn't do that because I honestly thought a verbal agreement between us would suffice. But, no. Harge, being the bastard that he is, needed it in writing. So, I asked him about what happened the other day when I got Rindy back a day earlier than scheduled -remember, when he came and dropped her off at the office because he had that meeting up in San Francisco? because that obviously wasn't in our schedule. He was nitpicking, so I decided nitpick, too, you know? He said those were extenuating circumstances because his parents couldn't look after her like they usually would in a situation like that, which I understand and agree with. But, somehow, *just* somehow, my going to Alaska for work -not some *fucking* holiday- is not considered extenuating circumstances. No, that supposedly doesn't count because like he said, I had more than
enough time to make the necessary arrangements with his lawyer. But, you know what the worst part of this whole fucking situation was? That fucking bastard made sure Rindy stood right next to him as he told me all this because he knows I would never argue with him in front to her. I couldn't argue about it and so I had no fucking choice but to fucking agree with him.” The tone of her voice and look in her eyes radiated the anger and indignation she felt. It was a side of Carol rarely ever seen, but when it was, it frightened those around her and terrified those who had the great misfortune of being on the receiving end of it. But, not Therese. If anything, she looked more compassionate than ever and it instantly began to melt the ice that had set under Carol's skin after leaving Harge's house.

A silence stretched between them as Carol calmed herself with her refreshed drink. The quiet was eventually broken by her now tamed voice, "And, now, I won't see Rindy for three weeks...But, that's not even the most upsetting thing about all this. I never thought it would come to this... I never thought that everything would have to be done through our lawyers, that every decision made would have to get their stamp of approval. I thought Harge and I could be civil enough to just work things out between us... But, we clearly can't. This is how it's been since before we got divorced, it's only gotten worse since we've been divorced, and I just...can't see it getting better. And, it's just...It's just all so exhausting." She pinched the bridge of her nose and screwed her eyes shut in an attempt to stave off any tears that dared try make themselves known. The avalanche of despair that threatened to consume her was stopped in its tracks when she felt two warm hands seize her own in a gentle embrace.

"I'm sorry, Carol," was all Therese said.

And, it was all Carol wanted or needed to hear. She knew nothing could be said to change how she felt, no utterances of "you'll have Rindy back before you know it" or "there's nothing to be done about it" nor "things will get better in the future" were made. They weren't made perhaps because Therese knew Carol had thought such things herself. But, the light squeezes of her hand communicated everything she needed, that Therese was there for her, that the younger woman wouldn't allow her to continue to feel like this alone. She looked up at Therese to give her a weak smile, a thank you of sorts she knew she would be unable to enunciate in that moment. They sat like that, hand in hands, for a some time with not a word spoken between them until Therese suggested that a change of scenery for breakfast was much needed.

They slid into a booth at a diner-style restaurant and were immediately greeted by a surprisingly chipper waitress, "Hi there! I'm Sarah. I'll be your server this lovely morning. Here are your menus. Our specials are on the blackboard behind me if you want something a little different. I'll come back in a bit or you can just give me a wave when you're ready and I'll come take your orders. Okay?" She beamed a blindingly toothy smile at them before turning on her heel to leave. Therese promptly snatched the menu from Carol's grasp as soon as she went to open it.

"What are you doing, Therese?" Carol exclaimed in surprise.

The only answer that was forthcoming from the younger woman was a flashed smile before she walked to the register to what could only be assumed was to place their order. She returned with two glasses and a pitcher of water and casually sat back down, meeting Carol's scrutinising gaze with an expression of utmost coolness.

Carol arched a brow in questioning, "Are you going to tell me what you ordered?" She could feel a smile begin to fight its way through her melancholy to come to the fore as she spoke.

Therese squinted her eyes and puckered her lips in deliberation before answering with a simple shake of her head and a cheeky pop of her dimples.
Carol laughed and with it, felt the tension, anger, and misery that festered within her begin to be exorcised. "The audacity of some people," she said with a humoured click of her tongue, finding Therese's playful antics rather charming. A refreshingly lighthearted conversation was finally had while they waited for their breakfast with Carol feeling her mood lighten with every word uttered between them.

The plate of food that was placed before Carol immediately brought a smile to her face. She found Therese beaming back at her as she cast her eyes up. "I remember you saying how much you loved banana French toast and then also maple bacon. So, I thought what could be better than having them both in one breakfast. It's not on the menu or a special but I pulled a few strings to get them to make it for you," Therese said, her glowing eyes now eclipsing her smile from Carol's vision.

Carol's chest tighten and then swelled immediately after, feeling the warmth from earlier begin to proliferate through her, unsurprisingly emanating from her heart. The simple yet powerful act astounded her in the best possible way. She reached across the table and took Therese's hand in both her own, almost recreating that which took place earlier. "You, my darling, are absolutely incredible, you know that?" said Carol. It was a sentiment she'd suspected for a while but now knew with absolute certainty was the unquestionable truth. She looked at Therese with what she could only imagine were eyes that exuded the utter adoration she had for the woman. But, she didn't care, not when she could not only drag her out of her doldrums but also make her feel such elation. "Thank you, Therese."

A flushed Therese shifted awkwardly in her seat, suddenly looking unsure of what to do with herself, and kept alternating between looking at their hands and into Carol's eyes, seemingly torn between which she wanted to stare at most. She eventually ceded to Carol's gaze, giving her yet another dimpled smile before saying, "I hope you enjoy your Carol special."

They tucked into their breakfasts with much gusto, the occasional sound of satisfaction that escaped from their lips being the only breaks in conversation being had. Not soon after they'd finished had they boarded the plane that would take them to where they would call home for the next few days, Prudhoe Bay.

As they exited the arrivals terminal in the small Deadhorse Airport, they spotted a makeshift sign that read, "Carol Ross + Therese Belivet" being held by a rather stout woman, perhaps in her mid- to late-50s. Carol immediately noticed there was a certain fierceness to her, from her almost uncompromising gaze as it interrogated each and every face that passed to her dominant, wide-legged body stance. Her eyes finally landed on Carol and Therese as they approached and she almost instantaneously closed the gap between them. Her theorised fierceness evaporated as the warmest and most eye-crinkling smile broke forth to greet them. "Welcome to Sagavanirktok! Or, as you may know it, Prudhoe Bay!" she boomed in a voice that again did not match what Carol had imagined it to be, sweet and singsong in its tone, as she spread her arms wide in the customary welcome gesture. "I'm Amka," she said as she reached to shake Therese's hand in both her own, before doing the same to Carol. "It's so lovely to finally meet you both. I swear it's felt like the longest time coming for you to arrive. I must apologise for my bashfulness because I'm just a little shocked you're actually here!" Her use of "bashfulness" wasn't quite how Carol would describe her, not for a woman who seemed to exude warmth and happiness and who was absolutely unabashed during their brief introduction. "I though we might get you checked in at The Aurora Hotel and then, if you're not too tired, I could show you around town and some places you'd maybe like to see for your story."

They walked out into hazy sunshine after the cool morning air had done battle with the day's first warming rays, with an extremely chatty Amka breaking their conversation to collect her truck, leaving Carol and Therese waiting by the airport's entrance. The icy air that bit at Carol's cheeks and
lips had an almost reinvigorating effect on her, banishing any fatigue she'd felt from the day's travels. She glanced across at a now rouge-cheeked Therese only to find the younger woman's twinkling eyes already on her.

"I think we need to commemorate our arrival, don't you?" Therese asked as she pulled out her phone.

"Ah, yes. I forgot you're part of the selfie generation," Carol teased, bringing about an eye roll from Therese, but acquiesced nonetheless. "Here, I think my orangutan arms are better suited for this," she said before taking Therese's phone in hand. She put an arm around Therese's shoulder to pull her closer, the younger woman responding in turn by snuggling into her side with her arm winding its way around her waist to secure their position. "Ready?" she asked before proceeding to snap away. She captured their aligned bodies, their beanie-clad heads pressed together with achingly wide smiles on their faces, and the splendid sun in the distance. The images were perfect, worthy of eternizing this moment. All except one where Carol sported a maniacal smile that would make Jack Nicholson proud. "I think I'll send that one to Abby. She'll appreciate it!" Carol joked.

After checking in and having a quick shower to freshen up, Carol and Therese met Amka to go trundling in and around Prudhoe Bay. They headed west to then drive south along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System whose 800 mile length bisected Alaska from north to south, cutting its way through mountain ranges, boreal forests, tundras, countless rivers, and tens of thousands of lakes. They saw herds of caribou around a few drill sites in the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field, some resting in the surroundings fields while others traversed the gravelled roads connecting one site to another in an intricate network of travelling efficiency. In the midst of their mating season, the male herd members, forming part of the larger Central Arctic herd, were adorned with grand sets of antlers which the bucks would inevitably use to joust amongst themselves in the hope of landing a mate. Surprisingly to both Carol and Therese, the caribou seemed somewhat unaffected by the anthropogenic changes to their once natural habitat and lifestyle. Lastly, Amka showed them some sites a few miles south of Prudhoe Bay where exploratory fracking had taken place just months earlier, the areas being primed for exploitation.

Amka turned in her seat to address Carol and Therese once they arrived back at the hotel. "Now, you both are invited to have dinner with me and my family and a few friends of ours tonight. It's my way of welcoming you to the Bay for what I hope will be a fruitful trip for you. I also want to feed you some good, hearty food because you'll definitely be needing it while you're up here. That's not to say the food at The Aurora is bad - it's quite the opposite, actually - but I want to give you a lovely home-cooked meal as my little slow of Alaskan hospitality. Does that sound like a good idea?"

It was a question that begged only one answer. "Absolutely. We'd love to have dinner with you," came Carol's enthusiastic response after reaching a non-verbal agreement with Therese.

"Great! I'll come pick you up at six-thirty because I don't want you walking out in the cold. You may run into a bear or, even worse, a rowdy oil worker," Amka said, guffawing at her own joke. "I'll see you ladies later!" she enthused with an energetic wave goodbye before she drove away.

"I think I'm going to need a quick nap before tonight. Because, with that chatterbox having us over for dinner, it's bound to be an entertaining but very long night full of talking," Carol said as they trudged their way through the hotel.

"Yeah, a power nap is definitely in order. I think I would have fallen asleep on our way back if I hadn't been too busy laughing at that ridiculous ice fishing accident of hers," Therese said with a chuckle before being overcome by a yawn, the intensity of which shook her tiny body and forced her to walk the last few meters to her room with her eyes closed.
Carol's dopey smile accompanied her to own room as she thought, *God, how can she be so adorable?*

Carol knocked on Therese's door a few hours after they'd parted ways in search of some much needed sleep. The sight that greeted left her struggling for breath. Therese stood clad in a fluffy white bathrobe, the opening of which showed the slightest but most enticing hint of cleavage, with her tousled hair still damp from her shower.

"Hi. Sorry, I overslept. Come in. I just need to get changed and then we can go."

Carol was somehow able to make her way over the threshold without tripping before Therese disappeared into the bathroom. *Jesus Christ, I was not ready for that.* She grinned at the thought of her licking the droplets of water as they descended between Therese's breasts before quickly admonishing herself for such lascivious musings. *Now, where do I sit and wait for her? On the bed always looks way too suggestive. So, that's not an option. I could always sit at the desk. No, that would mean looking at the wall like an idiot. I could sit in the Barcalounger, but I'll look too comfortable and lax. I'll just-

"Carol? Please could you pass me my grey thermal? I think I must have left it on the bed," came Therese's voice to interrupt Carol's ridiculous musings.

Well, it was nice knowing you, World. But, this is how I'm going to die. Seeing Therese in a state of undress again is going to kill me.

"Never mind. I found it," said Therese, her voice muffled by the door and perhaps the thoughts clouding Carol's head.

*Dammit! God, I hope the air outside acts like a cold shower because I definitely need it.*

Carol and Therese finally made their way downstairs to be picked up by Amka, who then almost immediately launched into giving them the rundown on who was coming for dinner that night. They soon pulled up to your typical looking wooden house except for a large polar bear skin that was stretched out on a drying frame that rested against the side of the house. Carol and Therese hardly had time to take in the toasty warmth of the softly lit interior nor the delicious smells that saturated the air before introductions were made by Amka, including her husband, Desmond or Dessie; daughter, Tanaraq and her three sons Aklaq, Amaruq, and Nanuq; son, Cupun along with his wife, Anna and daughter, Miki; and friends John, Christina, Maryann, and Henry. The initial shock of meeting so many new people and being cramped in such close quarters with them quickly wore off when they were so warmly embraced into their conversation.

Hot drinks were enjoyed as Carol and Therese gave a synopsis of what they were hoping to achieve during their time in Prudhoe Bay, finding the entire room listening with rapt attention with the kids even gaping back at them in wonderment as they spoke. Everyone soon moved the conversation to the low-lying table that spanned one side of the living room where the feast was to be had. Large steaming clay pots of caribou chili, hare stew, seafood chowder, and chunky caribou stew were brought to the table along with plateloads of Arctic char fishcakes and cast-iron skillets piled high with wedges of warm bannock bread. The heady smell of the rich food seemed to soak through Carol and almost overwhelm her with hunger as she patiently waited before finally being allowed to eat to her heart's content.

The sumptuous meal did little to deter conversation, with Tanaraq and Cupun chatting away with Therese while Amka kept Carol, Desmond, and her friends entertained. Unsurprisingly, Amka was a seasoned raconteur who told tales of her childhood growing up in the Bay in significant detail and
with meaningful insight. She elucidated how life in the Bay had changed in the last 50 years since the discovery of the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field and the ensuing oil boom, before explaining her role in various groups opposing fracking and further natural gas and oil exploration in Prudhoe Bay and Alaska in general.

Amka’s clearing of the table after dinner allowed Carol a rare opportunity to look at Therese. She saw her holding Miki whose chubby hands came to rest on the younger woman's cheeks, the toddler even being so bold as to kiss her deep-set dimples. Therese would act like the kisses were wet and sloppy by dramatically wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand to make Miki giggle hysterically and clap her hands in amusement before the little girl again went on the attack with her puckered lips. *I've never been more jealous of a baby before.* The toing and froing between them was briefly interrupted by Amka’s grandson, Nanuq, as he came to sit next to Therese, the look of absolute infatuation coming to colour his countenance as she chatted with him. *Now, that kid is more like me.*

Carol lost track of how long she sat enraptured for until she realised she herself was being watched by Amka who had since, unbeknowst to her, returned to the table. Carol blushed and hastily diverted her eyes elsewhere, hoping above all hope that the room's low lighting would hide her pink cheeks. But, the damage was done as Amka leaned toward her and in a low voice said, "You like Therese." It wasn't a question nor accusation, just a simple, straightforward statement.

Carol felt a surge of trepidation course through her, making her heart rate spike as it went. But, as ever, she kept her composure and attempted a nonchalant reply, "Of course I like Therese. We've become good friends since we started working together." Her rehearsed answer sounded stiff and forced, one she knew would not fool someone evidently as perceptive as Amka.

Even in the poor light, Carol could see Amka gave her a gentle, knowing smile. "No, you like Therese like I like my Dessie," she said, tenderly looking across at her walrus-moustached husband as he played with Aklaq and Amaruq.

Carol let out a sign of defeat, her shoulders sagging under the weight of what she knew was an immutable fact. "Not quite like you and Desmond. But, yes, I do like her," she quietly admitted.

"Have you told her how you feel?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have … a lot of baggage," came Carol's eventual answer after a few moments of deliberation.

"Unless you've got literal skeletons in your closet, I think you need to tell her."

"It's not as easy as that. You see, with us working together, I -"

"Is it not allowed?" Amka interrupted.

"Well, no. But -"

"Then I don't see the problem," Amka said, the arch of a single brow challenging Carol to say otherwise.

"I … It's … Well," Carol stammered before giving up completely with a deep sign. She slumped back against the wall before she almost involuntarily cast a quick, forlorn glance Therese's way.

"Carol," Amka started as she shifted a little closer, "If there's even the slightest of chances of
something happening between you two, you need to go for it. You don't want to live the rest of your life regretting what you should have done when you felt like this. Don't push down or diminish how you feel just because you think your baggage is big enough to scare her away. Give yourself a chance, dear." She gently patted Carol's hand in reassurance but the look on her face begged no further argument from Carol.

The evening began to wind down soon after as fatigue came to linger on the grandchildren, and Carol and Therese alike, with rather lengthy but ultimately sleepy goodbyes bid around ten-thirty. Carol and Therese eventually made their way through The Aurora entrance after being dropped off by an ever-chatty Amka, with promises made to see each other soon. As Therese started to move toward their rooms, Carol grabbed her arm and directed her in a different direction.

"Where are we going?" Therese asked confusedly but without resisting Carol's guiding her through the hotel corridors.

Carol merely shrugged and smiled, moving her hand to rest on Therese's lower back as she continued to gently usher her forward.

"Oh, I see what you're doing. You're paying me back for my silent treatment earlier at breakfast. Is that it?" Therese asked but was again met with a shrug and grin in response, making her silently smile all the way as they walked on.

Only once in the deserted espresso room did Carol turn to address Therese. "Now, I wanted to toast our arrival tonight but I unfortunately found out that this is a dry borough and I didn't bring my trusty travel hip flask," she said, winking at Therese for effect to succeed in making her laugh. "So," she began as she filled two disposable cups with grape juice from the dispenser, handing one to Therese before raising her own, "I'm instead going to make a toast with the closest thing I can get to wine.

By this stage, Therese could hardly contain herself, as evidenced by the humoured bouncing of her shoulders and her stifling her laughter by biting down on her lower lip, but joined Carol in raising her cup. "To our Alaskan adventure!" Carol said, soundlessly clinking her cup with Therese's before taking a sip. "Jesus, this is so bad with the juice and the fucking solo cups," she said, disappointingly shaking her head at what she thought was a rather sad attempt at making what should have been a fitting toast.

"No, it's perfect," Therese said, her hand gently but insistently squeezing Carol's lower arm as her eyes danced with wonderment. Carol could only smile around the brim of her cup at the woman in front of her.

Chapter End Notes

Props must go to Win7Wil for hitting the nail on the head about why Carol was upset. I can never pull the wool over your eyes :)

Let me know what you think about this chapter or the fic in general by dropping a comment below. Cheers guys :)
Something unexpected

Chapter Notes

Well, having just woken from my food-coma, I decided to post this chapter. I don't know about you guys but I felt as stuffed as the turkey I cooked yesterday :)

I hope you all enjoy the chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carol

Tuesday 17 October 2017

Carol and Therese sat in the hotel's communal dining room the morning after their dinner with Amka and her family, drawing more than a few lingering looks from their predominantly male dining mates, some subtle while others were overtly indiscreet. They were left well enough alone, though, as they enjoyed some surprisingly good coffee and tucked into their breakfast.

"I don't know how I'm actually able to eat again after last night's dinner. I honestly thought that meal alone would tide me over until we left," said Carol, reminiscing about the succulent chunks of caribou bathed in the stew's rich sauce as she chewed on her piece of rye bread topped with scrambled egg.

"I know, right? I felt like I rolled into bed last night after the amount of food I ate. It was all the so good, though, especially the caribou. I'd have that stew for breakfast if it was offered to me right now. We definitely need to take Amka up on her offer to have dinner with her again," Therese responded before taking a bite of her whole wheat toast smeared with salmonberry jam, a delicious new variety to her which she was relieved to find had not an ounce of salmon in it.

"That was more of a command than an offer, don't you think? But, yes, we must go back. And, if not for the incredible food, then for the company. I think I'm going to have to try smuggle Amka into San Diego when we go back because that woman is just too wonderful to leave behind. I'm also sure little Miki and Nanuq would just love seeing you again. They seemed really taken by you last night," Carol said. As am I. She admonished herself for such a thought over while taking a sip of her coffee. However, she couldn't prevent snapshots from the previous night from flinging themselves to the forefront of her consciousness, forcing her to stop her lips from curling into a dopey smile.

Therese smiled unabashedly at the mere mention of their names. "They were so cute. Miki kept kissing my cheeks and making those adorable gurgling sounds babies make. Nanuq was a bit more shy, though, but I eventually got him to talk. And, then he just didn't seem to stop," she said with a laugh.

"Really? I don't know about that because every time I looked, he just seemed to be staring at you with a rather glossy-eyed look on his smiling face. That boy definitely has a crush on you."

"You think so? I don't know. He did give me one of his bracelets if that means anything."

"He did?!"
"Yeah, look," Therese said, pulling up the sleeve of her sweater to reveal a simple woven leather bracelet.  

"Ha! That's practically a marriage proposal, right there!" Carol enthused to make them both shake in their seats with laughter. "You're so good with kids, Therese. Like last night with Miki and Nanuq and then also with Rindy. You just look so at ease around them."

"Yeah, I think to some degree I am. I mean, I always tried to be nice to the kids at the Home, especially the little ones, because a lot of them weren't treated that well before they got there. So, I guess that's influenced how I interact with kids now and how I treat them," Therese explained with a shrug, her attention more focused on her next bite.

"What do you mean by “the Home”?"

Therese's hand stalled as she went to put down her slice. Her chewing slowed to a laboured pace before appearing to swallow with great difficulty, all the while never casting her eyes up to Carol. "Oh, um … I … I grew up in a children's home," she explained in a small voice that thickened as she mentioned 'children's home'.

"Oh...I'm sorry. I… I didn't know, Therese" Carol admitted, diverting her own eyes so neither looked at the other. The admission and the dramatic change in mood it brought about stunned her into silence as she flailed in her uncertainty of what to do next. A lengthy, stifling pause stretched on between them before Carol finally chanced at breaking it, casting an exploratory look back up at Therese before doing so. "Can I...Do you want to talk about it?" Her question was close to inaudible to her own ears but was received by Therese as if by loudhailer, seeing the younger woman's body tense after its asking.

"Yes," came Therese's eventual answer. Carol immediately wanted to take back what she'd said upon hearing the short but overtly tremulous response, but was prevented from doing so when the younger woman spoke again, this time in a steadier voice, "Not here, though." She finally looked at Carol, her eyes now exuding her trepidation and utter vulnerability, but something else, though, almost a conviction of sorts.

Therese led them outside after they'd collected a few reinforcements against the harsh elements, namely their jackets, beanies, and gloves. The frigid air, a mere 18°F that morning, bit at Carol's exposed face, making her lips chap and her eyes water almost immediately. But, she didn't complain, not when Therese seemed oblivious to the cold. They made their way along Colleen Lake in silence, the crunch of compacted snow underfoot being the only sound accompanying them as they went. Carol walked close enough to Therese so their sides occasionally brushed, perhaps in the false hope of staying warm but more so to let the younger woman know she was there, that she would wait until she was ready to talk.

"I was 8 when my mother took me to the Order of St. Margaret Children's Home," Therese started out of the blue, her voice clear, controlled even. "My father had died a few years before and -I don't know- she just...she couldn't deal with me after that. Not because I was a handful or anything like that -I don't think- but rather because she was too busy trying to get her life back together, you know?" She paused for a beat or two before finishing, "Busy trying to build a new family."

Carol could almost hear Therese swallow as she prepared to continue. "I went back to live with her for a bit after she re-married but it...it just felt all wrong, you know? Like I was an imposter around my own mother and even more so around her new family....So, I went back to the Home because, for me, that was my real home. She'd come visit me every now and then while I was there, but I just felt...i just felt the damage was already done, like I had one foot out of the door already, you know? I just...I couldn't stand to see her pity me like she did...Things only got worse after that until I
eventually asked her to stop visiting me because I just...I just couldn't take it anymore," she explained unsteadily around the deep, shaky breaths that peppered her speech. After a pregnant pause, her now small voice cracked as she said, "I gave up on her being part of my life just like she gave on me being part of hers." Her footsteps halted almost immediately after as she just stared ahead along the path.

Carol hesitantly approached her, almost like she was a wounded animal, and gently placed a hand on her shoulder as to not startle her. Therese broke from her pained reverie to walk into Carol, slipping her arms in the gap between her sweater and puffer jacket to tightly embrace the older woman. Carol reciprocated by looping her arms around her tiny body to bring her as close as possible to her. Even through the thickness of her many layers of clothing, Carol could feel the younger woman's fingers bite into her back as she was held ever tighter. There were no shuddering sobs from Therese, though, no whimpering, no croaked wails, nothing of the sort. All she did was hold onto Carol, not loosening her grip for a second, perhaps fearing Carol would break their embrace if she did so. But, she wouldn't. Not until she knew Therese was ready to part.

After a few minutes of standing huddled together against the bitter wind that blew off the lake, Therese slowly backed up just enough for them to comfortably look at each other. She still held onto Carol, though, balling her thick cable knit sweater in her fists as she downright refused to completely break contact. "That's why I have a hard time believing in myself and when others believe in me...Because, she didn't believe in me enough to think that I could be part of her life," Therese said in a soft but ultimately clear voice.

Carol looked into her eyes, seeing in them the most absolute expression of melancholy, the clarity of which went straight through her heart. She placed a gloved hand on Therese's cheek and said, "I'm sorry, baby," the term of endearment rolling off her tongue with ease and without alarm. She held her gaze for a few moments longer, hoping to communicate the incommunicable, before embracing her again, this time with her cheek coming to rest atop the younger woman's beanie-clad head that was nestled against her chest. "Thank you for telling me, Therese. I know that wasn't easy for you," was uttered some time later, after innumerable tight squeezes from the younger woman.

Carol thought she heard Therese say, "You make it easier for me." She couldn't be sure, though, not when her hearing was dulled by her snug-fitting beanie and the wind swept words away from their intended target. She wouldn't ask Therese to repeat herself, though. Doing so would be for her own selfish interests, not for Therese's. And, that was all she cared about, what was best for Therese.

Therese eventually disentangled herself from Carol to now stand back from her with her hands buried in the very depths of her parka's pockets. Carol felt the icy air rush in to fill the void Therese had left, making her zip her jacket up in an attempt to prolong the warmth she felt while comforting the younger woman, both physically and emotionally. They stood apart surrounded by a stifling silence, neither catching the other's eye, neither knowing how to proceed after their weighty conversation.

Therese was somewhat withdrawn for the next few days but without cutting herself off from Carol entirely. They still talked but without much banter nor the flirty undertone that was typical of their conversations. Carol didn't push her, rather allowing Therese to come back around in her own time. Some unexpected changes occurred in the meantime, though. It was as if Carol saw Therese mature right before her eyes as she shed the restraints on her self belief to finally assume a quiet but undoubted confidence. This was most noticeable to Carol with regard to how the younger woman approached and conducted their meetings and interviews with various potential sources. She was direct without being forceful, succinct when expressing how she understood what she was being told without omitting pertinent information, she was unruffled when questions were thrown back at her
without her appearing affronted or indignant. She acted with utmost professionalism while also taking on a new steel of sorts which Carol immediately recognised as having seen in some of her highly acclaimed mentors and peers. There was no hemming and hawing in their meetings, she knew what she wanted to ask, and more importantly what needed to be asked, and she did so without hesitation or her previously characteristic bouts of overpowering uncertainty. And, although Carol had yet to see whether Therese's writing would mature in turn to show signs of her newfound confidence and steel, she would lay money on that being the case.

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**Thursday 19 October 2017**

Carol was finally rewarded with Therese's dimples on Thursday when they met with a local biologist who knew the best spots to glimpse at the wildlife living in and around fracking and drilling sites. Therese was nothing short of awestruck when they happened upon a cross fox, a melanistic colour variant of the red fox, stealthily stalking a hare on a snow-covered patch of tundra. Its black-grey fur gave a luminescent quality to their cadmium yellow eyes, creating an almost strobe light glow as they tracked the hare's movement. Carol watched Therese snap away as the younger woman tried her utmost to not startle either animal as they competed in a battle of wits. A beaming Therese practically bounced up to Carol as she returned from her impromptu photography session, her dimples almost crepuscular ray-like as they shone through the melancholy that had clouded her countenance of late. And, with that, Carol began to feel lightness begin to return to her.

Frank, the biologist, drove them out to just a few of the thousands of lakes speckling the land and the surrounding areas to see the native birdlife, comparing those where it thrived with those adversely affected by fracking. They learned that the effects of fracking extending beyond its transformation and fragmentation of the natural habitat, namely how anthropological sound pollution was negatively affecting their behaviour, communication, and reproduction, and was likely to worsen with an increase in fracking in the region. The deluge of information was met with countless questions from Therese, some of which were related to fracking while others were purely to feed her abundant curiosity. Her questions only seemed to stop when they actually saw a bird. Despite most migratory species like the black brant, red-necked phalarope, and black-billed plover having already left for their wintering grounds in warmer climates, a few resident species remained, including the willow ptarmigan and iconic snowy owl. Every new species encountered had Therese tugging on Carol's jacket to share in her all too evident awe, with her beaming looks of absolute wonderment being exchanged for brilliant smiles from Carol. By the end of the day, the younger woman's cheeks were bound to ache from the amount of smiling she did.

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Things went back to normal between Carol and Therese soon after that as they fell back into that familiar comfort zone around each other. They spent their days trying to gather as much possibly useful information from anyone and everyone by interviewing anti-fracking activists and meeting locals while occasionally subtly questioning a few natural gas and oil company workers that happened to be staying at their hotel. They were reasonably pleased with what they'd achieved before Sunday which marked their last day of work because Amka would be taking them to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the country's largest and wildest wildlife refuge, the following day before flying back to San Diego early on Tuesday afternoon.

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**Sunday 22 October 2017**

The dining room was teeming with hungry, rather haggard looking men on Sunday evening, the number of gawking gazes from their quarters thankfully having decreased by this stage. But, there were still a few who allowed their gaze to inconspicuously linger on Carol and Therese as they took
their seats at a table tucked into a quiet corner.

"You know I'm really going to miss the food up here. It's so simple and unfussy. I feel that everyone in California is trying to outdo each other with how complicated they can make a dish. Like this, how many places in San Diego cook their fish as simply as this?" Therese asked as she tucked into her fork-tender baked salmon.

"I know what you mean. Everything is so dressed up you can't even taste the fish's inherent flavour anymore. I swear to God it would not be a day too soon if I were to never see another tuna poke bowl or sushi burger in my life," Carol concurred before savouring the mild-tasting, melt-in-your-mouth flesh. "This is how my dad used to like his fish. Just simple or, as he used to call it, "no bullshit". It was the only way he would cook the fish we caught."

"We? You fish?" Therese asked, both of her brows shooting up in surprise.

"Please try sound less surprised, Therese," Carol deadpanned.

Therese giggled with her mischievous dimples revealing themselves to an ever appreciative Carol. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I just … I wouldn't have pegged you as the fishing type," she said with a voice that had to fight through her laughter.

"I will have you know that not only do I know how to fish, I know how to scale, gut, fillet, and skin a fish," Carol triumphantly replied before rewarding herself with a forkful of her salmon.

"Really?"

"Yes. My dad taught me when I was growing up," Carol answered with a shrug of nonchalance before going on for yet another bite. She found Therese watching her when she looked up once more, her shining green eyes silently encouraging her to elaborate.

Oh, okay She straightening up in her seat for what could prove to be a long story before continuing, "My dad was a US Attorney for the western district of Washington state when I was growing up, which meant he was a very busy man with an extremely stressful job. So, when time permitted, he'd escape from Seattle to just unwind. And, more often than not, unwinding meant fishing, usually at Eunice Lake, Mineral Lake, Ross Lake, and a few other places around the state."

She paused to take a sip of water, noticing how Therese was paying rapt attention with her dinner now forgotten before her. "When I was very young, he'd leave me and my sister with our mother while he went off to fish for a few days. And, that was fine until I got a little older, when my mother just became unbearably controlling and smothering. I remember I just had enough the one night and, by happenstance, my dad was going off to Ross Lake the next morning. So, I woke up hours before dawn the next day and packed a bag because I was determined to get away from my mother for a little bit. It wasn't a fool proof plan nor one I had particularly thought out but it was the only one I had. Anyway, my dad didn't ask any questions when he saw me waiting at the front door, he just took my bag, loaded up the car, and we left," she said with a rather wistful smile. "He taught me how to fish that day, took me to his favourite spots, and he even showed me how to build a fire when we got back to the cabin, just for the hell of it, you know? I think having two daughters he'd almost given up hope on ever doing anything like that. Needless to say, there was a lot he wanted to teach me," she said, chuckling lightly at the memory of her sitting dumbfounded at the lake's edge as he expounded on the different types of lures one could use when fishing for trout.

Her wistful smile made its appearance soon after, though, before she continued, "But, we actually talked, I honestly think for the first time ever. He was never very talkative at home, you know? It's kind of difficult when your wife dominated all conversations around the dinner table or at dinner
parties. So, I always felt that even though he was my dad, I just...I didn't really know him." She noticed Therese's features soften into an expression of absolute understanding.

"I only realised that weekend just how alike we were and that was honestly so relieving for me...I'd always felt so different to both my sister and my mother, like they were cut from the same cloth and I just wasn't. I wasn't interested in acting in a manner that was expected of me. I wasn't interested in having my thoughts and opinions dictated to me by someone else. But, my mother always tried to instill the exact opposite in me. And, the more I tried to resist, the harder she'd come down on me and it was just so...exhausting." She paused for a beat as she cast her eyes down. "In the end, I needed those trips away just as much as my dad did," she admitted in a small voice. She wasn't aware that she'd been tearing at her napkin until she saw a tiny pile of shredded paper before her.

She leaned back in her chair to fold her arms across her chest, almost to comfort herself. "So, despite my mother's protests, fishing became my dad and mine's thing. He would tell me all of his adventures from his childhood while we caught Steelhead, German Browns, Smallmouth bass, basically anything that would bite. What I liked most about our fishing trips was that he'd let me talk about things I was interested in -you know? things my mother thought I shouldn't care about or shouldn't want to discuss. And, he'd actually listen to what I had to say. He never dismissed my thoughts or opinions like my mother did, but would rather challenge me, have me think about things subjectively, have me come at things from another perspective, to have me always ask questions ... It's because of him I became a journalist," she said, her voice lowering to a whisper when making the simple conclusion which, in her mind, was the absolute truth.

"He sounded like a great dad."

Therese's gentle voice brought Carol back to the present, her monologue having taken her back deep into her past, and with it, she realised just how much she'd said. Her eyes darted back up to the younger woman in alarm, but the picture of sentimental beauty that greeted her immediately evaporated the fear and vulnerability she'd typically feel upon her revealing so much about herself. "He was," she concurred with a gentle smile.

Therese reciprocated with a smile of her own, this time with her dimples hiding from view. It was still a smile Carol would not tire from seeing, though, simple but tender and heartfelt. "Have you taught Rindy how to fish?" Therese asked.

Carol's smile lit up her entire face, her eyes brightening at the mere mention of her daughter. "I have, actually. Harge is a city-boy through-and-through with no real interest in doing anything even remotely outdoorsy, which meant Rindy wouldn't have that father-daughter bonding experience I had. I wasn't going to deprive her of an experience I cherish so dearly, though. So, I took her fishing instead, but not without considerable griping from Harge's mother. She thought little girls shouldn't go fishing, or do anything that could get them even remotely dirty for that matter," Carol said, rolling her eyes at her former mother-in-law's ridiculousness with the younger woman doing the same.

"Anyway," she continued, "I took her to Lake Table when she was maybe 5 or 6 and she had an absolute blast. I was very rusty so it took us a long time to catch anything, but when we did, her face was absolutely priceless. I should still have the picture of her with her first fish." She paused to rummage in the pockets of her jacket before her pulling out her phone. "Ah, here she is with the largemouth bass she caught." Carol showed Therese a picture of a tiny, rosy-cheeked Rindy, her floppy hat-clad head craned high above her bright puffy life vest, with the biggest, toothiest smile adorning her face as she proudly held up a striped olive green fish.

Therese made an unintelligible sound typically elicited when seeing something particularly cute.
"She's too adorable, Carol."

"She is, isn't she?" Carol said with a wide smile. She looked at the snapshot of that treasured memory once more before returning her phone to her jacket pocket.

"It's really great that you've kept that tradition you and your dad had going with Rindy."

"Yes. It makes it all the more special to me," Carol agreed. They sat smiling at each other for a few moments before almost simultaneously realizing just how quiet the dining room had become. They looked around to find the room almost empty with the hotel's cleaning attendants wiping down the now unoccupied tables. "You really need to tell me to stop when I talk for that long," Carol said to Therese.

"Never."

Their day spent at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge with Amka was nothing short of spectacular. After they'd hiked along a sluggishly flowing stream of slush, they found themselves immersed in a wilderness rarely seen or experienced by anyone. Expansive plains of white tundra spread out all around them, the frosted peaks of the Brooks Range creating the most picturesque of backdrops for what already was breathtaking scenery. They then drove north toward the coast, encountering countless herds of caribou and gigantic muskox scattered across the stark flats as they went. It was there that they were even so lucky to see, from a comfortably safe distance, a polar bear feeding on a whale carcass. To say that the day was special would not be doing it justice, with Carol putting countless snippets from it into memory, many of which simply consisted of Therese's dimpled smile as she gazed around them in wonderment.

Their day of departure was a teary one, not particularly for Carol or Therese but rather for Amka and little Nanuq, the latter undoubtedly having tagged along to see Therese one last time. Amka's usually joyful disposition was replaced by a downcast one as soon as they pulled up to the airport. Carol tried to change her mood by dragging her into a selfie Therese was trying to take with her, the unexpected surprise of which brought out the woman's eye-crinkling smile they'd grown to love in their brief time in Prudhoe Bay. Profuse thanks were given in exchange for bone-crushing hugs from Amka and promises were made to keep in touch before Amka and Nanuq made their way back.

After some griping from Carol, Therese finally managed to take one last selfie of just the two of them. The image was almost exactly the same as the first with the same side-to-side and head-to-head pose and their matching wide smiles, the sun being only slightly higher than before. And, yet, things were different between them, things were even better between them.

Chapter End Notes

Now, I know these two chapters covering Carol and Therese's time in Alaska may not particularly have been what you anticipated or wanted, especially with more than a few of you hoping that something would happen between them. But, honestly guys, I wanted the trip to be one of discovery and growth for them both individually and collectively. That, for me, was more important for where I'm taking this story than any quick coming together could have been. Besides, our ladies take their work seriously and so a business trip would be just that with a little bonding thrown in. I sincerely hope you guys will understand my wanting them to get even closer and more "in the feels" for each other because it will make their eventual getting together all the more special. I
really hope you'll stick with me to see how their story unfolds.

Let me know your thoughts on the chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Cheers, guys :)

P.S. For those of you that celebrated Christmas, I hope it was everything that you wished it would be and more. And, for those of you that didn't celebrate Christmas, I hope your day was still filled with chilled vibes and happy times :)
Chapter Notes

So, the parts between asterisks (*) are to show text emojis.

Cheers, guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carol

Wednesday 25 October 2017

The travel time back to San Diego was considerably longer than their journey to Prudhoe Bay, an exhausting 14 hours in total. Carol and Therese talked about everything and nothing on their flight to and brief layover in Anchorage and then again on their way to Seattle. But, as the clock ticked past midnight during their extended layover in Seattle, they began to wane, becoming almost zombie-like as they boarded their last flight before home. It wasn't long after takeoff that both succumbed to their overwhelming exhaustion to slip effortlessly into a deep sleep. During the plane's descent, Carol awoke to find Therese still sound asleep with her head resting against her shoulder, her eyes fluttering ever so lightly in her slumber while her lips parted with little puffs as she rhythmically exhaled. A blanket draped across their bodies cocooned them in a comforting and intimate warmth. Carol couldn't help but feel her chest swell at the sight, at the feeling, simply at being like this with Therese. I could get used to waking up like this. They arrived in San Diego a little after 5 on Wednesday morning where they parted from each other with one last laboured hug that had them both clinging to the other for support.

Carol slept until mid afternoon, feeling ever thankful that Tim had given them the day off to, as he put it, "shake the snow out of their ears". After a quick grocery shop and unpacking of her luggage, she sat down that night with a glass of wine to start sifting through her notes from the trip, carefully perusing page upon page of her mostly neat script. She knew she wouldn't be able to get through the two notepads worth of information along with the pile of documents given to her by various sources they'd interviewed, but welcomed the distraction it gave from the stifling quiet of her empty home.

Around nine-thirty, her eye was drawn to something out of the ordinary on the back of one of the pages. Upon closer inspection she saw it was a neatly drawn cartoon of a smiling, sunglasses- and top hat-wearing pickle standing beside a jar labelled "AVERAGE PICKLES" in which other smaller, sad-faced pickles lay. The caption below read, "YOU ARE KIND OF A BIG DILL" with a smiley face at the end. Carol chuckled at the sketch and at Therese's playfulness. She reached for her phone to message the cartoonist, accompanying it with a picture of her humorous piece of work.

Carol > You know, it's funny. I don't remember drawing this nor do I have any idea what it possibly relates to ...

A few minutes passed before her phone chimed into life.
Carol chuckled at Therese's candour. She thought back to a rather long meeting they'd had with one Tommy Tucker, an anti-fracking activist who had flown out from Barrow just to meet with them. He was a lanky, bespectacled man in his early 30s whose sunken eyes somehow still managed to protrude forward as he looked intently between them. He expounded on the true extent of gaseous emissions from fracking as succinctly as one could, his prosaic manner of speaking giving him an almost robotic quality that made him look and sound like the lovechild of The Big Bang Theory's Sheldon Cooper and C-3PO. The conversation got sidetracked about two hours in when Tommy began listing, in great and tedious detail, every ultramarathon and ice marathon he'd run across Alaska and the Arctic and Antarctic, respectively. Carol initially found the topic highly intriguing, but her interest waned soon after his monologue went beyond the three-quarters of an hour mark. His eager eyes, suddenly almost boastful tone, and more confident and forward body language meant only one thing: he was trying to impress one or perhaps both of them. She found his not knowing his attempts were falling on her deaf ears rather amusing. But, she thought Therese was more engaged in the conversation with the younger woman even going so far as to ask him a few questions. Now, though, Carol knew Therese wasn't nearly as interested as she'd seemed at the time.

Carol giggled not unlike her daughter had done when around Therese. She could almost picture Therese covering her eyes as she tried to not relive the memory. She herself didn't want to think about that particular story, nor many of the others for that matter, for fear of being buried by their mundane details once more.
Carol > Okay, that was the story. Now, tell me the truth, please

Therese > Well...I never had the chance before to tell you I think you're kind of a big dill. But, now I have

She snorted at the reply as a dopey smile began to tug on her lips.

Carol > You're very punny, Therese

Therese > Wow, that was pretty weak joke, Carol *winking face*

Carol > I know. I regretted it as soon as I sent it *facepalm*

Carol foolishly thought about trying to continue with her work but her fingers moved of their own accord as they began tapping away again.

Carol > How was the rest of your day?

She chewed on her bottom lip, her stomach suddenly aflutter with anxious excitement.

Therese > Pretty relaxed. I slept for longer than I care to admit. Then I did the usual mundane tasks you do after returning from travelling, like unpacking and laundry, in the afternoon. I then decided to order in for dinner and now I'm reading through my notes. Or, should I say, I WAS reading through my notes *winking face*

Therese > And, you? What have you been doing since we got back?

Carol > Much the same as you. I don't remember how I got into bed but I woke up there at about 3. Then, I did some grocery shopping because all I had in the house were some crackers and a few bottles of wine. And, now I WAS summarising my notes before you distracted me *winking face*

Therese > It's a nice change, isn't it? Having me distract you for once, not the other way around

Carol > But, I like distracting you, Therese *smirking face*

Therese > I know! And, you're very good at it

Carol felt her stomach wring itself at the short but ultimately unnerving message. If only she knew
just how much she distracts me. Not wanting to delve into what she'd possibly done to distract Therese previously nor how easily she herself was distracted by the younger woman, as evidenced by their current exchange, she typed another message.

Carol > What did you end up ordering for dinner?

Therese > Because, I'm part of the "selfie generation" and we take pictures of every meal we eat, I'll show you what I had for dinner

The image that came through immediately cracked Carol up, making her throw her head back to allow a laugh that emanated from deep within her to fill the quiet around her. It was of a fork and spoon set atop an empty dinner plate with the remnants of what appeared to be a red sauce of sorts smeared all over its surface. She bit her lower lip to steady her guffawing as she replied, shaking her head in the meantime at Therese's cheekiness.

Carol > Therese! *crying with laughter*

Therese > *crying with laughter* *crying with laughter* *crying with laughter*

Therese > That was pappardelle arrabbiata about 15 minutes ago. That's large, very broad, flat pasta in a spicy garlic and tomato sauce.

Carol > I know what pappardelle arrabbiata is! I'm not that much of a food novice *rolling eyes* *smirking face*.

Therese > I'm sorry. I don't know how much you know about food nor how well you can cook

Carol > Well, whose fault is that?! Have I not offered to make you dinner before? And, I'll have you know, I cooked myself dinner tonight, unlike some people I know ...

Therese > Touché

Carol > You know you're awfully bold over text?

Therese > I know. That's what happens when I'm in the safety of my apartment and after I've had a couple of stouts

Carol > Pasta and stout? Do they even go together?

Therese > They sometimes can go quite well together. But, in this case they really didn't. I swear it was like drinking liquid tar. You had wine, you should have invited me around

Carol flushed at the thought of their sharing what would have been quite a romantic dinner together. Don't be ridiculous. She only said that because you had wine and she didn't. She wasn't actually inviting herself over for dinner. She doesn't actually want to have dinner with you. The comment had succeeded in knocking Carol off-kilter, though, as her thumbs stalled above the keys. Before she
could even begin to type the reply she'd finally managed to formulate, another message from Therese popped up.

_Therese > As much as I've enjoyed this little break, and I really have, I think we both need to get a little more work done so we've at least got something to tell Tim tomorrow_

Carol replied within seconds despite feeling disappointment already beginning to gnaw away at her bliss.

_Carol > That's very wise of you, Miss Belivet. And, you're absolutely right_

_Therese > Goodnight, Carol_

_Carol > Goodnight, Therese_

_Therese > Sweet dreams_

Carol sat reading and rereading the last message long after Therese went offline, knowing full well it would be all she would see before her closed eyelids as she tried falling asleep that night.

_Thursday 26 October 2017_

Carol arrived at Tim's office first thing on Thursday morning to find Therese already seated before his desk. He'd emailed yesterday asking to meet with them to give feedback about the trip and to gauge the value and usability of the information they'd gathered. After last night's conversation with Therese, Carol managed to read through and summarise all her handwritten notes into key points while also making note of a few things she wanted to run past Tim. She was reasonably satisfied with what she'd accomplished when she turned in for the night, especially considering she had another 500 odd pages worth of documents to still read through which had the potential of yielding a deluge of useful information. "Morning," she said as she breezed in, giving Therese a squeeze on her shoulder before take a seat beside her.

"Hi!" Therese enthused, generously putting her dimples on full display for an ever appreciative Carol as she greeted her. "How are you?"

"Very, very well, thank you. I feel rested, refreshed, and ready to get back to work. Just don't tell Tim that," Carol replied, concluding with a conspiratorial whisper to make the younger woman giggle. She vaguely heard herself ask, "How are you doing today?" but was honestly too busy watching Therese's dimples somehow deepen still further as she grinned.

"I'm doing really well, too, and feeling very rested. But, to be perfectly honest, I don't think I could have felt less rested than I did yesterday. You know I fell asleep twice on the way home from the airport. I'm also pretty sure I paid $200 for a taxi ride that usually costs about $90 because I was just too tired to actually notice how much the fare was at the time. But, I don't really care because I'm just too happy that I feel human again," Therese joked with mirth beginning to twinkle in her eyes.
Carol chuckled with Therese, feeling more at ease than ever around the younger woman, a feat she deemed nigh on impossible given the level of comfort she'd felt around her while up in Alaska. She watched as Therese leaned down to rummage through her bag in search of something that was evidently well hidden in its depths, appreciating her sublime jawline, the gentle curve of her cheekbone, and the utterly alluring contrast of her dark tresses against her fair skin. She forced herself out of her reverie before she could get caught staring by joking, "I don't know about you, but I really enjoyed not having to put 16 layers of clothing on this morning."

Therese started laughing with her head almost buried in her bag. "Same here. I'm sure you also enjoyed us not having to see each other for more than 24 hours," she teased as she straightened up.

"Never," Carol replied, shooting a wink at Therese and, as ever, getting the desired response from her, a profuse blush and a rather vain attempt at hiding her bashful smile. The younger woman's eyes returned to Carol a moment later and this time didn't shy away from looking at her. "What?" Carol asked. She began to feel somewhat warmly self-conscious as she watched the slow pulling of Therese's lips into a smile.

"Nothing." Therese shrugged, her dimples appearing for far too brief a moment, as she maintained their eye contact. "I just like those glasses on you."

"These?" Carol asked, pointing at her pink-framed aviators, offering herself a much needed distraction from such a comment and that gaze. "Rindy chose them for me. She doesn't go for pink all too often but she seemed to really like these for some reason. So, I decided to get them." She smiled, remembering how adamant Rindy had been about helping her choose her next pair of glasses, with the then 7 year old settling on the most ridiculous looking pair in the optometrist's office.

"Well, Rindy certainly knows what looks good on you."

The somewhat innocuous compliment managed to somehow short-circuit Carol's brain, stunning her into a silence that had her flailing at how best to respond. Thankfully, Tim came in the very next moment to bring an end to her abeyance. They dove straight into giving him a brief rundown on everything about the trip, from the accounts by locals on the effects fracking had had on their day-to-day lives to the trends in the concentration of pollutants in Prudhoe Bay's freshwater supply since the commencement of fracking. He was nothing short of delighted with the information gathered, complimenting both Carol and Therese on their work done thus far. He suggested they, along with Dannie and Richard, meet again the following Wednesday, to discuss the progress of the piece as a whole and to plan the way forward. And, with that, they slipped back into their work.

Friday 27 October 2017

The rest of Thursday and Friday passed without too many hassles nor any further incidents. Carol kept herself busy by going through the documents she'd been given, finding more than a few tidbits of information worthy of inclusion and further investigation. Carol's plan for a quiet Friday was soon turned on its heads when Dannie convinced her, along with Therese, to go out for a few drinks as a welcome back of sorts. Neither believed the drinks were solely to celebrate their return, but both agreed nonetheless.

A little after 8 that night, Carol, Therese, Tim, Dannie, Louise -Dannie's now official girlfriend- Richard, Phil, Jeanette, Jermaine, and Alice arrived at La Puerta, taking up a long, high table near the restaurant's entrance with a view of the Gaslamp Quarter's bustling Fourth Avenue. After the first round of drinks, Carol and Therese spent much of the night telling the table about their trip with everyone quickly coming to the conclusion that they all wanted Amka in their lives, while enjoying
the establishment's delectable selection of quesadillas, tacos, enchiladas, tostaditas, and loaded nachos.

Carol found Therese, dare she say, more flirty towards her as the night wore on, especially after Tim left to appease his no-nonsense wife. The younger woman seemed to lose some of her inhibitions after a couple of glasses of wine, with Carol noticing how her glances lingered for longer, how her statements were more forward, how her body language showed her obvious interest. Carol even caught her staring at her lips a few times, most noticeably whenever she went to lick or bite them, something she'd deliberately done to track the wanderings of Therese's eyes.

Feeling emboldened by Therese's behaviour, Carol decided to test the waters, only doing so after tossing back the rest of her drink. She slid her foot down Therese's calf, disguising the movement as a supposedly innocuous switching of positions of her crossed legs. She watched as Therese snapped to attention, her eyes immediately locking onto her own with an intensity that made adrenaline flood her system to send her heart into overdrive until she heard it thud in her ears. Wanting there to be absolutely no misinterpretation of her intent, Carol cocked a perfectly shaped brow before boldly going forth by rubbing her foot up Therese's calf and then repeating the motion at a painstakingly slow pace down again. The simple but usually highly effective action had the desired effect as she saw the younger woman's throat visibly undulate under the force of her swallow and her nostrils flare, all the while never breaking eye contact. A bubble of electric energy sealed around them, effectively reducing the table's chatter and the ambient tumult to white noise, allowing them to bask in the intensity of their stare down. The slightest but most deliberate of smirks that began to form on Therese's enticing lips left Carol fighting to control her increasingly shallow breathing, the force of which made her chest heave. Any semblance of control Carol had left was obliterated a moment later when Therese briefly ceded eye contact with the slight bowing of her head before she flicked her eyes to look up through her lashes at Carol. Finally sensing her opportunity, Carol leaned in to the younger woman, delighting in the flash of her eyes to her rouged lips once again, before whispering in a sultry voice she knew few, if any, had ever been able to resist, "Do you want to get out of here?"

The thickness of the surrounding air suspended the question between them as it waited and begged to be answered.

"Therese!"

And, with that, the vacuum around them was infiltrated by their reality, the intense eye contact they'd shared being broken as both diverted their attention to the source of the interruption. Carol saw a beaming Amazon of a woman stride past their table to enter the restaurant before going to hug Louise and Dannie. Carol could only watch on as the woman kept her eyes locked on Therese on her walk over to their end of the table all the while the slyest of grins quickly grew on her lips.

"Hi, Therese," the woman said as she leaned down to give Therese a kiss on the cheek and a hug. Although their embrace was fleeting, the stiffening of Therese's body, along with the nervous shift of her eyes over to Carol that followed, succeeding in planting a fast-growing seed of doubt in the mind of a hawk-eyed Carol.

"Hi, Gen," came Therese's reciprocated greeting. "Uhhh, Carol, this is Genevieve. Gen, this is Carol," she said, her hands awkwardly motioning their introduction.

Genevieve tore her eyes away from Therese to land on Carol with her features noticeably transforming into a look of surprise and less than discreet appraisal. "Pleasure to meet you, Carol" she said, offering up her hand as her dark eyes bore into the woman she addressed.

"Likewise," Carol said, forcing out both her reply and her smile. Genevieve's handshake was firm but the caress of her finger on the back of her hand was anything but.
"Louise messaged me saying you guys were having dinner near by and I just couldn't resist seeing you again," Genevieve said to Therese as she took a seat beside her.

Carol felt the green-eyed monster rear its ugly head at Genevieve's familiarity with Therese, at her forwardness towards Therese, even at how she casually draped her arm across the back of Therese's chair. Any jealousy she felt, though, was almost immediately replaced by a feeling of utter inadequacy, with a pang of disappointment slicing through her for good measure. How can I compete with a woman like this? She ruefully took in Genevieve's toned shoulders that were left exposed by her off-shoulder bodycon top, the subtle definition of her abs that was noticeable even as she sat forward, and a muscular thigh that revealed itself from below her skirt as she went to cross her legs. As if her physical attributes weren't enough to extinguish Carol's now flickering glimmer of hope, everything about Genevieve seemed to ooze sensuality, from the way she spoke, to the delicate tattoos that adorned her olive skin, to her tactility as she talked to Therese. Left with no other alternative but to concede defeat, Carol swallowed back the bitterest of disappointments before calling on all the skills of etiquette she'd learned as a teenager to try maintain a reserved countenance through the remainder of what would undoubtedly be a painful exchange.

Therese nervously looked at Carol, her wide eyes silently pleading with Carol, but this time she'd steeled herself to it, attempting an almost indifferent look in return. "I-I meant to call you but I've been really busy and I, um, I also went to Alaska... For over a week, actually," Therese explained to Genevieve, stumbling over the words as if she'd never said them before.

"Alaska, huh? Is that your not so subtle way of avoiding me?" Genevieve playfully teased before quirking a brow at Carol.

"No. I-I really did. Right, Carol?" Therese replied as her gaze shifted across to Carol once more. The direct question begged a response from Carol and so, she gracefully acquiesced. "Yes, that's right. We only got back on Wednesday actually. We just needed to defrost ourselves a bit before we could successfully integrate back into Californian society," she joked, sending a reassuring but ultimately forced smile Therese's way as she did so.

"Well, I can think of one more way to get Alaska fully out of your system. Louise, Dannie, and I are heading to the Onyx Room for some drinks and a bit of dancing. You keen?" Genevieve asked.

"Carol and I were actually about to-"

"Never mind that now, Therese. Please go on ahead without me," Carol interrupted, trying her utmost to not allow her voice to be dulled by the overpowering dejection she felt.

"But, I-" Therese tried addressing Carol but was interrupted once again.

"Come on, Therese. Carol's given you her blessing. Come out for at least one drink. Come on, please? You know we'll have a good time together," Genevieve interjected with a slight cock of her head to the side.

Carol kept her eyes trained on Genevieve this time, knowing full well Therese would look her way again. She couldn't bring herself to meet her eyes, though, being too scared to see the pity that would inevitably lurk in their green depths.

"All right. I suppose one drink can't hurt," Therese answered.

The undeniable hardness of her voice that was most unlike Therese dragged Carol's eyes back to the younger woman. This time, though, it was Therese who refused to meet her gaze, instead choosing
to focus her attention on Genevieve. Carol noticed the subtle but definite setting of Therese's jaw and the tightening of her mouth as the younger woman sat listening to Genevieve babble on about something. The younger woman's indifferent demeanor added the final layer of ice under Carol's skin, making her sardonically congratulate herself for preventing any further embarrassment by her coolly rebuffing Therese.

"Please, excuse me," Therese said stiffly a few moments later before leaving the table.

Carol's eyes followed her as she went before eventually realising that she herself was being watched by Genevieve. "Are you sure you don't want to join us, Carol? Because, I wouldn't mind spending a bit more time with you tonight," Genevieve enquired, her eyes ablaze with flirtation.

The audacity of the woman was the last straw for Carol and served to spark her into action. "Thanks, but I actually need to be going. It was lovely meeting you, though," she hastily and half-heartedly added. She said a round of quick goodbyes to the rest of the table before managing to make good her escape before Therese returned.

She was about 50 meters away from the restaurant when she heard Therese call out her name. Feigning oblivion, she continued on, neither speeding up or slowing down her pace as she went for fear of raising any additional suspicions. As her voice grew ever louder, though, she knew she had to stop and face the problem head-on. She turned to Therese as she approached, taking a moment to calm and steel herself as the space between them shrank.

"Why did you leave like that?" Therese asked before she even came to a stop in front of Carol, her voice already having taken on an edge.

"I just felt it was time for me to leave," Carol said, hearing a foreign voice that sounded weak, defeated, and devoid of truth speak for her. Despite her resolve to stay strong she could barely bring herself to look at Therese, knowing one look into her eyes may be all it would take to spell the end of her weak semblance of composure.

"Why?"

"I just did."

"You just did? That's fucking bullshit, Carol! Why did you leave like that?"

Carol saw the sudden flash of anger in the younger woman's eyes and agonised at how it contorted the rest of her features. She knew her intended response would only add fuel to the fire but felt there was no alternative, not wanting to delve into exactly why she'd left so abruptly in front of Therese.

"Leave it be, Therese," she said gently before turning to walk away.

Therese ran ahead and stopped in front of her to effectively block the way forward. "You're just going to leave like this without even talking to me? You're telling me you've got nothing to say to me?" she asked, her voice breaking during the deliverance of what was an almost desperate plea.

"Please, just leave it be," Carol pleaded herself.

"Carol, please just talk-"

"Drop it, Therese!" Carol exclaimed, setting her own blazing eyes on Therese as they sparked into life. "I'm fine. Just, go enjoy the rest of your night, okay? I'm sure Genevieve will see to that," she said. She grimaced at the bitterness of her tone before feeling the shame at letting such a thought escape begin to devour her.
"Carol, Genevieve and I are-"

"Enough, Therese!" Carol roared, making the younger woman shrink under the ferocity of her command. She saw the hurt pooling in the green eyes she'd thought she'd always want to look into, but, in this moment, she wanted nothing more than to flee before the image imprinted itself into her memory. Not trusting herself to say or do anything to repair the damage at that moment, she stepped around Therese and continued on down the sidewalk, with the younger woman this time not doing anything to stop her.

Chapter End Notes

Fucking Genevieve, right?

For those of you that couldn't quite picture the cartoon Therese drew, here's a link for what it looked like:
https://i.pinimg.com/736x/fc/62/f2/fc62f29059c6edbf88cc7ba5dc8248a--corny-jokes-food-puns-funny.jpg

Let me know what you guys thought about the chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below :)
Chapter Notes

Happiest of New Year's to you all! I hope you had as rad a time bringing 2018 in as I did :)

When it's mentioned, give Party Monster by The Weeknd a listen to while you're reading. It may help you get a better feel of the scene and how it unfolds.

One last thing, everything happens for a reason...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Saturday 28 October 2017

Therese squinted one scratchy eye open to see a beamed ceiling slowly come into focus above her before gingerly following suit with the other. The rapidly crescendoing throb in her temples that soon followed, though, made her screw them tightly shut to try hide from the pain. She laboriously swung her legs over the edge of the bed before straightening up at a painstakingly slow pace so as to not exacerbate her pounding headache with a sudden and nauseating change of direction. She then grimaced as she attempted what was the driest of swallows with her sandpaper-like tongue scraping against the roof of her mouth. With considerable effort, she dragged herself off in search of water, feeling like a haggard nomad arduously crossing the most desolate of deserts in search of an oasis, with her eventually and quite literally stumbled upon a bathroom. She steadied herself against the door frame, fighting hard to not fall victim to gravity and the shifting floor below, before entering and sliding the door across with great and uncoordinated difficulty. She lunged, or something to that effect giving her present state, at the basin to greedily guzzle what felt like litre upon litre of water.

After sating what she thought would be an almost insatiable thirst, Therese's breath caught in her throat as she finally saw her naked body in the mirror. Even in her groggy state she could see the clearly defined trail of love bites that traversed her collarbone and snaked its way over the swell of her breasts before looping around each nipple. The sight sobered her up quicker than any amount of Gatorade ever could with a familiar pleasurable ache between her legs now vying for her attention. She brought the tips of her fingers to her nose and was hit the distinct and engulfing scent of another woman on them. Fuck.

Snapshots from the previous night began flinging themselves to the forefront of her mind with every thud of her now hammering heart, prompting her to seek confirmation of whom she'd slept with back in the bedroom. She slid the bathroom door open as quietly as possible and crept toward the rumpled bed from which a hand and foot peeked out. She gently lifted one corner of the bed sheet shrouding the woman's body to reveal a pair of toned olive legs, rounded cheeks of what was an equally toned ass, an intricate mandala tattoo covering one hip, some major sideboob embellished with their own selection of deep purple love bites, and finally up to defined shoulders. She knew who it was without needing to see the face buried between the pillows. Genevieve. Shit.

She hastily barricaded herself in the bathroom once more before putting her head below the tap to allow the water to run through to her roots, hoping that the shock of cold on her scalp would shake
the last of her disorientation. Droplets of water trickled uncomfortably down her spine and through the valley of her breasts as she then sat on the shockingly cold tiles. She began to shiver, the hairs of her body now standing to attention in search of any heat to trap and warm her, but she merely hugged her knees in what was now a heightened state of awareness and replayed what happened after Carol left last night.

She watched Carol walk away and never once look back her way before seeing her turn down an adjoining street to disappear altogether. She stood there a while after, the shock of what had abruptly transpired between them having rendered her unable to move, until she felt an arm sling around her shoulders.

"Hey, T. The girls were worried about you so they sent one of the men to make sure you're all right," said Dannie in a deeper voice than usual as he puffed out his chest in what was an exaggerated display of stereotypical masculinity. "You still coming?"

"Huh?"

"To the Onyx Room? You still wanna come for a drink and to do a little jig?" he joked.

"Yeah. Let's go do a little jig," she joshed in return without feeling remotely jovial but bumped his hip in return in what ultimately was a forced act of geniality.

After meeting up with Louise, Gen, Richard, and Jermaine they made their way to the Onyx Room. Conversation was had as they went without Therese's involvement nor her hearing what was being said. Their voices hybridised with the coming and going tumult of passing bars and restaurants and the sound of Friday night revellers walking the streets in search of more good times. The resulting static allowed her to get lost in her thoughts. How unceremoniously Carol had left after what was the most ill-timed of interruptions by Gen. How Carol ignored her pleas for them to talk. How Carol snapped at her, the ferocity of her voice and intensity of her glare making her cower. How they could go from flirting to her receiving the coldest of rebuffs and placating.

She felt the anger and bitter disappointment rise like bile at the back of her throat with every step, and so she resolved to get drunk as quickly as possible in the hope of ending the night sooner rather than later. They gained access to the club relatively quickly and miraculously found a vacant table soon after, almost as if the universe was for once assisting her in her aspirations for the night. She knocked back a double shot of tequila and a kamikaze with everyone before ordering herself a whiskey tonic. She'd barely finished the first before she was ordering another, then another, and then two more for good measure. She returned from her last trip to the bar to much pomp and circumstance, with a round of loud whistles coming from Dannie and Richard, a congratulation of sorts for her being on a mission to get drunk. She chuckled at them as her buzz finally spiked, feeling her inhibitions being discarded one by one as the alcohol worked its way into her system with her rage and regret being worn down in the process. She had succeeded in numbing herself and now waited for the night's end.

For the first time since arriving, she turned her attention away from her drink out to the packed strobe light-lit dance floor. As if by an act of divine intervention, the crowd parted to give her an unobstructed view of the catalyst of her present state, the interrupter that was Gen. As she watched the seductive sway of her hips, the way she ran her fingers through her hair, and how provocatively she danced with men and women alike, Therese felt something grow within her. It was something she'd felt in La Puerta after Carol had run her foot up and down her leg without breaking their intense eye contact, an arousal which instantaneously flamed up within her. She wanted Carol then and knew without a doubt she was wanted in return. But, she couldn't. Carol's fleeing had seen to that. She still wanted something, though, only this time she just wanted to fuck. No, she needed to
fuck or to be fucked by someone, something her inebriated self foolishly thought would make her forget Carol.

Almost as if being able to hear her desirous thoughts, Gen locked eyes with her and gave her a less than private personal show with her piquant moves somehow more seductive than before. Therese's breathing laboured at the sight as her heartbeat began to drum rhythmically in her ears. The subtle throbbing between her legs she'd felt for Carol had burst into life once more with an intensity that would undoubtedly leave her arousal escaping through the delicate material of her thong. One final hair flip from Gen as Party Monster by The Weeknd started broke the last of her resistance. She downed the rest of her drink before determinedly striding onto the dance floor whereupon she grabbed Gen's hand and pulled her off the dance floor without a word. They walked to and entered the restroom, completely ignoring a few women who were taking advantage of the vanity's good lighting for a spot of selfie-taking, before Therese pulled Gen into a cubicle with her.

Gen's hot mouth was on hers before the lock for the door was even bolted with her tongue aggressively seeking access to her own. She obliged without hesitation to allow their tongues to enter in a battle of pleasure while their heated breath mingled in the void of their melded mouths. Her arousal leapt within her as Gen tugged her head back to allow the woman to lick and nip her away along her neck. She countered by driving Gen back against the door before parting her toned thighs with a single jut of her knee. Gen immediately dropped the few necessary inches to grind down on Therese's bare thigh, the sudden contact of which made her relinquish her mouth's wet hold on Therese's neck to allow a loud gasp to escape. Therese promptly silenced her with another all-consuming kiss that reunited their eager tongues. She then balled Gen's skirt in her fists and hastily tugged upwards, leaving it bunched around her waist to allow for unencumbered grinding gyrations. She felt Gen's already abundant wetness soak through her underwear to make her thigh slick to both touch and movement. She brought her knee up higher as she forced greater contact with Gen's heated core. The resulting cacophony of pleasured moans that was elicited from the woman reverberated between their mouths and around their sliding tongues.

*Ooh, she mine, ooh girl, bump and grind
Ooh, she mine, ooh girl, bump a line*

Therese tugged Gen's bottom lip with her teeth as she dragged her mouth away to trail wet, open-mouthed kisses and less than gentle bites down the length of her neck, across her exposed collarbone, and still lower. She yanked her top down to expose more of her delectable torso with a single breast popping free from its tight confines in the process. She beat gravity to the punch by taking Gen's pierced nipple into her mouth mid-descent, alternating between sucking in earnest and swirling her tongue around its edge. The loud, staggered moan that escaped Gen's begged for Therese's attention as she went to resume the heated kiss that made their noses mash together and their teeth clink and clash. By this stage, Gen was breathing into her mouth in hard, erratic bursts all the while her legs trembled uncontrollably, telltale signs of her imminent orgasm. Therese quickly removed her thigh and went straight to pulling Gen's drenched thong to the side before nimbly entering her with lubricious ease. She curled her two fingers to gently massage the bundle of nerves nestled in the crevice of the heated silken inner walls in which they currently luxuriated while she insistently pressed the heel of her hand against Gen's slick clit. A flash of metal caught her eye making her quickly suction her mouth onto Gen's nipple once more to appease its and her own wanton need. The triple pleasure assault brought about a slew of unintelligible whimpers from Gen before she whined, "Fuck, Therese." The motion of Therese's fingers and mouth stilled immediately upon hearing the cry. The voice wasn't who she wanted it to be, it wasn't Carol moaning her name,
it wasn't Carol's nails leaving tracks of passion across her back, it wasn't Carol who she was bringing to a rapturous release. She swallowed back the realisation and steeled herself to ignore what she really wanted.

Tell me lies, ooh girl, tell me lies
Say you're mine, I'm yours for the night

It only took a few forceful thrusts and the accompanying slamming of the heel of her hand into Gen's engorged clit to send the woman crashing over the edge and into a pit of ecstasy. She swallowed Gen's protracted moan, as she continued to search her heated mouth for her own pleasure. The rest of the night was a blur of blinding gratification with orgasms being given and greedily taken before the blackness of her inebriated state consumed her.

"Therese, are you okay?" came Gen's muffled voice from the other side of the door, her tone lowered somewhat by her recent state of slumber.

Therese shook her head to dissolve the last of her reflection. "Y-yeah. Um...I'll be out in a sec," she replied after coughing to clear her thick throat. She grabbed a towel from the rack to dry where she'd sat and her body, finally removing the barrier against warmth and reality that had coated her skin. She was confronted by Gen's body in all its naked glory upon sliding back the door, forcing her to, for once, divert her eyes upward. She was relieved to find not a hint of the lust from last night in Gen's eyes, instead seeing them shine with the full warmth of their brown depths.

"You okay?" Gen asked as she leaned against the door frame, her brows crinkled with concern. "You shut yourself in there like 20 minutes ago after you checked up on me."

"You knew I did that?" Therese guiltily asked.

Gen gave a short laugh before sending a knowing smile Therese's way. "Yeah, you kinda tugged the sheet out from under me as you hightailed it and then I heard you walk into the bureau," she said with a jerk of her thumb in the direction of the offending piece of furniture.

Therese blushed as she fiddled with the edge of her towel. "Ummm. About last night, Gen."

"Relax, Therese. Last night was just sex, right?" Gen casually asked as she went to slip on a short, black silk robe.

"Yeah."

"Good, don't worry about it, okay?" When no reply was forthcoming, Gen went to stand before her. She stooped to make eye contact before she gently started, "Look, Therese, I'm not gonna lie to you but I've wanted you since the moment I saw you and last night I could see you just wanted to fuck. And, that's exactly what we did. We fucked and we both got what we wanted. You have nothing to feel guilty about on your end and I sure as hell don't regret sleeping with you. Please don't overthink it, okay?" Gen squeezed her shoulders after getting a small nod in agreement from Therese before dropping her hands entirely. "I'm gonna make some breakfast because you made me work up quite an appetite last night," she joked with a light chuckle. "Do you want some? Wait, wait, wait...Before you say anything, you don't have to stay for breakfast if you don't want to."

"Uhh ... yeah ... Um, I really think I should go, if that's all right?"
"Of course. Let's find your clothes. I think I saw your thong around one of the leaves of my snake plant," she joked to make Therese cringe before they hunted for her haphazardly discarded items of clothing.

After leaving Gen's apartment embarrassingly clad in her dress from the night before, Therese laid low for the rest of the weekend, not because she was particularly hungover, but rather because she had some much needed thinking to do, Carol being the epicentre of her musings. She'd known for some time that she had strong feeling for Carol. Despite her best intentions to not have her strong initial physical attraction develop any further, she was powerless against the plethora of feelings for the woman which, if she was being honest with herself, had proliferated at an almost exponential rate since they'd met. She felt her stomach flutter and her chest suffuse with warmth every time Carol smiled that brilliant smile she loved, playfully winked at her, or called her some term of endearment. Although such feather-light feelings were delightful and utterly addictive, they did not represent the full depth and extent of what she felt for Carol. The absolute sense of comfort and security she'd felt with Carol when revealing things about herself from some of the deepest, most painful, and private recesses of her past and psyche was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, something that went beyond anything she'd previously experienced in companionship with another or otherwise. As a result, she found herself more willing to reveal her true, unvarnished self to Carol despite how confronting and terrifying it was. It was the overwhelming relief and buoyancy that flooded her immediately after which soothed the misgivings she'd typically have. She'd gotten taste of just how fulfilling and freeing it was to be that open with Carol and now found herself greedily wanting more. She thought back to her musings all those weeks ago about what she wanted and was looking for in a partner and now realised just how inadequate her conclusions were. She now knew that not only did Carol meet her every criteria, she opened her eyes to others she didn't know she cherished and valued so highly. Simply put, it was Carol who she wanted.

The profuse elation Therese felt upon making such a realisation was quickly sullied by trepidation, fear, and a paralysing sense of foreboding that came to linger in the back of her mind. She knew harbouring feelings for Carol have the potential to spell serious trouble for her, especially if the current trajectory of their growth were to be maintained. Having such feelings was worrying in itself given that they worked closely together, something she valued greatly since the very beginning, but it was the volcanic nature of those feelings that both shocked and scared her. The thought that her feelings for Carol may never be requited set in like ice under her skin. That was until she remembered how Carol's eyes would flutter and divert on the occasions Therese caught her staring. She thought about the way Carol's eyes softened whenever she spoke candidly about her childhood and battles with her self-belief. Carol's expression of utmost tenderness whenever she watched Therese and Rindy together didn't go unnoticed either. All pointed towards Carol at least having some feelings along the same lines of Therese's.

What happened at La Puerta confirmed her suspicions. Although Therese was the one who, after a few glasses of wine, had been shamelessly but ultimately harmlessly flirtatious toward Carol, it had been Carol who had boldly rubbed her foot up Therese's calf. The want that instantaneously flamed up within her then was mirrored in Carol's eyes and was stoked still further when asked if she wanted to get out of there together. That was until Carol's behaviour turned on its head after Gen's most unfortunate and untimely interruption. The initial sting of Carol putting down her attempt to keep their plan of leaving together was quickly followed up with the sucker punch that was the older woman's cool indifference towards her. The change in Carol's demeanor astounded her into a detached numbness that had her almost unconsciously and begrudgingly agreeing to go to the Onyx Room. She didn't have slightest intention of actually following through with it, though, with her resolving to wait for the opportune moment to present itself so she could slink back home for some alone time that she hoped would quell her abject disappointment. She'd recalled escaping to the restaurant's bathroom to try recenter herself. Her calm didn't last for long as her anger spiked upon
finding Carol had unceremoniously left whilst she was gone, making her then storm outside to confront the older woman. Her rebuffed attempts to talk to Carol thereafter cut straight through her, finding her own willingness to talk about how she felt whenever Carol probed her at complete odds with the walls Carol had immediately and so comprehensively put up when challenged to express how she felt and what was bothering her. But, it was the stark and utterly crushing contrast between what almost happened between them and how things were left between them that eventually sent her reeling into Gen's all too willing and eager clutches.

Despite the overwhelming guilt Therese felt about sleeping with Gen, guilt she though was somewhat unjustified given that nothing had actually happened between her and Carol, she resolved to have the older woman initiate any conversation between them. If she wanted to explain herself then she would have to be the one to talk first. But, Monday came and went, as did Tuesday, without their sharing a single word or a glance that lingered longer than absolutely necessary. Both were particularly mean feats considering they shared an office where their desks were spaced less than 10 metres apart and the fact that they were working on a story together, but they managed to avoid each other with relative ease. Dannie had perhaps also seen and felt the prevailing awkwardness and tension between them at work and thankfully refrained from engaging them in conversations together. And, so, their standoff continued.

Wednesday 1 November 2017

Therese stood taking less than healthy drags of her cigarette on the roof at work on Wednesday afternoon, finding it oddly therapeutic to watch the smoke appear before her eyes before dissipating into nothingness. She'd escaped for one last smoke before the fracking meeting that was to start in about thirty minutes time in the hope the nicotine fix would quell the utter dread she felt. She found herself at a complete loss for how to approach it and how to best conduct herself given the stifling awkwardness between her and Carol. Her apprehensive musings, though, were interrupted when she heard approaching footsteps coming from behind her. She knew who it was without having to look. Carol. She didn't turn as she heard her near, instead choosing to keep her eyes focused on the valley's mosaic of greenery.

"Do you mind if I smoke with you?" Carol asked as she appeared beside her more than an arm's length away, her voice soft and lacking the usual smokiness the younger woman loved.

Therese looked sideways to find Carol's blue-grey eyes clear and calm. Her body language exuded trepidation, though, from the furrow of her brow, the fidgeting of her hand as twirled her lighter, to the restlessness of her mouth that appeared conflicted between adopting a hard line and attempting what undoubtedly would be a strained smile. Therese nodded her assent before returning her gaze to the valley.

"Can we talk?" Carol asked after a beat.

Therese glanced at her only to find her looking beyond the building's edge with her cigarette held unused between her fingers. She diverted her own eyes once more before saying, "That depends. By "we", I hope that means you're actually going to let me talk."

"I deserved that," Carol admitted as she turned to face the younger woman.

Therese stopped herself from retorting in agreement, knowing that doing so would not help the dialogue Carol was trying to establish. So, instead, she turned to stand face-to-face with Carol. She hoped her eyes would, for once, not betray her in projecting her emotions, while she willed herself to maintain a cool control. She noticed Carol's unlit cigarette sat in the breast pocket of her shirt with the older woman's attention now wholly on Therese. "I think you should start," Therese said firmly,
surprising herself with her straightforwardness. She discarded her cigarette before folding her arms across her chest as she waited.

The fluttering of Carol's eyes suggested she, too, was taken aback by Therese's hard-line approach. "R-right, yes" she stammered. Therese saw the subtle tense of her jaw as she swallowed hard before she finally outed, "I'm sorry for what happened the other night."

"What exactly are you sorry for? Because, I've been trying to figure out what the hell happened and I just can't," Therese challenged in an even tone. She didn't know where this directness had come from but she wanted to see where it took her.

"I'm sorry for leaving the way I did."

Therese stared in dumbfounded silence at Carol after what was a pathetic start of apology by her. What was most astounding, though, was that she could see the older woman herself hardly believed what she'd said and yet incredulously went ahead with it. "You think I'm upset about the way you left?" Therese asked, hearing a bitter, sarcastic voice speak for her. "You know you're kinda right but let me explain to you why I'm really upset. I'm upset at how one second you were asking me if I wanted to leave with you and then the next second you pushing me away. I wanted to leave with you but you rebuffed me. I'm upset at how you acted towards me after we were interrupted. You acted like I wanted that interruption to happen, like I was glad we were interrupted, when that couldn't be further from what I wanted. I'm upset that you snuck away from the restaurant just so you could avoid me. Because, that's exactly what you did, you wanted to avoid me. I'm upset that you shut me out when all I was asking was for you to talk to me. That's all I fucking wanted from you. I'm upset that you shut me down when I tried talking to you, when all I wanted to do was explain myself about Gen," she finished with her now level tone remaining so throughout her elaboration. She'd noticed Carol looked almost apologetic as she spoke. That was until she mentioned Gen whereupon Carol noticeably tensed and set her jaw.

"Okay, you wanted to explain yourself about Genevieve. Tell me this, did or did you not sleep with her?" Carol asked in a voice that was suddenly cold and steely in its hardness. Her icy tone was juxtaposed with her fiery eyes that now bore into Therese.

The unexpectedly direct question left a flabbergasted Therese in stony silence. She met the ferocious gaze that would typically make her shrink and this time held it. "That's all you've got to say to me? After everything I just said to you? Really? Jesus Christ, Carol! All you want to know is if we fucking?" she bellowed, her voice now dripping with indignation, as she set her own blazing eyes on Carol. Feeling at a complete loss for an appropriate response, she started pacing back and forth in the hope of calming herself. She stopped after a while and walked right up to Carol, stopping mere inches before her. "What if we did sleep together? Does it even matter to you?" she asked. Her voice faltered ever so slightly during the deliverance of a question she never hoped to ask, both for her sake and for Carol's, but resorted to doing so in the hope of getting reaction out of the older woman.Tell me it matters. Tell me you care. She looked searchingly into Carol's eyes, hoping to exact a truth from their blue-grey depth. She saw hurt subtly soften her eyes before unmistakable vulnerability crept to the fore through their weakened defenses.

It didn't last long, though, as Carol turned away to light her cigarette. She cast a few furtive glances Therese's way as she took deep, unhealthy drags but never ventured to respond. And, with that, Therese snapped back to reality as she watched Carol put her walls up to shut her out once more. She exhaled deeply through her nose and shook her head at what she'd foolishly hoped would be the beginning of Carol opening up to her. She shrugging her shoulders in defeat before saying in a voice that was so absolute in its ruefulness, "You can't even admit it." She looked into Carol's eyes one last time, hoping to communicate her own truth, before she turned on her heel and made for the roof's
"It matters to me, Therese," came Carol's loud, clear voice from behind.

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me. Okay, you can hate me but just know that it will all be worth it soon.

Feel free to comment below on what you thought about the chapter or the story in general.
I struggled quite a lot with this chapter. I wrote it ages ago but when it came time to do a bit of editing over the last few days, I ended up redoing just about the whole thing. So, my apologies if this chapter is a bit rough around the edges. I do still hope you'll enjoy it.

Cheers guys :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Wednesday 1 November 2017

"It matters to me, Therese," came Carol's loud, clear voice from behind.

Therese stopped mid-stride with her extended leg now held awkwardly before her, Carol's short but confounding interruption having knocked her off-kilter before flinging her into abeyance. She didn't move, hardly even dared to breathe too loudly for fear of missing anything said further. But, not a word more was forthcoming as Carol quietened almost as abruptly as she began. The pause that now stretched on and on between them was stifling in its quietness. It made Therese feel like she was choking on Carol's word along with everything she'd ever wanted to say to Carol but couldn't or daren't. She knew she wouldn't survive for much longer as the deafening silence quickly began to overwhelm her. She attempted a deep, calming breath that staggered out of her as she prepared to face the catalyst of her current inner turmoil, doing so despite knowing it may cause her yet more anguish.

She finally turned to find Carol standing bolt upright with her tensed shoulders at complete odds with her arms that hung limp at her sides. There was an unreadable stillness to her face, her usually expressive countenance muddled with an amalgamation of what looked like shock, worry, terror, and a hint of exhilaration. Her eyes were on Therese, but they seemed to stare right on through her, perhaps searching for something, anything, to say. But, she remained silent.

Only once Therese advance toward Carol a few moments later did the older woman snap out of her trance whereupon her expression softening to one of relieved recognition. "Therese, I … you see … I just, uhhh … when I … uhh … you are … I have … I want to...You make me, uhhh...Fuck!" Carol stammered, the concluding expletive being the only clearly spoken part of what was a thoroughly erratic sentence, or perhaps more accurately, her attempt at one. She looked skyward with her arms akimbo as a rumbling of indiscernible mutterings escaped from her. After a drawn out sigh and the sagging of her shoulders, her gaze returned to Therese. "I'm really fucking this up, aren't I?" she asked ruefully, her clear eyes reaching out to Therese in their pleading. Regret and dejection noticeably transformed her features as an almost unfathomable defeat was conceded. She slumped back against the boundary wall and ceded eye contact when she loll'd of her head to the floor.

Therese slowly but surely went to a now crestfallen Carol. She fought the urge to crack her knuckles or run her fingers through her hair as so often is the case when her anxiety spikes, instead forcing herself to ball her fists at her sides as she fought to remain calm. She came to mirror Carol's pose.
against the wall, side-by-side, both with their hands now buried deep in the pockets of their slacks, neither facing the other. "We're both fucking this up," she said thickly. Despite the whirling pit of despair she felt herself being sucked into by her admission, she couldn't help but meet Carol's gaze as she turned to her. She knew the truth of her sleeping with Gen and the unshakeable guilt that continued to gnaw away at her would be all too obvious to see in her eyes, but she simply could not hide it, not after Carol had comprehensively knocked her off-kilter moments earlier to strip her of any steel she had. It was excruciating for her to see Carol's countenance cloud over with realisation and hurt. She felt dread immediately begin to consume her as she waited for the inevitable erecting of the walls that would shut her out forever. But, the older woman's features inexplicably softened a moment later as she assumed an expression of pained tenderness, a look that suggested utmost understanding. Therese finally outed with the breathe she'd been holding before swallowing back her anxiety. "Carol, please talk to me," she pleaded gently.

"I know it doesn't seem like it, but I'm trying, Therese. I really am. It's just … talking about things like this isn't easy for me...especially about how I feel ... It's something I've avoided doing for a long time," Carol admitted quietly, her speech punctuated by deep inhales and exhales.

The slight quiver in Carol's voice and the unmistakable fear that exuded from her eyes made Therese's breath catch in her throat. She had to fight tooth and nail with herself to not wrap Carol in hug right then and there, one she hoped would somehow erase all that had transpired between them since Friday night, because she knew a quick fix like that just wouldn't suffice. "Why do you avoid it?"

Carol flinched at the hushed question's asking before a deep sigh worked its way out of her to make her body slacken once more. "It's easier, I guess. It's easier than having to face the music about how I really feel. I got so used to it during my marriage that I'm now having a hard time changing that part of me." Her eyes strolled over Therese's face while she spoke before almost daringly meeting her gaze. A weak smile briefly graced her lips before being pulled into a sad line once more.

"I'm sorry, Carol. It's just...I feel like I'm flailing in the dark here...Because, I don't know what's going on with you," she said in her own tremulous voice.

"How could you, though, Therese? I'm not nearly as open with you as you are with me. I'm not nearly as brave as you are to lay everything bare and just say how I feel," Carol passioned in a strained voice, her eyes now clear with absolute belief. It lasted but a moment, though, as sadness made them fog over. "I want to be more open and brave. You make me want to be, Therese. I want to talk to you and tell you things and tell you," she was briefly stopped by the strength of her hard swallow before she maintained eye contact as she continued, "And, tell you how I feel about you... I know I have absolutely no right to ask you this, but please give me a little more time to figure out how to do that in the right way? Because, I want to, Therese. Please believe me when I say that. I want to because I don't want to fuck this up, not this." Her voice had thickened once more, this time with earnestness, but remained level throughout.

After a moment of serene stillness, Therese felt her heart kick-start to send blood violently coursing through her, the now repeated thudding of her heartbeat in her ears insistently forcing coherence out of her mind. Her ribs seemed to expand and contract around her lungs with great, irregular bursts of force, like she was being played by a hyperactive accordionist. Her eyes widened as she looked into Carol's where she attempted to decipher the thousands of, as yet, indiscernible words she knew lay trapped and hidden within their blue-grey confines. "Carol," she blew out. She was about to continue when Carol's phone suddenly shrilled into life.

Carol stared at Therese for three whole rings before the fluttering of her eyes brought her back to reality. Her hand noticeably trembled as she went to answer her phone. "Hi …I'm on the roof …
Yes, she's here with me … Okay ... Okay...No, that's all right. We'll be down there in a minute," Carol said to the floor. She cleared her throat before continuing, "Dannie. Uhh, he was just wondering where we are because the meeting is about to start. I think we should get going." The apologetic smile she'd undoubtedly forced on faded as she began to turn away from Therese.

Springing into action, Therese tugged her back by a single belt loop. "Hey," she said as she stooped her head to meet Carol's downcast eyes. "You haven't fucked this up, okay?" Her tone was soft but uncompromising while her eyes shone with an earnestness she hoped would convince the older woman that what she'd said was the absolute truth. She flashed her dimples for good measure, something she hoped would bring about what she so desired, Carol's smile. The simple act did not fail her as she watched the slow curl of her lips into a jaw-droppingly beautiful smile.

Carol opened her arms to envelop Therese in a tight hug. Her warm breath wound its way into the younger woman's ear as she whispered, "Thank you, Therese. Thank you so much, darling."

They broke apart a moment or two later with both now trying to hide their rather bashful expressions by looking at the ground. "Shall we?" Carol eventually offered with a butler-like bow and doff of an imaginary hat that brought out a wonderful giggle from Therese. The younger woman answered by pulling on Carol's shirt sleeve until they fell into step together, their arms brushing all the while as they exited the roof.

The meeting she'd been dreading since she arrived at work on Monday went smoother than she could have hoped. The air that previously seemed to vibrate with tense energy whenever her and Carol were in the same room together gave way to a sense of utter relief that flowed between them. Much like a perfectly proven bread dough, though, things didn't spring back to normal immediately, instead only doing so gradually. But, it did happen. After a few glances and shy smiles were exchanged, they shared in a comfortable professionalism which had them feeding off one another during the meeting, where they bounced ideas off each other while occasionally making a few suggestions the other had yet to consider; before settling into an overall familiarity that put them both at complete ease.

By the end of the meeting, the scope and objectives of the fracking story were more clear and precise than ever with Tim pushing them to aim for its completion by mid-December for inclusion in the January issue of PRNT. Therese almost kicked herself immediately after when she had to pass up going for a drink with Carol and Tim, now regretting more than ever her decision to go with Xander on a late afternoon hike in the Torrey Pines State National Reserve. She'd agreed without hesitation when asked a few days ago, with memories of the panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and the windswept cliffs making her fingers itch to capture yet more of the reserve's natural beauty one moment at a time on camera, but now wanted nothing more than to spend the evening getting into a comfortable place once more with Carol. The beamed smile goodbye Carol shot her way before she left had feeling a strange combination of elation and longing, with the former in the end proving too much for the latter to last.

That night, after she'd successfully tackled the Broken Hill Trail and came away with the winnings that were her pictures of anything and everything she'd found exquisite, she sat in the windows seat of her apartment and did what she always did while seated there: think. Unsurprisingly, Carol had assumed the position of the nucleus of her reflection once more. Her simple but heartfelt admission and plea unequivocally proved to Therese that her feeling for the older woman were not unrequited. She now knew with absolute certainty that the smouldering want in Carol's eyes on Friday was not a fleeting attraction that just happened to spark into life. The realisation imbued her with a sense of buoyancy that made her feel like her physical body was tethered to the ground while her mental being soared high above. To say that she was on cloud nine wouldn't be far from the truth.
It was that exultation that had her bounding out of her seat to grab her phone, as she went to rather boldly ask Carol if she'd like to grab a drink tomorrow or Friday night. She scrolled through the list of open chats to her one with Carol, finding it had fallen down some way since Friday. She clicked to enlarge Carol's newly updated profile picture, where the older woman sat with Rindy perched on her lap, the young girl, clad in a grass stained soccer uniform, having slung an arm around her mother's neck while she held a soccer ball in her own lap. They appeared to be sharing in a hearty laugh with their mirthfully crinkling eyes on each other instead of focusing on the camera. Therese could not help but smile at the image that was perfect in its simplicity and at the joy and love that was palpable between the mother and daughter.

Her achingly wide smile began to fade the longer she stared at the image, though. *Rindy. That's why she needs to figure things out.* She admonished herself for making such a crucial and foolish oversight that had allowed her desire for Carol to run wild, especially now given the unquestionable possibility that something may happen between them. But, that was all it was: a mere possibility. She knew Carol simply could not and would not dive into a relationship without giving it considerable thought beforehand because it wouldn't just be her entering into it, but rather her and Rindy. It wasn't a matter of Carol having to choose her over Rindy either, but rather whether Carol thought her worthy or not of inclusion in her and Rindy's lives in that way. The fact that anything had yet to happen between them sent her flailing into despondency. But, it was the realisation that, as yet, she simply wasn't worthy of getting involved with that ripped her asunder. The all too familiar feeling of inadequacy came to cover her skin once more like a wet blanket, cold, heavy, and difficult to shake off. It was something she'd felt whenever her mother visited her at the Home, that she simply wasn't worthy of inclusion in her new life.*She just doesn't like me enough to want me in her life like that.* She typically would have chastised herself for such an adolescent thought but it was the most straightforward way to describe what she thought to be the absolute true.

She lay in bed that night with her mind still awhirl with her troubled thoughts. Only when she thought of Carol's plea and of all the glances, smiles, laughs, comforting hugs, and the memorable times they'd ever shared was she able to still her inner turbulence and fall asleep. Before doing so, though, she realised she would have to cling onto those moments with all her might as she waited and hoped above all hope that something would happen between them. She knew she would do it willing, it was just a question of how long she'd be able to keep it up without losing herself.

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**Saturday 4 November 2017**

Therese stood before her closet trying to figure out what to wear to Carol's supposedly casual, as Abby called it, "little beach party get-together thing". Abby had come to PRNT on Thursday to take Carol, Tim, and Dannie out to lunch, the latter she'd fast become friends with after only just being introduced. After having to decline Abby's offer to join them, Therese agreed without hesitation to go to the party with Abby using the its plentiful supply of drink as her main point of persuasion, relishing the opportunity for some light-hearted fun and chilled time on the beach.

She put on and promptly tossed off a floral-print romper, a combination of boyfriend jeans and an oversized button up shirt, a stereotypical whimsical summer dress, and a polka dot shirt dress. After admonishing herself for overthinking such a simple task that had ridiculously lasted more than two hours, she settled on a deep-V grey t-shirt which she'd knotted at the front to expose a hint of her stomach above her rust drawstring shorts and finished off the look with a pair of strappy white sandals. She thought she looked like she was neither trying too hard nor too little, instead striking a good balance that made her look somewhat effortless. *Effortless? You just spent two hours trying to find something to wear before throwing on shorts and a tee. That's a lot of effort you put into looking effortless. You'll be fine. Everything will be fine. Just relax and enjoy yourself.*
She was greeted by Abby upon her mid-afternoon arrival at Carol's double-story home, the exterior of which exuded a minimalist vibe with its spectacular walls of glass and mix of simple wooden and white wall facade. She barely had time to take in the contemporary decor with subtle beach house touches before Abby dragged her out onto an expansive deck that overlooked the pristine, porcelain-coloured beach. Introductions were promptly made with Carol and Abby's friends whose professions ranged from the typical doctor and lawyer to an artisanal gin distiller and organic farmer.

She spotted Carol talking with a thin, bald man who towered over her and the disproportionately shorter woman who was attached to his hip. Carol's beach style oozed cool effortlessness, from her cuffed beige joggers and white button up shirt, the long sleeves of which were rolled to just below her elbow, to her sand-speckled bare feet. She stood absorbed in conversation with her wine glass held limply down at her side and her other hand casually tucked into her trouser pocket.

Abby didn't have to drag her over to the group she would naturally gravitate toward. "Therese, this is Bernard and Mary. Berny, Mar, this is Therese. She's an up-and-coming journalist at PRNT with Carol, definitely one to keep an eye on," she said, shooting a sly wink Therese's way as they shook hands.

Therese could see out of the corner of her eye that Carol was silently watching her. She finally turned to the blonde and quizzically asked, "I'm sorry, and you are?"

A wide-eyed Carol's jaw dropped as she gasped at Therese's cheek. She playfully slapped the younger woman's arm before closing the gap to hug her tightly. "You! And, you call me unbelievable!"

"You are. I'm just trying to up my game to your level," Therese said as they pulled back from each other, making sure her dimples were on full display with her devilish grin. The group laughed at the little exchange, but, to be honest, all she saw was Carol's nose-crinkling smile.

"Please, excuse me while I go teach Miss Belivet here a lesson. I mean, get her a drink," Carol joked with a shake of her head. She ushered Therese away with a simple press of her hand to the small of the younger woman's back.

They walked into a kitchen that left Therese green with envy. The counters were decked out in white marble, the grey veined expanse of which contrasted beautifully with the sleek black cabinets and the white smoked oak floors underfoot. A few potted plants that were scattered around the counter and atop shelves added refreshing pops of green and life to dull the sharpness of the glistening silver appliances. She couldn't help but look around in wonder.

"If it's not obvious, Abby likes to cover all bases when it comes to catering for everyone's tipple, so you'll be hard-pressed to find something you won't want to drink. Now, what can I get you?" Carol asked from beside the alcohol-laden kitchen island, to break Therese's awestruck reverie.

"Hmmm, what are you having?" Therese enquired as she slid onto one of the barstools, nodding her head as Carol took a sip of her wine.

"This? This is a Riesling. Here, give it a try," Carol said as she offered up her glass.

Therese's eyes flashed to where Carol had placed her lips before focusing on actually taking a sip without spilling. She hummed as her taste buds were awoken by the drink's almost perfectly balanced acidic sweetness which in combination with the relief provided by its fruity lightness made for thoroughly refreshing drinking. She nodded in agreement and was duly rewarded with a chilled glass of her own. "I'm glad I didn't end up bringing that bottle of whiskey because it wouldn't look like much among all that," she said after a sip, gesturing toward the ridiculously vast selection of
vodkas, gins, whiskeys, tequilas, rums, and brandy.

"I think a barrel of whiskey wouldn't look like much among all this," Carol deadpanned to bring out a hearty chuckle from the younger woman. "Besides, Abby would have flayed you to within an inch of your life if you did try bring anything."

"Oh, Abby doesn't worry me."

"Is that so?" Carol asked with an inquisitive arch of her brow as a smile began to play on her lips. "Speaking from personal experiences, I can tell you you do that at your own peril." She raised her glass in a toast of good luck as she winked at Therese.

"Well, I'm happy to take that risk," Therese replied with a shrug of nonchalance. "That reminds me," she said as she got up from her seat to leave the kitchen. "I didn't want to come empty-handed," she explained as she returned, handing Carol a Mason jar filled with a deep brown concoction that had a simple piece of twine wrapped around its neck with 'Carol' beautifully calligraphed on its tag. "It's whiskey maple bacon jam I made. I thought you'd like it."

"Wow! Thank you, Therese!" Carol beamed at the younger woman before giving her a quick hug. She flipped the tag over to read aloud, "Instructions. Step 1: eat jam. Step 2: enjoy jam. Step 3: try to not make too many loud sex noises when enjoying jam." Her voice cracked with amusement as she read the last step before she descended into a fit of laughter. "Well, you know, I just have to try some now," she said eventually before she plunged a spoon into the thick, sticky mixture. As expected, a drawn out moan escaped her lips upon tasting. Her shoulders sagged and knees buckled slightly as she possessively clutched the jar to her chest, all the while her eyes were closed in absolute rapture. "Therese," she drawled, exaggerating the 'z' sound more than ever before. "Oh my God, that's so good!"

Therese's mind quickly wandered to more lascivious thoughts at the display, but it didn't last long, as Carol gave her apologies soon after to go greet Tim and his wife Helen at the door before taking them to do the customary round of introductions. She ambled over to Dannie and Phil as they chatted with Susan, the owner of an organic root vegetable farm, and joined easily in their conversation. The afternoon soon became evening, the time being filled with the ebullient chatter had between Carol's old and new friends. After the sun had made good its descent for the day, everyone congregated, with drinks in tow of course, around a large fire Tim and Phil had lit down on the beach.

Therese took a moment to stare at the flames as they licked ever higher up the smouldering pieces of wood, making them crackle with pleasure and occasionally pop in rapture, appreciating the shock of colour it provided against the calm water's blue-black darkness that mirrored the clear night sky overhead. She didn't know how long she'd sat there for when Abby suddenly plopped down beside her and forced a Corona into her hand.

"I think Coronas are fitting when sitting around a fire on a beach, don't you?" Abby said.

"Absolutely! Hey, thanks for inviting me, Abby. This is a pretty cool group of friends you and Carol have here." Therese clinked her bottle with the other woman's in appreciation before taking a gulp of one of Mexico's finest exports.

"No, thank you for coming. I think it's good for Carol to have her friends from her old life mix with those in her new one. It creates that familiarity she likes and kind of needs, you know? And, what did I tell you about everyone loving you because you've already got a huge fan in Fred," Abby said, nodding her head toward the intellectual property lawyer as he chatted with Jeanette. "I practically had to shove a meatball in his mouth earlier just to shut him the hell up because he just wouldn't stop talking about you," she admitted with a wry shake of her head.
"Do you usually just shove food into people's mouths to shut them up?"

Abby hemmed and hawed for a moment before answering, "Occasionally." She gave a naughty grin, something she evidently shared with Carol, before continuing, "Sometimes it's easier to just kiss them, you know?"

Therese laughed at Abby's ridiculousness. "Yeah, I somehow don't think you would quite resort to kissing a guy just to shut him up," she joked.

Abby started with her characteristic bark of a laugh. "You're fucking right I wouldn't!" she vehemently agreed. "Besides, neither of us would much appreciate such a kiss because we're both about as straight as a corkscrew." She joined Therese in guffawing that shook their shoulders and made their eyes water over.

Therese's attention was eventually involuntarily drawn away when Carol came into her line of sight across the fire. She was captivated by the paradoxical blazing flames that danced in her icy blue-grey eyes, as she absentmindedly stared at the glowing timber. Carol looked up to lock eyes with her and held her gaze. Therese sat enraptured as she watched the grin that steadily spread across Carol's full lips until it matched her own.

"She likes you, you know?" came Abby's gentle voice to shatter her state of transfixion.

Therese forcibly dragged her eyes away to look at Abby, finding her bright but unreadable eyes watching her. She noticed that the older woman felt no need to point out who it was she spoke about, evidently knowing full well Therese would know. "Yeah, I do," she admitted as she diverted her eyes to the flickering sand before her.

"Why the hell haven't you done something about it, then? Because, I know you like her, too, Therese," Abby stated matter-of-factly.

"You know why."

"I don't, actually. So, please enlighten me," Abby challenged.

Therese looked sideways at her to see she'd assumed an expression of absolute curiosity. "I know I can like her as much as I want, but she'll have to be the one to initiate anything between us. But, she can't just act on how she feels either because she has Rindy to think about, you know? She won't just get involved with someone she only kinda has feelings for because she's probably worried things might end too quickly and that isn't the type of stability and consistency I know she wants in Rindy's life. If anything is ever going to happen between us it has to be because she really wants it and has given it enough thought." Her tone throughout was neither bitter nor regretful, instead sounding overwhelmingly rational, if not too rational. The explanation came easily to her, almost as if she'd practiced it time and time again, and yet the pain she felt with each point given was raw in its freshness.

After a pregnant pause, Abby quietly asked, "So, what will you do if that doesn't happen? If she doesn't try start something with you. What will you do then? Will you just ignore how you feel and try maintain whatever it is you have with her? Can you really do that? Are you willing to do that to yourself?"

This time Therese could not stop the dejection and melancholy that crept into her voice as she spoke and into her being at large, "What choice do I have, Abby?" She stopped as she tried to swallow back her imminently irrepressible feelings. "What happens if I were to try something and, and -you know? she doesn't want it and, and then that messes things up between us? Then what? I'd rather
have her in my life, however unfulfilling it may be for me, than to not have her at all."

"Okay, but, just how long do you think you'll be able to keep that up? How long do you think you can put yourself through that shit?"

"I don't fucking know, Abby," she stressed. She took a deep, faltering breath before continuing in a voice that began to break ever so slightly. "I'm sorry. I just … I really don't know. All I know is that it's getting harder and harder for me to be around her without desperately wanting something more...Because, every time, every fucking time, I just … feel." She stopped herself from saying anything further for fear of her unravelling at the seams.

After a long pause, Abby said, "I really don't know what else to say besides that I'm sorry, Therese. I truly am. It's not fair for you to keep having to do that to yourself. You can't go on like this, you just can't."

Therese merely shrugged in defeat before her eyes were automatically drawn to Carol once more.

Chapter End Notes

This may not have been the chapter you were hoping for but I felt the types of thoughts Therese had and their reactions would naturally follow such a conversation. I also wanted them to overcome this last hurdle.

Let me know what you thought about the chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below :)
Carol sat listening to Dannie and Tim weigh the pros and cons of growing moustaches, and beards alike, now that Movember had begun, including their personal struggles with either growing or grooming their facial hair. It was a conversation she could contribute little to and could relate to even less, and yet both raconteurs had her listening with rapt attention. She saw Abby come to sit on the other side of Helen and made to smile at her lifelong friend but immediately noticed she had no interest in joining in or listening to the conversation being had. They quickly established a non-verbal conversation, the slight shifts of their eyes and subtle twitches of their features communicating as effectively as any spoken word could. No sooner had Abby sat down was she up again and striding off into the house without a second look back. Carol discreetly followed soon after before they inconspicuously proceeded into the garage without a word with Abby promptly closing the door upon their entry to shroud them in the glaring fluorescent lighting.

"What's so urgent that we have to do this now, Abigail?" Carol asked as she turned to face her friend, her full name in this case being used teasingly. The light laugh she was about to attempt stopped dead in her throat when she saw the look on Abby's face. "What's wrong?"

"Carol, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, but you need to get your get your head out of your ass and you need to do it right fucking now."

"What?"

"Therese."

"What about her?" Carol asked. Her attempt at nonchalance failed miserably as her response came out exactly how she felt: defensive. She'd successfully dodged most of Abby's prying questions about the younger woman since she returned from Alaska, with her selfishly wanting to keep the details of their transcendent time together up north to herself. She'd also withheld all that had transpired between in the last week, doing so deliberately for fear of the strong reaction it would undoubtedly evoke from Abby. One look into Abby's already smouldering eyes told her there was simply no way of sidestepping being interrogated this time around. She swallowed back her unease and prepared to handle the situation in the only way she knew how: by maintaining her defensiveness.

"Do you want to tell me why she's a mess?" Abby asked, cutting straight through the bullshit to get to the chase.
"She looked fine to me, Abby. You saw how she was acting when she first got here. She was laughing and joking around with everyone."

"Oh, come on, Carol! You of all people should know how easily someone can slip on a mask to hide how they're really feeling. You did it—for what? eight years, remember?" Abby challenged, her passioned response succeeding in silencing the blonde. She took a deep, calming breath before stressing, “You cannot keep doing this to her, Carol. You cannot keep flirting with her and you cannot continue to string her along like this and think that she's not going to get her hopes up about something happening between you. It's not fair on her."

“I know.”

“You know? Then why the fuck do you keep doing it?!?”

The anger in Abby's voice and the fire that now leapt in her eyes stopped any response that was forthcoming from Carol in its tracks, with the defences she'd hastily put up only moments ago disintegrating like a matchstick house in a tornado in the process. The sinking feeling she felt in the pit of her stomach began to fester uncontrollably before the sucker punch that was the realisation that there simply was no escaping Abby's wrath resigned her to her fate, that of her being at the mercy of her friend's relentless scrutiny.

Carol's silence hardly dampened Abby's efforts, though, as she went forth unabated, "Really? You—you've got nothing to say to that? Oh, Jesus, Carol! I don't even know where to fucking start," she stammered in exasperation before turning her back on the blonde, the shaking of her head showing her pure disbelief. After a roll of her shoulders a moment later, she turned and went to stand directly before Carol. She looked her dead in the eye as she said in a voice that was steely in its hardness, "You know she just about broke down in front of me earlier when I asked her about you?"

The question that was goading in its directness comprehensively knocked the wind out of Carol's sails, forcing her to lean heavily against her car for support. She felt like she'd taken an adrenaline shot straight to the heart with her heart rate crescendoing at a velocity which quite literally took her breath away. She lolled her head to look down at the floor in what was now a vain attempt to shield herself from the gaze that had already succeeded in making her crumble. "What did she say?" she asked cautiously, her thick voice barely louder than the low hum of the music emanating from inside.

"Well, although she didn't explicitly say so, I'm pretty sure she thinks that you don't like her enough to want get involved with her. She thinks that you won't jump into bed with someone you only have lukewarm feelings for because you're worried that if it ended soon after—which it probably would—it would mess up the stability and consistency you're trying to maintain in Rindy's life. But, I know that's not what's going on here. It's not a case of you not liking her enough because just by looking at you when Therese is around, I can see your feelings for her are the antithesis of lukewarm."

She straightened up and began to pace before a now shrunken Carol, whose timid eyes tracked her every movement. "So, that left me wondering just why the hell you haven't made a move on her when you're so very clearly interested in her. Let's go with your argument of not wanting to risk fucking up your working situation by getting involved with Therese. That excuse doesn't quite hold water because you've always conducted yourself with utmost professionalism and you said so yourself that Therese handles herself with a maturity that far exceeds that of most of the people you've ever worked with. That means that neither of you would do anything to fuck up your working together if you were to get involved. Let's move onto your next argument, then, which is whether Therese is interested in woman. She definitely is and you fucking know it."

She came to a stop before Carol once more with arms akimbo, an imposing barrier of sorts that insured no escape was possible if it foolishly were to be mounted. "Let's just move right onto your
biggest hang up about Therese, what's holding you back from just letting this happen. You think someone as young as her couldn't possibly be interested in someone like you, someone who's older, divorced, and who has a young daughter. But, that's where you couldn't be more wrong, Carol, because the way she looks at you is the exact way you look at her. She looks at you like that despite all that shit you thought would scare her away. So, I just do not understand why anything has yet to happen between the two of you. Please tell me you are not just stringing her along like this for the hell of it. Please tell me I'm missing the real reason why you haven't made a move on her," Abby said in a tone that was in no way cutting, simply matter-of-fact and uncompromising. Her wide dark eyes looked at Carol searchingly as she waited for a response.

Carol could only stare back at Abby in silent astonishment, seemingly at a loss for how to respond to her friend's comprehensive debunking of her rationale for not pursuing something more with Therese. Her closest friend since she was four years old, the one person who knew her best but the very same person who called her out on her bullshit, had succeeded in stripping her of her admittedly weak arguments, leaving only the real reason for her hesitancy to be revealed. "Yes, there's another reason," she quietly conceded.

"What is it, then?"

"She's … fragile. No, that's not the way to describe her. She's got this emotional baggage and, and these scars which quite frankly scare me, Abby...She's broken down twice in front of me and both times I felt like I was only just able to keep it together for her...I'm so scared that if we were together and something like that were to happen again, but this time worse, that she would look to me most for support, support that I may not be able to give her...Even though I want to be, I don't know if I'm strong enough to give her the support I know she'll need...It terrifies me to think that I may not be there for her in the way she needs me to be," Carol forced out.

Abby's hardened features softened immediately upon hearing the pained explanation. She started gently, "I absolutely understand your fears, Carol, I really do. But, you have to realise that you are one of the strongest people, if not the strongest person, I know. Hey, hey, you are." She gripped her friend's arms after she'd ceded eye contact to the floor once more, her soft but insistent squeezes willing Carol to believe what she said. "You put yourself through hell during your marriage, with Rindy being the only thing that kept you going. Do you not know how much strength it must've taken for you to first admit that that wasn't enough for you anymore, that pouring all your love and energy into Rindy wasn't enough, and then to actually walk away from it all and get a divorce? Those are some of the hardest things anyone could do and yet you did both. That took a lot of guts and strength. And, not only have you been able to hold it together and pick yourself up after all that, you still want to fall in love again. Wanting to even try again after all you've been through takes even more guts and strength. And, that exactly what you have. You have serious guts and you are incredibly strong, Carol. I won't allow you to think that you aren't."

By this stage, Carol could feel Abby's words begin to extract her sorrow lying within, leaving it pooled in waiting. "Honey, you're coming at this whole thing from the wrong angle. I think you've gotten so used to focusing on the negatives of a relationship that you forget to consider all the positives. You shouldn't be focusing on messing things up, you should be focusing on all the good that could come from pursuing something more with Therese. Like, what if you both fall in love? What if she's the love of your life? What if getting involved with her turns out to be the best decision you've ever made?" Abby explained, stooping low in the hope of making eye contact with Carol as she gently took her
hands in both her own. She continued once Carol's watery eyes finally met hers, "Carol, the fact that you're so afraid of losing her or hurting her right now speaks volumes about how you already feel about her. Don't push this down and hide how you feel. You've done enough of that to last you a lifetime. Put a stop this. Stop fighting against yourself because it's not doing you or Therese any good. Give her a chance and give yourself a chance at this. Let this happen."

The salty catharsis began almost immediately with Carol's tears making good their escape from their lashed confines to slide over the smooth edge of her high, prominent cheekbones before plunging down. She bowed her head to rest her chin on her heaving sternum as shuddering sobs wracked through her, all the while the force of her grip made her nails bite into Abby's hands. They stood like that for some time with Carol's occasional sniffle and stifled cries being the only sound to intermittently drown out the ambient thrum.

She came to her senses as the stream of tears made its way beyond the valley of her breasts and through her bra to uncomfortably tickle the delicate hairs of her stomach. She slowly freed her hands to cover her tear-strewn face as she took deep, calming breaths, each seemingly coming easier than the last, before promptly wiping the offending moisture away altogether. She finally looked up to meet Abby's dark eyes, seeing how they had warmed over with tenderness, which nestled below her slightly furrowed brows and above her mouth that was held in a compassionate grimace. It was a face she'd seen throughout the last few years of her marriage, after she'd finally allowed herself to be consumed by woe in front of Abby. It was a look that suggested that Abby almost shared in her pain, her best friend being the most sympathetic of sounding boards. It was a look that proceeded every one of Abby's pep talks encouraging Carol to put an end to her misery by getting a divorce. Despite Abby's ever uplifting words and vociferous support, the reality of her situation would quickly fill her with a feeling of utter despondency that would comprehensively extinguish her flickering hope of freeing herself from the smothering restraints of her marriage. This time, though, the hope she felt began to proliferate through her as she finally gave mind to all the amazing possibilities that could come from her finally giving into her feelings for Therese, to all the memories they could create together to add to ones she already cherished.

"You're right," Carol said, her voice even and clear but overwhelmingly weak. "You always are." She managed a feeble smile before being pulled by her shoulders into an all too familiar comforting hug whereupon she buried her face in Abby's shoulder and just allowed herself to be held.

"Are you okay?" Abby asked after their prolonged embrace was broken, her features still clouded with concern.

"Yes, I think I am."

"Are you sure?" After receiving a nod and a better attempt at a smile in reply, Abby proceeded, "Okay, I'm going to go back inside before someone tries to come find us. Just take some time for yourself and come back inside when you're ready. I'll make up some elaborate excuse if anyone wonders where you are."

Carol felt mirth force its way up through the thickness in her throat to sound a hearty laugh. "Why does it have to be elaborate? Why can't you just say I'm talking to Rindy or something like that?" she asked humorously with a sniff.

"You know I have a penchant for flair. Talking to Rindy is too middle-of-the-road for me," Abby explained with a shrug of nonchalance.

"Of course, of course," Carol concurred to be rewarded with Abby's characteristic pop-eyed expression of amusement. "Thank you, Abby," she said a moment later, her voice laced with seriousness and an overpowering sincerity. Abby gave her arm one last reassuring squeeze and a
tender smile before escaping to the inside of the house. She hesitantly turned to look at her reflection in the window of her car. Despite the ghastly overhead lighting, she was relieved to find she looked somewhat presentable, her glistening, slightly reddened eyes, faintly rouged cheeks, and tear-clumped lashes being the only noticeable evidence of her crying, nothing a little splash of cold water couldn't fix. And, so, she stole to the bathroom before the babel guided her back to the party outside a little while later.

She descended the steps leading to the beach with a glass of the clementine and lemon thyme cocktail Abby had whipped up earlier in hand, to find the evening's conversations and drinks flowing as before. Now, though, Tim had everyone in stitches as he regaled them with stories from his alcohol- and sex-addled years at USC. As her eyes adjusted to the fire's harsh glare, she noticed someone sitting some way away facing the water, the expanse of their back bathed by the soft, warm glow that only just reached where they sat. She looked around and made a quick account of all those congregated around the fire and the few that stood chatting up on the deck before identifying who the lone soul was. Therese. She knew the younger woman had undoubtedly separated from the crowd to calm herself after what sounded like a heart-rending talk with Abby. But, she wouldn't allow Therese to be alone with her wholly fallacious thoughts about why anything had yet to happen between them any longer. She knew what she needed to do and thus determinedly retreated from whence she came as she prepared to approach the younger woman.

Not wanting to attract any attention that may jeopardise her opportunity for some much needed one-on-one time with Therese, she took a wide berth around the front and along the side of her house before making her way down onto the beach under the cover of darkness. She tried to calm herself when mere meters away before promptly closing the gap altogether. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asked, her voice rising above the lilt of the gently ebbing and flowing waves and the distant chatter.

Therese turned and inclined her head to look at Carol without a hint of surprise, almost like she suspected that Carol would seek her out. She smiled her assent, the warm lighting serving to deceptively deepen her alluring dimples. Even in the poor light, her eyes sparkled as much as the moonlight-speckled water did. Her apparent contentment calmed Carol momentarily before her breathtaking countenance made the butterflies she already had in her stomach begin to flutter.

"I brought us a couple of stouts. I remember you saying how much you like them. Oh, and I brought you something warmer to wear. I thought you might be a bit cold from sitting this far away from the fire," Carol said, holding up two bottles of Oakshire Overcast Espresso Stout in her one hand and a sweater in the other. She mirrored Therese's crossed leg pose as she settled comfortably close to the younger woman on the cool sand.

"Thanks. I didn't realise just how cold I was until you mentioned it," Therese admitted as her head popped through the neck hole of Carol's sweater. She looked down at its front and asked, "Is this your NYU sweatshirt?"

"Yes, it is. It's older and probably a bit more worn than yours. But, it's my favourite and by far the most comfortable thing I own that I know will be just right for a night like tonight." Carol's casual reply brought about a brilliant smile from Therese, an ultimately simple and typically innocuous reciprocation which managed to make her stomach wring itself. Not knowing or really trusting herself to say anything more, she merely lifted her bottle to clink with the the younger woman's. They took their first sips with Carol having to force her grin around the rim. That was until the strength of the brew made her grimace and cough.

"Are you okay?" Therese asked as she shifted closer in order to rub soothing circles on Carol's back.
Carol nodded despite feeling the bitter hoppy flavour attack her taste buds before it jarringly made its way down her throat. "I had quite a sweet cocktail before this so something like this a bit of a shock to the old taste buds. I think I just need another sip." She tossed her head back to take a deep gulp, this time coming to appreciate the stout's predominant flavours of coffee and chocolate and its slightly nutty undertone. She beamed back at Therese to show she was all right. And, she was, especially now that they sat close enough for their legs to touch. "Do you mind my asking why you're sitting out here alone?" she hesitantly broached a few moments later as she gazed out over the water's rippled surface.

"I don't mind," Therese replied without hesitation to bring Carol's eyes back to her. "I just wanted a bit of alone time."

"I can leave you be if you'd like?" Carol asked, doing so because she wouldn't want to impose on Therese and because it was the polite thing to do, despite fearing the younger woman's response.

"No, please stay."

The younger woman popped her dimples reassuringly to dismiss the last of Carol's unease. "Okay, I'll stay. But, only because you asked so nicely," Carol lightly joked disguising her pleased grin by taking another sip. "You know, I also find myself sneaking away from parties for some alone time. No matter how much I'm enjoying myself, I always feel the need to just get away for a little bit, for some privacy, you know?"

"I do the same thing. It doesn't matter how much of a good time I'm having or how big the party is because I invariably find myself sneaking away. I can't remember the exact line from The Great Gatsby, but it was something along the lines of large parties being more private while smaller parties lack privacy -which I always found kind of counterintuitive. So, I think in this case, in order for us to get the privacy we want and apparently need at a small party like this, we're left no choice but to actually leave it."

"That sounds about right. Also, the quote that you're thinking of actually goes, “And I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy.” Jordan said that to Nick the first time he went to one of Gatsby's parties."

Therese briefly chuckled before joking with her mischievous dimples on full display, "I never thought I'd see you nerd out as hard as you just did."

"Laugh all you want because I'm unashamed of my nerding out over F. Scott Fitzgerald. He's one of the greatest writers ever and one of my all-time favourites," Carol replied matter-of-factly before joined the younger woman in laughing. "Now, apart from escaping from my smotheringly small party and coming out here, how's the rest of your evening been?" she enquired with an amiable nudge to Therese's side that roused a delightful giggle from her, hoping to distract from the slight trepidation she felt at hearing the answer that may permeate her voice.

"It's been going well, actually. I just wish I'd seen more of the host," Therese admitted with a shrug. The sly grin that briefly appeared before she took a sip indicated which host she spoke of.

Despite having already finished her stout, Carol again felt the need to hide her smile by feigning taking another sip. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I've been wanting to see more of you since you arrived. It's just every time I looked you were occupied," she admitted with her own shrug as she heard her heartbeat begin to murmur in her ears.

"Hmmm, it does make me feel a little better...Only a bit, though."
Carol was met by Therese's single-dimpled profile as she turned to her, the sight of which made her chest swell to effectively kick her into gear. She swallowed back her nervousness in order to boldly go forth. "I suppose I need to make it up to you." She stood with her hand outstretched and simply said, "Come with me."

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to tell me your thoughts about this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below :)

I have a question for you guys. My work-varsity is starting next week and it's going to be one helluva busy year for me. So, I won't be writing as much as I have, but I will write when I can. Would you prefer that I stagger updates of the chapters I've already written so that they're every week or every few weeks? Or, would you prefer I keep updating at the current rate of every 3-4 days until I have no more chapters left to and then have an even longer wait after?
"Come with me," Carol said to Therese as she stood with her hand outstretched for the younger woman to take.

The crinkle of Therese's brow and the slight parting of her lips as she looked up at Carol showed her clear confusion. Her hesitancy barely lasted longer than a count of two, though, as she slid her hand into Carol's to be pulled to her feet without a word in questioning. Their fingers lingered momentarily in the clutch before separating as they advanced towards the fire, with Carol then rather skilfully averting Dannie as he tried to rope them into listening to Tim's story about his bachelor's party that sounded like it had quite a few extraordinary parallels to that from *The Hangover*. She silently led them inside the house and upstairs whereupon they veered left down the longest passage. Therese lagged a step behind with her appearing to slowly take in every detail as they went, from the simple botanical illustrations of Monstera, fiddlehead ferns, cacti, and succulents that adorned the cream walls, to the few intricately woven plant baskets containing yucca and lady palms that added striking bursts of green against the royal blue bohemian rug which ran along the length of the passage. Carol stopped a moment later, though, upon realising Therese had fallen much further behind. She turned to find the younger woman standing idly before the threshold of the library.

"This is your library?" Therese asked in a breathy voice, her wide, glazed eyes roving around the room instead of focusing on whom her question was addressed to.

Carol stifled a laugh at Therese's immediate and obvious infatuation, something she herself had felt the first time she saw the library's classic wood-panelled interior that was at complete odds with the rest of the house's contemporary design. "It is. But, it's not what I wanted to show you," she explained with a smile playing on her lips. She comfortably placed her hand on the small of the younger woman's back to usher her along. She took a different tack when she did not budge, though, by smoothly sliding her hand around Therese's waist to gently pull her down the passage with her. "I promise to let you loose in there some other time. But, right now, I want to show you something else I hope you'll like."

She saw Therese's eyes bulge and her throat visibly move under the force of her hard swallow as the interior of the last room came into view, that of the master bedroom, her bedroom. *Jesus, I don't even want to know what she thinks I'm trying to pull on her.* She chastised herself for such an overwhelmingly embarrassing oversight but chose to push it out of mind than have it linger any longer. A mixture of surprise and undoubted relief momentarily washed over the younger woman's features as they passed before cloturing over in confusion when no other room was immediately obvious. But, Carol merely pressed on until an opaque glass-panelled door appeared in a little inlet at the very end of the passage. She turned to Therese and instructed, "Now, I want you to wait here for just a bit until I call you, okay?" The furrow of the younger woman's brows deepened but she nodded in agreement nonetheless, her assent being rewarded with a brilliant smile from Carol before she disappeared from sight.

"Therese, you can come on up," Carol shouted down as she anxiously waited atop the metal spiral staircase that lead to the rooftop terrace.
Carol watched as Therese emerged, their eyes meeting momentarily before the younger woman's swept across the terrace. A breath Carol did not know she was holding escaped her when she saw Therese's face light up as she took in the low-lying, ridiculously comfortable looking pallet couches laden with an eclectic selection of patterned cushions, the candelit Moroccan lamps and lanterns that dotted the floor, the living plant wall that spanned the one side of the terrace, and the overhead string lights that added yet brighter pops of light to the star-speckled sky. Therese looked at Carol once more, this time dazzling her with her smile almost as much as her wondrous eyes did.

Carol thought she couldn't be more enraptured by Therese's reaction, until the younger woman's countenance softened with utter wonderment as she finally caught sight of the exquisite view of the ocean their elevated position afforded. The younger woman slowly wandered across the terrace with the soft lighting somehow enhancing her already alluring features, before she idled in obvious transfixon to gaze out at the dark waters that shimmered with flecks of silver from the moon that hung watchfully above. With leaden feet and a now stiflingly thudding heart, Carol made her way over to stand beside Therese, willing herself to remain calm in what undoubtedly could be a defining moment for her.

They seemed to turn to each other simultaneously to find their smiles reflected back to one another. Carol again found her breath stuck in her tightening chest as she stared at Therese. "Does this make it up to you?" she eventually asked.

"Carol, this is just … wow," Therese admitted without her twinkling eyes ever leaving Carol before she almost reluctantly dragged them away a moment later to look at the supposed source of her awe.

"The view isn't bad. It's better during the day, especially at sunrise and sunset. But, at night, this is a pretty good vantage point for a spot of star gazing," she said as she leaned down to flick a switch that extinguished the string lights overhead, leaving the space flickering in warm oranges and yellows from below. Therese's eyes shot up to look upon the diamonds scattered across the endless dark void. Despite the now poor lighting, Carol could still make out the younger woman's contented smile, her eyes inexplicably being drawn to her dimple instead of the stars above. She traced Therese's mesmeric profile, feeling her heart rate increase with every inch traversed until she heard its rhythmic beat in her ears. "You never answered my question. Does this make it up to you?" she somehow managed ask.

Therese diverted her eyes down to look at Carol, their sharing in the briefest of silent conversation before she turned and went to hoist herself up onto the first tier of the boundary wall, leaving her legs to dangle over the edge with her back to the leafy wall. She cast her eyes skyward once more and hemmed and hawed to the darkness before lowering her gaze to Carol. "Hmmm … it does a little," she said with a shrug and an impish grin before looking up.

"Only a little, huh?" Carol asked to which Therese responded by vigorously nodding to the sky. She stifled a laugh at the younger woman's nonchalance as she prepared to go forth with what she wanted to and should have done a long time ago. She stopped fighting the magnetic force that always seemed to pull her to Therese until she stood mere inches before her. She waited until the younger woman looked down at her before placing her hands either side of her knees. Her heart ceased its ministrations as she watched Therese's eyes dart to her hands before snapping up to meet her own, seeing shock flash cross her features before assuming an expression of what looked like anxious excitement. "I suppose I'm going to have to make it up to you some other way, aren't I?" she purred with all her might as her heart restarted to beat in earnest. The younger woman immediately caught onto the true meaning of what typically would be an innocuous question with her eyes widening and her chest giving one large heave, the sudden intention in the air evidently stifling in its thickness.
Carol's own breath caught in her throat as Therese leaned forward to place her hands either side of her own. The younger woman's boldness was short-lived, though, as she ceded eye contact with the bowing of her head. "Only if you want to," she whispered.

Carol took the cue to close the gap between them until her front met with Therese's knees. She swallowed back her anxiety before cupping the younger woman's jaw with her hand, her thumb gently toing and froing against the smooth expanse of her pale cheek, while the other came to rest on her knee. "I want to," she whispered, her voice thick with earnestness. She dropped her hand to mirror the other and gave her knees a soft squeeze of assurance.

Therese finally met her gaze, the green depths of her eyes now an amalgamation of trepidation, anticipation, fear, and slowly simmering lust. She invited Carol to eliminate the last few inches separating them by opening her legs. Carol stepped forward without hesitation with her hands drifting deliberately slowly up Therese's bare thighs, feeling her slight muscles tense beneath her wandering fingers, before coming to rest on her hips. By contrast, the younger woman's timid hands first found their way to Carol's upper arms, then to her shoulders before finally settling at the juncture between her neck and shoulder. After discarding the last of her resistance, Carol leaned towards Therese with the younger woman following suit. She saw the darting of the Therese's eyes to her own before they focused on her lips as the distance between them grew ever smaller.

"Are you sure?"

The question was breathed against Carol's lips. She answered in the only way she knew how: by pressing a kiss to Therese's lips. Her mind immediately went blank as she gave herself entirely over to the moment, only feeling the overwhelming sensation that was the soft perfection of Therese's lips and their kiss. After joining in a harmony of sighs that was the release of the breaths they'd unconsciously been holding during the stifling build up to their long overdue kiss, they settled into a slow synchrony of pleasure. Their fronts moulded together a moment later when the younger woman's fingers glided into Carol's hair to gently lock them in their kiss.

The concept of time and space was lost on Carol, finding herself too exulted and euphorically lost in the languid dance of their lips to care about what lay beyond this moment and the woman she shared it with. After a few minutes of utter bliss, their kiss transitioned into something hungrier when an evidently overpowering need simultaneously reared up within them both. Therese's tongue ghosted across her lips to bring about their immediate parting, their mouths melting further into one another to allow for their tongues to meld together in a battle where there were no losers. Carol felt herself drowning in the pleasurable assault Therese was mounting on her senses, from her subtle but distinct taste she was now putting to memory, the sound of her soft, muffled moans that occasionally escaped their joined mouths, to the feel of the silken interior of her overwhelmingly addictive mouth.

Carol's familiar but recently dormant all-consuming arousal lurched within her as Therese nibbled her lower lip before gently sucking on it, all the while the younger woman's hand snaked its way inside the collar of her shirt to insistently claw at her back. Carol reciprocated by winding both hands under Therese's offending shirt with practiced ease to traverse the soft, unexplored skin of her back, before comprehensively eliminating any remnant of a gap that may somehow still have existed between them as she desperately held the younger woman closer to her. The sudden contact of her cool hands with the heated skin below brought about a gasp-cum-moan from Therese that vibrated through her mouth. She couldn't help but smile at the titillating feeling but more so at the effect she was having on the younger woman. The momentary stilling of her now curled lips didn't go unnoticed by Therese as she latched onto her upper lip one last time before breaking their kiss altogether. Lust-darkened eyes met after they'd brought their foreheads together with the electric silence that now hung between them being peppered by the sound of their laboured breathing. They continued to gaze at one another throughout the slow curling of their swollen lips into matching grins.
Carol tucked a wayward brunette lock behind Therese's ear before cupping her sublime jaw with her thumb caressing her lower lip. She said the first and only thing that came to her mind, "Stay with me tonight?"

Much like Carol's non-verbal response which broke the dam wall that allowed their desires to flood forth into the open, Therese answered by pressing a simple kiss to her lips.

Carol reluctantly broke their embrace some time later, this time stopping after Therese had gently tugged on her lower lip once more, as she attempted to rein in her runaway arousal that had undoubtedly pooled itself throughout their intense necking session. "Therese," she began only to be stopped by her own moan that escaped as open-mouthed kisses were placed below her ear and yet lower down her involuntarily craning neck. "Jesus, you're making this hard for me," she croaked out.

Therese unlatched her mouth from Carol's supple alabaster neck with a soft, lascivious pop. "What am I making hard for you?" she asked, her wide eyes and the batting of her lashes laying her feigned innocence on pretty thickly. When no answer was forthcoming from an evidently stunned Carol, she pecked her lips, then again, and again, and then once more before peppering kisses from the corner of her mouth to down and along her jaw, seemingly in pursuit of the yet to be explored skin below the other ear.

Another whimper chased itself up and out of Carol as Therese kissed her neck with the accompanying gentle clawing at the younger woman's back only succeeding in rousing yet more pleasurable neck kisses. She dragged her leaden hands out from under Therese's shirt with her then using them against their will to firmly grip the younger woman's knees for support as she forcefully pushed herself back. "Therese, this could go on for hours," she huffed out, her breathing now fighting to normalise itself after what felt like a few endorphin-addled hours of making out.

"Do you not want it to go on?" Therese asked almost innocently.

_Fuck._ The younger woman's swollen lips twisted into a sly smile the longer Carol stared at her. She took the younger woman's face in both her hands in what was her attempt at assuming control of the situation, but found herself inexplicably leaning in for yet another kiss. "You know that's not what I'm saying," she managed to force out around their joined lips before continuing their unencumbered kiss once more. She felt the curve of Therese's lips as she smiled against her own and found herself simply incapable of not reciprocating the gesture.

It was the younger woman who next broke their lip lock in order to ask, "Then what's the problem here?" She didn't wait for an answer this time, instead enthusiastically moving to reunite their lips once more. Her hands found their way inside the opening of Carol's shirt to slide up her chest and around her neck, making the older woman shudder with every inch advanced.

Carol gave one last forceful swipe of her tongue against Therese's before trying with all her might to pull her lips away as she leaned back to look at the younger woman. She couldn't help herself, though, from winding her arms around Therese's waist to pull her flush against her. "The problem is that there's a group of people downstairs who are probably wondering where we've been for the last hour, maybe even two hours." She tried to maintain eye contact as she spoke, vehemently fighting the overwhelming urge to go in for another kiss, but found her gaze migrating to Therese's enticing lips more often than not.

Therese's eyes bulged. "That's how long we've been up here?" she stressed.

Carol chuckled lightly at Therese's obvious embarrassment. "I'm guessing. To be honest, though, I've been a bit preoccupied to actually check the time," she teased with a wink, wanting to make sure she
was still able to make the younger blush on cue and was duly rewarded with the faint rouging of the apples of her cheeks. "As much as I don't want to, and I really don't want to, I think we have to rejoin the fray. Hopefully things will wind down soon enough, though, so we can get back to this," she said. The languid, wondrous kiss she initiated unquestionably indicated what she meant by "this".

"Can't you just chase everyone away?" Therese eventually whined against Carol's neck after her lips had kissed their way down from her mouth.

Carol couldn't stop the giggle that bubbled through her chest, feeling absolutely ecstatic that Therese was as reluctant to part as she was. That was until she was silenced by her own sharp intake of breath that came after the younger woman gently sucked on her pulse point. "I may just have to if you keep that up," she puffed.

It was Therese's turn to giggle, the melodious sound vibrating gently against Carol's neck before reverberating into the deepest recesses of her heart. One last kiss was pressed to her neck before the younger woman leaned all the way back in her arms. "We might as well get it over with then, huh?" she asked, the disinclination in her voice all too obvious to hear.

Carol gave her a reassuring smile and a quick peck on her cheek before helping her down from the boundary wall. The almost instinctive lacing together of their fingers by Therese that followed left Carol grinning like an absolute fool, the rapidity of the smile's growth making her cheeks blissfully ache. She surprised the younger woman on their walk over to the stairs by spinning her around and pulling her flush against her before stooping to capture her all too willing lips with her own. They shared in a kiss that was unhurried, effortless, and serene, one that set Carol's stomach aflutter all over again. "I just needed that to get me through however long this is going to take," she admitted, finding her grin being mirrored back at her. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

They made their way inside the now quiet house and proceeded downstairs where they found Abby gathering used glasses left scattered around the living and dining rooms. Her wide-eyed expression of surprise after she saw them was soon juxtaposed by her knowing grin. "I was wondering when you two would resurface."

Carol saw Therese squirm in her periphery and went to place a reassuring hand on the small of her back. "Not a word, Abigail," she warned, her voice assuming an iciness she knew deterred most people.

Most people, yes. But, certainly not Abby, of course, who merely rolled her eyes. "Jesus, will you relax? I just spent the last two-and-a-half hours covering both your asses for Christ's sake," she lamented with a shake of her head. "Yes, that's how long you were gone for," she explained matter-of-factly, answering an unspoken question both Carol and Therese's embarrassed expressions begged.

She went back to stacking the few glasses together before starting, "Look, no one really seemed to notice either of you were gone because they were all pretty drunk by that stage. I'm guessing the only people you were worried about suspecting anything were Tim, Dannie, Phil, and Jeanette. Tim was definitely too drunk to notice. I mean he fell asleep next to the fire for fuck's sake before Helen dragged him home. Dannie didn't look like he suspected anything untoward because by the end of the night he kept drunkenly muttering about missing some Louise woman. And, then, Phil and Jeanette were too preoccupied by Fred's yammering to notice you weren't around. When everyone starting leaving, I said you, Carol, had gone to lie down because you weren't feeling well while I told them you were busy on a call, Therese. Stop worrying, okay? I handled it."
They silently followed Abby as she breezed into the kitchen to deposit the glasses before going about returning a few discarded lids to the correct bottles of alcohol. “I started doing a bit of a clean up but I actually have to go. I'm meeting up with Erin for a drink. So, don't wait up for me,” she said to Carol with an unmistakable mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Sensing her opportunity, Carol attempted to change the discourse and the mood by asking, "Now, who's Erin again? Was she the pediatrician, sommelier, lecturer, or the manager of that animal shelter you occasionally volunteer at for all the wrong reasons?"

"You consider sex a wrong reason to volunteer whereas I do not. Zoey was her name, by the way. Erin, on the other hand, owns that seafood restaurant down on the Marina."

"Oh, right, right. Who were the pediatrician and sommelier, then?" Carol indulged.

"Uhhh...Kate was the sommelier and then...Jemma was the pediatrician. Or, was it Jenna? Shit, I can't remember now if her name was Jemma or Jenna. Wait, it may even have been Jenny," Abby admitted, her brows knitting in concentration as she tried to make sense of her innumerable dalliances. Both Carol and Therese sniggered at her evident confusion but it still looked like it did little to dispel the younger woman's unease. "You know what? It doesn't even matter right now. My Uber will be here in a bit, so I need to get my stuff together. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Abby said as went to peck Carol on the cheek before shooting Therese a sly wink on her way to the guest bedroom.

Carol could almost feel the trepidation exuding off Therese after Abby left a few minutes later, noticing her restless eyes as they roved around the kitchen and beyond the deck to the surrounding darkness, all the while her hands toyed with the cuffs of Carol's sweatshirt. She moved to quickly banish the younger woman's disquietude once and for all, desperately wanting the return of the confident woman from earlier who'd comprehensively taken her even more than she ever thought possible. "Put on some music, would you?" she asked before busying herself.

With two wine glasses now in hand, she gave Therese a half-empty bottle of Riesling to carry before taking her other hand in her own to guide them outside without a word. She plopped down splay-legged in front of what remained of the fire, the low glow being thrown somehow more romantic than earlier on the terrace. She stopped Therese from sitting beside her with a simple "uh-ah" with her instead pointing to the wine bottle. She poured them two inches worth of the weakly golden liquid that came alive with glints of orange from the smouldering timber before promptly twisting the bottle and both glasses into the sand beside her. With a simple flick of her finger, she indicated where Therese was to sit: between her legs.

Therese complied with a dimple-popping smile, settling down with the help of a steadying hand from Carol so they sat back to front. The gap was evidently too great, though, as Carol shifted forward while ushering the younger woman closer to her by gently placing her hand against her chest. Perhaps it was her somewhat intimate touch or the kiss she pressed to Therese's dark tresses, but the younger woman melted into her, feeling the tensed muscles of her back slacken against her breasts. With wine now in hand, they sipped quietly to the smooth-voiced Leon Bridges and the ambient sound of crashing waves.

"What are you thinking about?" Carol asked after a pregnant but comfortable pause.

After a beat or two, Therese answered, "I'm wondering whether Abby was just humouring me when she asked for help on how to meet women."

Carol laughed, feeling relief begin to suffuse through her at Therese's willingness to at least broach a lighthearted topic. "I hate to break it to you but she was definitely humouring you, darling. That one
has absolutely no problems meeting women. This may be hard to believe but this may actually have been bit of a slow month for her because she was busier with work than usual. As you could probably tell, I have a hard time keeping track of all the women and it is a skill I have yet to master." She felt Therese's chuckle delightfully vibrate through her chest before going still once more.

"What are you really thinking about?" Carol whispered into her hair a little while later.

"I," Therese began before twisting around so that her back came to rest against Carol's bent leg. "I can't believe this happened," she admitted, gesturing between them. The shaking of her head and gentle smile that adorned her stunning face showed her pure disbelief at their finally giving in to their desires.

Carol reciprocated with a tender smile of her own before leaning in to sweetly kiss her once more. She pulled back after a beat and just gazed at the younger woman with what she assumed was a look of absolute reverence. "I'm really happy this happened," she admitted, jumping into oblivion both fearfully and fearlessly, with a smile still playing on her lips as she spoke.

"So am I," Therese concurred. She broke eye contact a moment later as she looked at the glass of wine clutched in her lap. After a great heave of her chest, she looked up and asked, "What changed for you? I mean, you said you needed to figure things out."

"I know what I said but I knew I was fighting a losing battle because I cannot and will not try and ignore or hide how I feel about you anymore, Therese," Carol admitted earnestly. She barely had time to cast an assuring smile Therese's way before the younger woman leaned in to passionately kiss her, their lips now moving with practiced ease against one another. The kiss was slow and yet still managed to set her want ablaze. She ran her tongue along Therese's lower lip and was rewarded with the long awaited reunion of their tongues. She cradled the back of her head to deepen their kiss, much to her own and the younger woman's satisfaction, as she almost methodically went about searching every inch of her mouth for yet more pleasure.

The intensity of their embrace made them huff hotly into the void surrounding their sliding tongue. Their noses mashed together as they switched positions without their dancing lips missing a step. Therese shifted further around as she threaded her fingers through Carol's hair to desperately bring her lips closer. Having discarded her glass with a hasty toss to the sand, Carol reciprocated by easily slipped her hand under Therese's shirt to slowly but greedily glide across her flexing stomach and up her side, with the younger woman's free hand then moving to knead her breast. The snaking of Carol's thumb below Therese's bra soon after made the younger woman unexpectedly pull back, their kiss being broken mid-tongue swipe.

"Take me to bed. Now."

Chapter End Notes

I always enjoy hearing from you guys. So, please feel free to tell me what you thought about this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below.

I really hate to break this to you guys, especially given where this chapter ended, but the next chapter will only be up in, at best, a week's time. I truly hope you'll think the wait will be worth it, though ;)
Sweet, sweet surrender

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carol

Saturday 4 November 2017

"Take me to bed. Now."

The desperation of Therese's command and the lust-laden huskiness of her voice sent a jolt of heat straight to Carol's crotch. Logic momentarily reared its wise head to argue the point that things were perhaps moving too quickly between them but the burning conviction in Therese's eyes and her overwhelming want for the younger woman combined to overrule rationality with ease. They scrambled to their feet and somehow made their way to the master bedroom without succumbing to their wanton desires, firstly against the sliding glass doors as they tried entering the house, then at the bottom of the stairs, and lastly against the passage wall; the bottle of Riesling and wineglasses left forgotten on the beach in their haste.

Carol came to sit on the end of the bed, Therese having fallen a little behind as she idled by the door, and waited with her breaths now fighting their way out of her. She held out her hand to the younger woman, desperately wanting to be reunited with any inch of her before committing herself to mapping every inch of her with her own hands, lips, and tongue. Therese advanced slowly but by no means uncertainly, her body vibrating with arousal as her chest heaved with her every laboured breath, to stand directly before Carol.

Carol grabbed two handfuls of Therese's shorts to guide the younger woman on top of her, having her straddle her lap. Therese cupped Carol's face with her thumbs lazily caressing her cheeks, and merely gazed down at her. Carol took a moment to commit to memory the abundant desire that seemed to ooze from Therese's eyes and the exact hue of their lust-darkened depths before the younger woman stooped to hungrily capture her lips, entering in a kiss that somehow stoked her own arousal ever higher. Her hands stealthily worked their way under Therese's shirt to the heated skin below, feeling goosebumps follow every inch they traversed.

The intensity of their kiss left them gasping for breath when Carol forced the loss of lip contact as she removed Therese's offending shirt and sweatshirt in one fell swoop. The sight before her eyes stilled her motions, made her lungs cease to pump air, and seemingly made her heart crash to a stop. The only faculty she knew she retained control of was that of sight and she took full advantage of it in her current abeyance. Her eyes strolled across Therese's delicate collarbones, down her pale chest, over the swell of her breasts that nestled in an exquisite white strappy lace bralette, and down still to the flat of her stomach. When her gaze eventually roved all the way up again, it was met by a wide-eyed Therese who she hadn't realised had frozen under the ministrations of her eyes. She accompanied the softening of her own eyes with the slightest of smirks, a contained countenance of sorts which served to reassure the younger woman she held. Therese returned the gesture with vigour to kick Carol's overpowering arousal back into overdrive, making her want nothing more than to kiss her way down the valley of the younger woman's breasts and through the slight cleft of her stomach. With her hand cupping the nape of Therese's neck, she pulled her down to initiate another heated kiss that would get both her and the younger woman to where they wanted to go.

Her lucid mind snapped to attention a moment later, though, as Therese's eager hands began hastily tugging on the buttons of her shirt without their lips missing a beat. She went to still the younger
woman's wayward hands with her own, her eyes involuntarily flashing to the bedside lamp that bathed the room in low but sufficiently good lighting thereafter as she pulled back from their kiss for the briefest of moments. Her hesitation was fleeting but lasted long enough for Therese to notice. The younger woman gently cradled her face in her hands and said, "I want to see you." Her voice was clear and assured while her eyes blazed with an insistence that made Carol swallow her uncertainty. After one final huff, Carol leaned back and merely watched as nimble fingers went to work to deftly unbutton her shirt before manoeuvring for its removal altogether.

Carol felt her trepidation spike to send doubt flooding into her intoxicated consciousness after Therese stopped much the same way she'd done moments earlier. That was until the younger woman's hand began tracing the same line of her gaze as it swept slowly down between her breasts, leaving the skin her fingertips gently caressed puckering with arousal. A quick flash of a pleased smile from Therese and the increasingly dark greens of her eyes banished the last few misgivings Carol had, making her lurch forward to reclaim the younger woman's addictive lips. Their fronts melded together as both desperately clutched at the other to increase the contact between their now overheating bodies. Carol exulted at the feeling of Therese's lithe body pressed against hers and at the push and pull of their heaving chests as they exchanged hot puffs of air, but it was the way the younger woman's hardened nipples jutted into her in earnest that made her head swim. She simply couldn't fight the urge any longer as she dragged her one hand across the flexing muscles of Therese's back to instead knead the younger woman's gloriously firm breast, torturously depriving its puckered peak of the attention it was quite literally straining through the lace for. Despite her befuddled state, she couldn't help think that Therese's breast fit perfectly into her hand, like she was meant to be the one and only one to fondle its supple weight for the younger woman's and her own pleasure.

One thing needed Carol's immediate attention soon after, though, as Therese reached behind her back to undo her bralette. She rushed to stop the younger woman's hands in their endeavour while she kissed her chest. "Let me," she huffed, determinedly locking eyes with Therese for a moment before hungrily kissing her once more. She went to work on the delicate piece as the younger woman did the same on her bra, both competing to free the other from the offending garments first. Carol won out with Therese then desperately pushing herself off the older woman's chest to assist in its removal.

Carol groaned at the sight of Therese's pale pink nipples that were now free to strain to their full height but was silenced by the younger woman as she resumed the rapturous battle of their sliding tongues. She zoned in on a puckered nub without hesitation nor misstep, teasingly rolling its peak between her thumb and index finger, while her other hand ghosted up the younger woman's thigh and below her shorts to be confronted by the radiating heat of her core. The gentle flicking of her finger back and forth across the nipple and her kneading the inside of Therese's thigh made the younger woman claw at her back, undoubtedly sending yet more of her own arousal streaming out of her. All it took was a staggered whimper from Therese after she'd given one firm pinch to the younger woman's nipple to melt away the last semblance of control she still had. She hooked Therese's legs behind her back to flip and shimmy them up the bed in what was a display of arousal-fueled agility with her own bra skillfully being discarded in the process.

The sensation of Therese's taut nipples biting into her bare breasts, the locking of the younger woman's legs behind her to pull her closer with every downward thrust of her pelvis as she ground into her now burning core, and the faltering moans that fumbled their way into her mouth added layer upon layer upon layer onto Carol's already sky-high arousal. And yet, she desperately and greedily wanted more and more, essentially resigning herself to the addiction that was Therese. Her hand raked up the younger woman's thigh until her thumb finally touched down on where her fingers and her mouth hoped to call home. The release of her lips by Therese as she let loose with a
protracted moan allowed her to hungrily kiss down the younger woman's neck and chest before eagerly latching onto a nipple while adeptly giving the other its due attention with her hand. She alternated languidly running the tip of her tongue over its straining surface with firm flattened swipes up and over its peak and slow but increasingly insistent sucking. A single nip to its peak left Therese choking out, "Carol."

The utter desperation of Therese's whine sent an instantaneous and overpowering shot of arousal through Carol, making her spring into action. She pushed herself off the younger woman and pulled her shorts and now sodden underwear off in one swift motion before hastily removing the remainder of her own clothing. They traded hot gasps into one another's mouths at the sudden contact of their overheating naked bodies before they fell back into step of the erotic dance of their lips and tongues. Carol could only handle a few minutes of the rhythmic grinding of their bodies before she felt her want for Therese consume her. She propped herself up on one elbow but remained draped over Therese and slid her other hand slowly down the younger woman's stomach before her fingers almost drowned in the abundant wetness that had seeped out of her. A whimper was stopped in Carol's throat by yet another shock of heat that coursed through her to deepen her own pool of arousal.

"Jesus, you're so wet," Carol whispered, her voice having dropped half an octave to an even sexier gruffness.

Her pleasurable assault on Therese began by her teasingly running her fingers up and down the younger woman's slick slit, coating them in her abundant lubricious nectar but without ever dipping into its depths, before circling her engorging clit with as little pressure as possible. Therese's unbridled moaning and the way she was already writhing around in ecstasy beneath her instantly had Carol utterly transfixed. She stooped to take the younger woman's nipple in her mouth once more and closed her eyes in rapture as she gave herself over to the feeling of the strained nub fighting against her tongue and luxuriant pussy warmly nestling her hand.

The teasing didn't last much longer, though, when Therese gripped Carol's wrist as her fingers idled at the younger woman's wet opening, a silent command for what she wanted. Carol obliged without hesitation by smoothly entering her with two fingers to be embraced by the silken heat of her inner walls. She watched in awe as the younger woman's eyes shot open before fluttering to a screwed close and at the tightening of her mouth into a puckered 'o', this all despite her slick, swollen clit now being deprived of the attention it craved from her thumb and palm. She pulled out all the way and spread Therese's arousal over her other digits, wanting them to share in the product of her skillful taunt. The sudden loss of contact made Therese look at her in desperation before her head snapped back into the pillow as Carol began repeatedly plunging deep into her at an excruciatingly slow pace, the older woman looking to resume her blissful torture once more.

Therese's now incoherent mutterings were laced with tried but failed attempts at profanity. Her nails bit into the hand that was driving her pleasure as she ground her hips down to meet the older woman's every thrust. Carol had long since ignored her mouth's twitching want to envelop Therese's taut nipple in a warm, wet caress, as she willingly resigned herself to being an enraptured spectator of the younger woman's uninhibited display. The curling and gentle massaging of her fingers against Therese's swollen inner wall few moments later accompanied her rubbing the younger woman's sensitive nub left to right, up and down, and round and round with her thumb. If possible, Therese flung her head even deeper into the pillow at the double assault, the suprasternal notch of her arching neck now glistening with sweat that begged to be licked. Carol snaked her mouth down Therese's gleaming neck and chest before succumbing to its wanton desire by suctioning onto a nipple once more. The younger woman abandoned her efforts at coherence as she let loose with a staccato gasp-cum-moan.
Carol resumed her fingers lubricious travels into and out of Therese, matching their pace with the increase of her sucking. It wasn't long before the telltale signs of an imminent loss of control began to pile up for Therese, from the tremble of her legs, the frenzied gyrations of her hips, the repeated clenching and relaxing of her stomach, to the tightening of the walls that sucked Carol's fingers in with all their might. All it took was a bite to the younger woman's nipple and three firm thrusts to send Therese tumbling over the edge, the slamming of Carol's hand against her clit heightening the overwhelming orgasm that tore through her. The younger woman relinquished her vice-like hold on Carol's hand as she balled the bed cover in her white-knuckled fists to assist in the skyward arch of her body off the bed. Carol felt her arousal spike at the sight, at the feeling of the warm wetness that escaped around her fingers to stream into her palm, at the sound of the younger woman's moaned cries as they spluttered out of her mouth, and at the heady smell of arousal that ensconced them in her bedroom.

Carol kept her fingers buried deep inside Therese allowing her to feel every pulsating shock as she rode out her climax, their slackened but persistent movement serving to prolong the younger woman's euphoria. The pace of her thrusts slowed still as the contractions began to ebb, with Therese's hand returning to lock hers in place, insuring her fingers took her to the very end of her orgasm. The eventual removal of the slick digits sounded a lascivious whisper among the laboured breathing that peppered the humid air. They remained nestled between Therese's legs, though, with Carol merely circling the younger woman's throbbing clit with the feather-light touch of her fingertips. Despite not having had a shattering orgasm course its way through her, Carol found herself gingerly climbing up Therese's heaving body on shaky arms and legs to crouch over her. The hooded eyes that gazed up at her still smouldered with desire, making her chest constrict with anticipation. She brushed her lips against Therese's in what was the gentlest of reunions before realigning their fronts. Their tongues began the languid, erotic dance soon after that both knew was a means to an end.

Being too lost in the heat of their kiss and the feeling of sharing in such an intimate embrace with Therese, Carol did not realise she'd unconsciously been grinding down on the younger woman's knee that had propped up to meet her centre an unknown amount of time before. Her intoxicated mind only came to when she felt her own wetness coat the inside of her thigh, evidently deposited there by her wayward gyrations. The sudden coiling she felt in the pit of her stomach made her moan into Therese's mouth and her tongue idle against its writhing partner. Her lips staggered in their departure from the younger woman's as her want knocked her off-kilter.

Carol's momentary loss of control afforded Therese the opportunity to flip them, surprising and somehow arousing the older woman even more with her fleeting display of agility and strength. Therese's hungry lips were on hers for the briefest of moments before the younger woman glided down her body, depositing quick, wet kisses from her neck, down through the valley of her breasts after giving each nipple a popped suck of appreciation, before descending further. Carol offered no resistance when the younger woman parted her legs, finding herself absolutely malleable under even the lightest of touches. Her previous torturous teasing was coming back to bite her in the most pleasurable way possible, with the kisses and nips Therese placed to the side of her knee and down her inner thigh making her puddle before the younger woman even more, both in her mind and between her legs.

Despite her overwhelming state of intoxication, she quite incredibly managed to prop herself up on her elbows as she waited to watch Therese's mouth meet with the epicenter of her arousal. The younger woman locked eyes with her after she'd settled between her spread legs, their entering in a silent conversation that was full of intention. Carol didn't even last the first full flat-tongued lick that swept from the base of her slit up and over her sensitive clit, though, with her head sinking into the pillow after her arms collapsed beneath her. She felt Therese's reciprocating hum of pleasure reverberate through her, its titillating vibrations making her back arch off the bed. She then began to
writhe under the sensual ministrations of the younger woman's tongue, from its probing inside her to its lazy zigzag up and across the hood of her clit. It was the occasional pointed jab to her clit, though, which unravelled her with every blow landed. And with that, it was now her turn to fill the air with her moans and the occasional groaned, "Oh, fuck", "Yes", and "Jesus".

The two fingers that glided into her brought her to the precipice with the unexpected removal of Therese's tongue altogether ensuring that she was torturously held there in abeyance. The hooking and massaging of the younger woman's fingers that soon followed, though, sent Carol's arousal back into overdrive, the insistent goading and raking at her inner wall beginning to undo the last of her feeble restraint. She anchored her heels into the bed to assist in lifting her hips off the bed as she forced greater and deeper contact with Therese's nimble fingers, making the coil in her stomach wind to an unthinkable tightness. The latching of the younger woman's mouth onto her clit and the intense sucking that ensued a moment later broke her as she became overcome by the avalanche of euphoria that was her orgasm. A protracted, "Therese" forced its way out of her before she lost the faculty of speech, resigning her to moan in earnest. Her fingers sank into Therese's hair to lock her in place, desperately wanting to prolong contact between her pussy and the younger woman's ecstasy-inducing mouth, while her hips twitched with every contraction of her core. Her eyes screwed shut as she rode out wave upon wave of blinding rapture.

The radiating sensation of Carol's orgasm lasted for God knows how long, the concept of time having been discarded at the same time as her sanity. She only came to when light kisses peppered their way up her stomach, between her breasts, and then along her undulating throat. With great effort she opened her heavy eyelids to find Therese gazing down at her, the younger woman's eyes now warmed over with tenderness. The dark tresses that curtained Therese's arresting face made her beauty only for Carol to see and this moment only for them to share in. She leaned up to kiss Therese with the younger woman's lips meeting hers halfway.

As expected, the kiss grew in intensity with neck bites, nipple sucks, grinding that brought about the rhythmic meeting of thighs and heated centres, and probing with both tongues and fingers being given in exchange for shudderingly overwhelming climaxes. Both Carol and Therese eventually collapsed in a haze of euphoric exhaustion in the early hours of the morning. Before succumbing to her fatigue, a groggy Carol looked down at the now sound asleep Therese. The sight of the younger woman's tiny body curled into hers, of her head resting against her bare chest, and of her arm slung possessively over her waist after she'd reached across to entwine their fingers in an intimate embrace made her chest flutter. She couldn't stop the escape of her contented sigh that preceded her falling into a blissful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was quite a departure from previous chapters with this one being the smut-filled chapter no one ever asks for ;)

I know a few of you may be surprised that Carol and Therese had sex so soon, especially given how slow the build up to their actually getting together was. My reasoning for their taking the next step so soon is that the desire they have for each other has been there for a long time and they have that familiarity and comfort when around each other that made jumping straight in to things so easy. For me, their biggest obstacle was giving in to their feeling and desires for each other and that opened the proverbial floodgates for them both. I'd like hear your take on it, though :)
I got my schedule and the next 6 months are chocker block full for me. That means that I won't be able to write all too often. But, guys, I said that I would finish this story and I fully intend on keeping my word. It's just that this is the reality of my situation and I will be focusing my energy and attention on getting the hectic first half of my masters done. Writing and the chapters will come in fits and starts but they will come.

Feel free to tell me your thoughts on this chapter or about the story in general :)

Lastly, a massive thank you to F :)
Good morning kisses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carol

Sunday 5 November 2017

Carol stirred lightly in her sleep, her body valiantly clutching onto the last remnants of her serene slumber with all its lazy might, before slowly opening her heavy eyes, feeling ever thankful that the ivory curtains dulled the aggressive morning sun to shroud the bedroom in warm but comforting light. After a few fluttered blinks to clear the last of her drowsiness, she lolled her head to the side and was met with a sight that, under the constrictions of her chest, made her breath stagger in its escape from her. Therese. She immediately shifted onto her side for ease of gazing at the younger woman as she continued to soundlessly sleep beside her, with her. She, too, lay on her side with her one hand propping up the pillow on which her head rested, her dark tresses fanning haphazardly over its surface with a few strays falling delicately across her cheek. Carol's eyes swept slowly over Therese's face, studying every feature of her exquisite countenance, effectively putting to memory the gentle slope of her cheekbones, the subtle glow of her pale skin, and the shape of her parted lips, lips which she now knew to be simply kissable and utterly addictive. The tightening of her chest eased with every inch traversed until it swelled full of elation.

Carol smiled blissfully as moments from the night before flung themselves to the forefront of her consciousness, from Therese's content smile as she looked up at the stars above, the gently brush of their lips as they shared in their first kiss, the kiss that was perfect in its simplicity and yet more fulfilling than she could have ever imagined; and the tenderness of the younger woman's eyes after she stripped herself bare by admitting her own unadulterated happiness at their finally ceding to their feelings for one another. The freshest moments, though, both in memory and in touch, came from their time spent together on the bed in which they currently lay, the bed where their desires overflowed in the most pleasurable of ways, the bed that sealed her enamourment for Therese. Enamourment. The thought didn't scare nor worry her, all she did was bask in having this feeling again but even more so at the woman who was the cause of it. Therese.

A pleasurable ache between her legs soon made itself known, a reminder of a night well spent at the hands and mouth of Therese. The insistent throb left her feeling simply incapable of not peeking below the bed cover which, insultingly to her, concealed the younger woman's body. Her eyes strolled over Therese's glorious naked form, taking in the pale pink nipples she'd kissed that adorned the breasts she'd cradled, the flat of her stomach she'd yet to explore with her mouth but had exulted at its softness under the tips of her fingers, and the bent leg which hung down to cover the last of her modesty. The hunger from last night growled within her once more at the sight she knew she wouldn't tire from seeing any time soon.

After quietly checking to see that it was well after ten o'clock, Carol shifted closer to Therese under the duvet cover which cocooned their intimate warmth. With great care, her finger slowly traced the line of the younger woman's collarbone with her hand then ghosting down from her delicate shoulder and along her slender arm before gently draping her own arm over her slim waist. Every inch of her skin in contact with Therese came alive while rousing the remainder until it yearned for its own long-awaited reunion. Her fingertips lazily caressed up and down the soft skin of the younger woman's back, almost as if she was lightly brushing the strings of a harp to play the most soothing of melodies.

Her touch made Therese stir. She smiled at the younger woman's delightful display of adorableness,
namely the ever so slight furrow of her brow that almost made her look like she was concentrating on
holding onto her sleep and at the way her tongue darted out to lick her lips. The curve of Carol's lips
remained as she leaned down to press a soft kiss to Therese's chest, then another, and another, and
another, with her lips lingering for longer on the supple skin with each one planted. She felt her name
vibrate against her lips when Therese uttered it as she idled once more in her puckered delivery.
After one last kiss, she looked up to meet the younger woman's eyes, the greens of which shone and
mirrored the gentle smile that her adorned her exquisite lips.

"Hi," Carol said, her mouth fighting with her smile every step of the way as she made the simplest of
greetings.

"Hi," Therese replied, her curled lips evidently doing battle much the same way Carol had done
when delivering her greeting. That was the full extent of their conversation for quite some time with
both seemingly too absorbed in gazing and grinning at the other to talk. "Do I not even get a good
morning kiss?" Therese eventually croaked out, her dimples making their first full appearance of the
day.

An emotion shot across Therese's eyes at the typically innocuous question. Quick as a flash, she
snaked her arm under the one which hung loosely around her waist to pull Carol on top of her before
replying, "Not even close." It was the younger woman who initiated the passionate kiss, eagerly
craning her neck to meet Carol's lips while threading her fingers through blonde tresses at the nape of
the older woman's neck to pull her close.

Carol's surprise was fleeting as she soon went to deepen their kiss even more with her anchored
forearms allowing her to insistently press her lips down onto Therese's. Her concerted efforts were
rewarded with the arrival of the younger woman's tongue into her all too eager mouth. The
overpowering want from the previous night flamed up once more as they almost instinctively started
grinding against one another, thighs meeting cores with ease and repeated precision. It wasn't long
before Carol desperately flung the duvet off their now overheating bodies.

Carol felt Therese's hand descend to her breast without hesitation, giving it the quickest but most
rousing of kneads. Her own languid approach to nipple teasing from the night before was not
adopted by the younger woman who instead went the more direct route by firmly pinching its peak.
Carol growled into Therese's mouth and snapped her head back to meet the younger woman's now
darkened eyes. The devilish upturn of Therese's lips taunted Carol, daring her to make the next
move. Carol raised a grin of her own before diving straight for Therese's neck instead of latching
onto her lips that had puckered in anticipation of another kiss as she suctioned onto the delicate skin
of the younger woman's pulse point. The insistent sucking and the wet swipes of her tongue she
added to the mix made Therese shudder below her. It didn't stop the younger woman from searching
for greater contact with Carol's thigh, though, as her hips rose off the bed with repeated earnestness.
Friction is what Therese craved and friction is exactly what she got as a low, protracted moan
escaped her lips.

Carol typically would have allowed Therese to grind away for a little longer. Right then, though,
during the rapid ascent of own her arousal into a blissful oblivion, she found herself being consumed
by a burning desire to taste Therese, having been too enraptured with watching the younger woman
come undone under her fingers the night before to seek her own satisfaction between her legs. She
glided down Therese's body, the sudden departure of her lips from the younger woman's straining neck being met with an anguished whine and desperate clawing at her shoulders. She nipped her way over the swell of Therese's breast, along the edge of her heaving rib cage, and down her stomach before she smiled devilishly against the inside of the younger woman's thigh upon hearing her staccato moan. The last nip placed at the juncture of Therese's thigh and pussy had the younger woman strangling out, "Fuck, Carol", sending a jolt of heat to the older woman's groin.

Not wanting to prolong Therese's torture nor her own any longer, Carol sank between the younger woman's legs and parted them with firm grips to the backs of her thighs. Judging by Therese's moaning and her increasingly limp body, though, such a measure seemed wholly unnecessary as she knew that the younger woman would sooner leave the bed right then than not keep herself open to her mouth. The sight before her instantly made her grind her hips down into the bed in the hopes of creating some pleasurable friction on her clit. She took a moment to gaze at Therese's already glistening folds with the heady smell of the younger woman's arousal confronting and engulfing her, before she committed herself to satisfying both their desires.

She looked up as she dipped her tongue into Therese's slick centre but failed to meet the younger woman's eyes, only seeing the taut nipples that accentuated the peaks flanking the valley of her breasts. She felt Therese flinch under her tongue before she extracted it all the way back into her mouth, wanting to savour the younger woman's taste before she inevitably succumbed to her wanton need for more altogether. She smiled blissfully into Therese's slit before repeatedly plunging her tongue into the wet crevice, feeling the younger woman's slickness slather over its sliding surface. The pointed jabs of her tongue caused incoherent mutterings to stumble out of the squirming younger woman who, by now, had screwed her eyes shut as she willingly gave the reins of her arousal over to Carol. The older woman's reciprocating moan was hummed into Therese's centre as her own arousal crescendoed with gusto, feeling its vibrations bounce off the silken walls in which her tongue currently luxuriated. She shimmied her head side-to-side and bopped it up-and-down as she continued her tongue's ministrations, sporadically making the tip of her nose bump into Therese's clit to send undoubtedly overwhelming shots of ecstasy through the younger woman. The only time the pace of her probing slowed was on the odd occasion her flattened tongue raked slowly up from the base of Therese's opening to the hood of her engorged clit whereupon she gave it the briefest suck of attention.

It wasn't long before Therese's fingers threaded into her hair to insistently pull her closer. The urgency of the younger woman's hair tugging only spurred her on as she flicked the engorged clit once more before sucking it into her mouth altogether with her then torturously holding it there with the least amount of pressure possible. After hooking one of Therese's limp legs over her own shoulder, Carol eased two fingers into the younger woman's pulsating core, feeling the walls desperately suck them into a hot, wet embrace. Her thrusts were consistently slow and deep, teeming her fingers' journey into and out of Therese with gentle sucks on the younger woman's throbbing nub. Therese's arousal overflowed down Carol's fingers with the lascivious squelching sound that accompanied every probe now fighting for dominance with the younger woman's moaning.

She slowed her thrusts and hooked her fingers to stroked the bundle of nerves nestled in Therese's heated inner wall while mounting an all out assault on her clit, sucking in earnest as she drove the younger woman to her climax. Therese could barely force out, "I'm gonna" before her orgasm ripped through her, making her grind down on Carol's mouth with her leg flexing into life to lock her in place. Carol felt the swollen nub twitch against her lips and tongue as her fingers nearly swam in Therese's abundant wetness. The euphoria of eliciting such a response from the younger woman came to wash over her before it settled between her own legs.

Only once Carol felt the lubrious contractions around her fingers become fewer and farther between, did she release the engorged clit and slowly extract her glistening digits. After wiping her
chin and hand, she placed one last peck to the inside of her thigh and another to a taut nipple before aligning their bodies once more, feeling Therese's every laboured breath as her chest heaved below her. She waited until the younger woman's eyes fluttered open to quip, "Was that morning kiss more satisfactory?" Only once the dimples of Therese's satisfied smile revealed themselves did Carol stoop to kiss her.

With audible groans of hunger emanating from both woman a little while later, they reluctantly made their way beyond the four walls of the bedroom in search of some much needed sustenance. Carol had to force her smile around the rim of her cup of coffee as she watched Therese, clad in only her underwear and oversized NYU sweatshirt, move around her kitchen with such ease and familiarity as she prepared what was now a very late breakfast. Her efforts were in vain, though, as, more often than not, Therese would look at her while manning the stove with a knowing smile on her face. They eventually settled down at the kitchen island to have sweet potato and kale hash with oozy poached eggs. Both were evidently ravenous as they ate with silent gusto, the lingering glances and frequent smiles being the only conversation had between them.

"Carol?" came Therese's voice after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

"Hmm?" Carol looked up to find the younger woman stabbing at the last few cubes of her caramelised sweet potato.

"Are we … you know?" Therese forced out after finally meeting Carol's gaze with her hand gesturing back and forth between them.

Despite knowing what Therese was getting at, Carol couldn't resist toying with her just a little bit. "Are we … what?"

"Are we … a th, a thing?"

The almost cringing, furrowed-brow expression on Therese's face broke Carol's composure as her expansive smile came to the fore. "God, Therese, you're so adorable!" she delighted, watching surprise and bashfulness rapidly transformed the younger woman's features. She threaded her slender fingers into Therese's dark tresses as she leaned over to tenderly kiss her, the unhurried movement of their lips undoubtedly reassuring the younger woman. After pulling back, she tentatively ventured. "I hope we're a thing … But, it's entirely up to you."

"Me?" Therese's brow knitted together once more as she studied Carol.

"Therese, you know it wouldn't just be me going into this," Carol said as she herself gestured between them. "I have Rindy...Do you really want to get involved with someone who has an eight-year-old daughter? Someone who will always have to think about her and put her needs first. Can you accept that?" she asked as her eyes flitted searchingly over the younger woman's features. Anxious anticipation made her stomach flip and clench as she waited for an answer she hoped she would not dread to hear.

"Carol," Therese began after her countenance softened. "I know what I'm getting myself into by going into this with you and it honestly doesn't scare me. I know you have to think about Rindy and put her best interests first but I'm not frightened by that. I won't say that I don't care that you have Rindy because that would be a lie. I do care but only because..." She lowered her gaze for the briefest of moments before continuing with a thick voice. "I've liked you for a while now, Carol, and I didn't think I could like you more. But, then I saw that side of you that Rindy brings out and it's only made me like you more. I don't say that lightly or this either, but...I want to be with you." Her eye contact with Carol was strong and unwavering with the conviction of her words also burning in
the green depths of her eyes.

Carol's chest heaved as her heart almost chased itself up and out of her with its racing. They were the words she wanted to hear most but found herself thrown off-kilter, almost unnerved even, upon hearing them. Her mind began to swim leaving her to flounder in disbelief and to search for her senses in the grey stream-like veins of the white marble counter. That was until two hands took her own in a warm embrace. The gentle squeezes drew her eyes back up to Therese's once more, finding the familiar tenderness she'd come to love in them. Her state of abeyance was immediately broken, allowing for a mixture of relief and utter elation to flood forth and overcome her. With great effort she said, "Well, that's that." And, with a sweet kiss to the younger woman's lips, that was, in fact, that.

Although Carol wanted nothing more than to return to bed and stay there all day with Therese, the house needed to be whipped back into shape in time for Rindy's return later that afternoon. Despite Carol's insistence that the cleanup was a one person job, Therese obstinately refused to allow her to do it by herself. And, so, they set about collecting stray glasses of many a shape and size, more than a few half-empty bottles of beer, and plates and bowls littered with remnants of snacks from the night before. The mundanity of the task was sweetened by countless stolen kisses and the occasional playful squeeze Carol sneaked on Therese's bum. It wasn't long before they'd made their way out onto the deck to relax and enjoy an assortment of leftovers, including meatballs, cold pizza bites, spiced almonds, and antipasto skewers. They sprawled out on the ever so comfortable loungers with light conversation being had.

"Do you want to stay for dinner tonight?" Carol asked after a while, watching Therese play with their entwined fingers after the younger woman had snuggled into her side. She found herself greedily wanting to spend the evening with both Rindy and Therese. Most importantly to her, though, was that she wanted the younger woman to begin to experience what a relationship with a child involved would entail as soon as possible.

"I think I need to go home, actually."

"Oh, right... Y-yes." Carol couldn't help the disappointment that crept into her small voice nor the sudden surge of uncertainty she felt.

Therese's head snapped to the side only to find Carol staring blankly ahead. "Hey," she started as she moved to sit sideways across Carol's lap, slinging an arm over her shoulder while her other hand gently tugged on the front of the older woman's shirt. "It's not that I don't want to have dinner with you. It's just that you haven't seen Rindy for three weeks now. So, your first night together should be just the two of you," she explained, her green eyes shining with earnestness.

Carol's unease was immediately and comprehensively expelled by Therese's thoughtful elaboration. Wonderment came to occupy her features, from her tender eyes to her small but light smile. "You know I keep thinking you can't get more incredible but I'm wrong." The younger woman's reciprocating blush and dimple-filled grin made her lean forward for a kiss which, unsurprisingly to her, set her stomach aflutter.

"Would you like to have dinner with us some time this week, then?" Carol eventually asked, briefly interrupting her placing sweet kisses along the length of the younger woman's neck.

Therese stretched her neck, silently encouraging Carol to continue her mouth's peppered travels along the underside of her jaw. "I'd like that. I could cook for us if you like?"

Carol lips stilled against the soft, beating skin of Therese's pulse point before she pulled away. "You
really don't want to try my cooking, do you?” she asked, finding herself simply incapable of not playfully messing with the younger woman.

"No!" Therese placed a reassuring but overwhelmingly passionate kiss to Carol's lips for good measure, making the older woman feel giddy that her little jest had brought about such a desirable result. "I do want to try your cooking but I thought I could give you the night off from cooking duties by cooking for the both of you." The separation of their mouths was fleeting, as the younger woman kissed her once more after whispering, "What do you think?"

"I. Think. That. Sounds. Like. A. Splendid. Idea," Carol said, punctuating her response by pecking Therese's lips. "Are you free this Friday?"

"Yes, I am."

"Great. It's a date then," Carol enthused. She went to reunite their lips once more but Therese inexplicably pulled away.

"Wait, how must I act around Rindy now?” the younger woman asked, her eyes suddenly wide with uncertainty.

Carol looked up at Therese for a moment before resting her hand on the younger woman's thigh in a gesture of reassurance and nothing more. "I think for now we need to keep this just between us. So, that means that we would act like we’re friends around Rindy until she gets used to seeing us spending more time together. Then, ideally, I’d talk to her about us being more than that. I think I’m just going to have to play it by ear, though. Because, honestly, I've never done this before, so I don't know how things are supposed to go or what the best approach is," she answered truthfully.

"I guess we’ll just have to figure it out."

Therese's immediate and easy response blunted the nervousness Carol felt about her impending sit down with Rindy. The younger woman's use of "we" made her realise that they were in this together, that they would indeed figure this out together. She watched as hope and optimism swept over Therese's features which strengthened the growth of her own smile with every millisecond passed until she beamed up at the younger woman. She touched the softness that was Therese's cheek with the backs of her fingers in reciprocation for the hand that came to rest on chest. She slid her hand to cup the nape of the younger woman's neck and pulled her down for a tender, wondrous kiss as her form of agreement.

Carol drove Therese back to her apartment a little while later after both had enjoyed invigorating showers, albeit separately. The younger woman griped about the SUV being too wide for her hand-holding liking but reached across for Carol's hand nonetheless as soon as time permitted, entwining their fingers as their hands rested atop the center console. Carol glanced at Therese throughout the comfortably quiet drive but their eyes never met, instead finding the younger woman staring ahead with a single dimple popped in her cheek. The simplicity of Therese's slight but contented smile filled Carol with absolute buoyancy, forcing her to drag her eyes away from the enchanting woman beside her as they continued on in their journey to their imminent departure.

She parked outside Therese's apartment building and graced over to chivalrously open her car door. The simple gesture tinted the apples of the younger woman's cheeks which she then valiantly tried to hide by focusing on safely dismounting the car with the help of Carol's steadying hand. Their hands immediately sought each other out with their fingers lacing together as if they'd always done so. Carol couldn't keep her eyes off the younger woman, as she allowed herself to be blindly lead forward with an unabashed smile curling her lips. The embrace of their hands was broken as they
entered the elevator whereupon Carol slung an arm around Therese's slender shoulders and pulled the younger woman closer until she snuggled into her side. She would have become distracted by the hand that slid into the back pocket of her jeans that reciprocated her pressing a kiss to Therese's dark tresses, were it not for the younger woman beaming up at her with a smile that brimmed with dimples.

The pose remained as they arrived at Therese's door. Not wanting to break their serenely comfortable silence they had cocooned in since leaving her home, Carol gently cupped Therese's face in both her hands and kissed her with the younger woman's arms winding around her waist to pull her closer. The kiss was absolute in its simplicity and yet the overwhelming emotions that flooded Carol as their lips slowly moved together suggested it was anything but. She eventually opened her eyes to find the very same whirl of emotions she felt sparkling in the green depths of Therese's eyes. She suddenly felt herself ablaze at the sight, not with the wanton hunger from last night and much of the day, but rather with something greater and more fulfilling.

Carol wrapped Therese up in a tight hug that was full of longing, feeling the younger woman's tiny body immediately melt in to hers to share in the warmth of their affection for one another. A giddy smile plastered itself onto her face when they eventually pulled back from each other after Therese sneaked one last kiss on her neck. She breezed her hands down the younger woman's arms to take her hands in her own as she stooped to place a lingering peck on her dimpled cheek, eking out the very last of their contact. She beamed her goodbye at a blushing Therese before forcing herself with great and reluctant effort to turn on her heel to leave.

Chapter End Notes

This will be last chapter I post for some time. I just wanted to get this chapter out because I really need to focus all my attention and energy on my work. Like I've said before, though, this is not the last you will hear from me and our ladies. I really look forward to picking up where I left off with you guys when I do update again :)

Let me know your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Cheers, K :)

Hey! So, I'm back. Well...kinda. You know what, I don't actually know. All I know is that I've missed writing (and you guys, of course!) and so I decided to pick up my pen again - that is the pen in my mind because I type this stuff up *shrugs* Anyway... I decided to post this on a whim. As a result, it hasn't been beta'd so please excuse any typos or grammatical errors. Let me know if there are any because that shit annoys the hell outta me.

I hope you guys enjoy this slightly longer than usual chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Therese

Sunday 5 November 2017

Well, don’t I just look ridiculous right now? A wide smile practically split Therese’s face into northern and southern hemispheres as she rested against the door of her apartment immediately after Carol left, effectively recreating a scene from just about every romantic movie in cinematic history where the protagonist goes to mush after parting from their lover with a sweet kiss. She was so lost in bouncing around within the bubble of happiness she found herself suspended in that she nearly jumped out of her skin when a quickfire double rap sounded behind her a few moments later. Without any thought nor hesitation, she wheeled around to open the door and was met by the very catalyst of her current state of intoxication. There stood Carol with Therese's handbag held before her from a single, hooked finger, her grin slight but with mischief brimming in her eyes.

"You really should be more careful with your belongings, Miss Belivet," Carol purred with a single brow tauntingly cocked.

Therese flushed at the sound of Carol’s alluring smoky voice, at the gaze that seemed to incinerate every fibre of her rational being, quite simply at Carol. With great uncoordinated effort, Therese managed to take hold of the handbag before hastily tossing it inside her apartment, not caring in the slightest as to where or how it landed. She coughed to clear the sudden thickness in her throat before saying, "Thank you...You were distracting me earlier." Daringly, she looked up through her lashes at the woman diverting all coherence from her mind with a slight smirk now having made its way onto her lips.

An emotion streaked across Carol’s exquisite features before she smiled satisfactorily back at Therese. Without moving, she leaned in over the threshold until her lips were mere inches before the younger woman's and whispered, "I’m just getting started on distracting you, darling."

The sultry assertion forced its way into Therese, leaving her idle lips slightly parted upon its audacious entry. The younger woman’s abeyance wasn’t allowed to last for long as Carol’s full lips captured her own and set about her revival in earnest. Inexplicably and disappointingly, though, the kiss ended almost as soon as it began when Carol straightened up. It was a fleeting meeting of now sensuous partners, much too short for Therese’s liking, that somehow managed to stoke her arousal as effectively as dousing fire with jet fuel. She huffed in abject dissatisfaction and allowed for her
eyes to be the looking glass into her inner self, where her want for Carol had instantaneously freed itself from its lousy restraints before bolting forth in a frenzied rush.

Almost as if being able to hear Therese's desirous thoughts, Carol cupped the nape of her neck as she stepped forward to possessively claim the younger woman's lips once more. The kiss was hungry, utterly insatiable, and all-consuming with the arrival of Carol's tongue into Therese's mouth quickly and easily extracting a low moan from the very depths of the younger woman's rapidly deepening arousal. Carol pulled back after a beat with her lightly tugging on Therese's lower lip as she parted but kept her long fingers woven in the younger woman's thick locks. A disgruntled groan emanated from Carol almost immediately after, though, and so, she went in for another heated kiss. Therese responded with her own wanton enthusiasm as she snaked her hands below Carol's shirt to traverse her warm and delightfully supple skin below.

Just as the world began to fall away around them, the sound of advancing voices dragged them back to reality, back to their intense necking in the doorway of Therese's apartment for any passersby to see. Therese withdrew her wayward hands and casually pulled Carol's shirt back into place with the older woman then taking a step back to put some much needed distance between them. After nodding her greeting at the elderly couple that walked by, Therese grinned back at an uncharacteristically blushing Carol. The reciprocating far from innocent lip bite immediately wiped the smug smile off the younger woman's face, making her feel offended that she was not the one nipping and tugging at that luscious lower lip. She went to close the torturously vast gap between them for what already felt like a long overdue kiss but a firm hand splayed across her chest stopped her dead in the tracks of her lustful endeavour.

"You are going to make me late," Carol said as she lightly jabbed Therese's sternum with her finger, sending radiating heat through the younger woman's chest with each pointed touch.

"And, yet, here you still stand," Therese playfully quipped, finding herself leaning into Carol's finger to prolong contact. Her overeager arousal was put on hold at the sight before her. Carol's adorable nose crinkling smile and the mirth that began to well up and twinkle in hers eyes as she guffawed had the younger woman standing and staring in silent enrapturement.

"I really should go," Carol admitted rather wistfully, her previously expansive smile moving to occupy the confines of her blue-grey eyes as she gazed tenderly back at Therese.

The younger woman knew this to be true, and so, she ceded with a reassuring smile and a playful tug at the front of Carol's slightly rumpled shirt. The older woman stepped forward and gently took Therese's face in both hands with her thumbs languidly stroking the younger woman’s cheeks. Therese tried to hold their eye contact but her eyelids fluttered to a heavy close at the soft caress. A kaleidoscope of colours banished the darkness before her eyes as Carol's lips softly met her own, the tiles shifting and hues changing as she succumbed to Carol’s kiss altogether. A drawn out sigh was pulled from her lips as they opened and slowly slid against Carol’s, her synapses opening at their touch to savour the mere feeling of their sharing in another heavenly kiss.

After one last chaste kiss on the lips, Carol warmly embraced Therese. She angled her head down as she nuzzled into the younger woman’s hair and whispered, "See you tomorrow, baby." And, with that, Carol turned and parted from Therese altogether.

Therese found herself being supported by her door once more with an equally dopey smile adorning her face, Carol's breathy "baby" now having made both her physical and mental beings go to jelly. *I would be a puddle before her if she kissed me again.* She typically would have chastised herself for such an adolescent thought but her supposed adult rationality was too busy luxuriating in her resplendent happiness to care. Any and every thought she could possibly have at that moment was
rounded up by an all-encompassing feeling of elation that had assumed control of her, making her feel like her body was the balloon cart ensuring that her spirits didn’t float away like an unruly bunch of balloons.

Seemingly under the weight of the plethora of snapshots of Carol that were now playing on loop in her mind, spanning the first sight of her standing casually on the deck to the last glimpse of her dazzling smile as she nipped out of sight mere moments ago, Therese sank deep into her couch, her body slackening with every inch advanced until she moulded snugly with its contours. It actually happened. She smiled giddily at the thought and quite sillily touched the tips of her fingers to her lips which Carol had now emphatically taken ownership of.

With glossy, unfocused eyes, she stared blankly ahead and just allowed herself to be overcome by the pure disbelief she felt at all that had taken place in the last 24 hours. Perhaps most inconceivable to her was the polarity between her current mood and that after the emotional undressing that was her conversation with Abby. Laying out her thoughts on why anything had yet to happen between her and Carol in such frank and agonising detail made it all so real to her, like saying all that she felt aloud sealed its immutability and her own despair. The ensuing inner turbulence she felt had her slinking into the party’s periphery before escaping from its suffocating joviality altogether in search of something, anything, to quieten her overwhelmingly unsettled mind. She was thankful then that everyone was either too engaged in conversation or made blissfully unaware by a haze of inebriation to notice her slipping away.

Unsurprisingly to her, she found herself being embraced by the familiar comfort of nature, with only the beach, the wonderful subtle briny breeze blowing off the Pacific Ocean, and its ephemeral waves for company. She tried to imbue the coolness of the sand that clinged to her exposed legs into her veins, willing it to quell the rampagings of her heart. The coming and going waves eventually succeeded in pacifying her, the rasping of trillions of grains of sand sliding in unison against one another ground away at the warring front of her consciousness until it stilled to a steady calm. And so, she set about erecting a wall of sorts that would both contain and protect her from the volcanic feelings Carol erupted within her, one she hoped would prevent her from crumbling at the feet of the older woman were she to read too deeply into the slightest twitch of her lips or the most innocuous of looks.

The cement binding Therese’s buttress together had barely dried when the very source of her disquieted state sought her out on the beach and began what was the younger woman’s ultimate undoing. Carol’s sonorous voice seemed to mosey its way through Therese’s new line of defence with ease, her love for the soothing sound betraying her own resolve to leave her exposed to whatever. The cover of relative darkness rendered Therese unable to physically see Carol's trepidation but it seemed to radiate off her, having it briefly pound away at Therese before she gave in to Carol's will altogether and allowed her to to end her own solitude. The meaning behind Carol’s offering up her sweater to Therese thereafter -that she cared for and thought about the younger woman- meant more than the gesture itself. Perhaps without realising it, the older woman cracked Therese’s chest wide open in that moment and enveloped her vulnerable heart in a comforting embrace that slowly reversed all that she had inflicted on the younger woman. It was then that Therese felt that familiar and addictive warmth suffuse her chest once again and with it, felt herself being pulled back in by Carol bit by bit, both willingly and unwillingly.

The flirtation that imbued their conversations effectively since their introduction nearly two months prior clicked back into place with a tennis match of playful jests unfolding between them as they enjoyed a couple of stouts. With a healthy dose of alcohol having trickled its way into her veins, Therese decided to throw caution to the wind and test the waters, again going against the wishes of her mended but weakened heart. She chanced her hand by alluding to the fact that the only way in which her evening could have been improved was if she’d seen more of Carol. It was a simple and
wholly truthful confession, one she hoped would provoke a reaction from Carol. Given the lightness of their conversation, though, she wasn't holding out much hope for anything beyond a tease in return.

But Carol called Therese’s bluff when she insisted on making it up to the younger woman. The sudden change in Carol’s demeanor, one Therese sensed was a peculiar mix of purposefulness and nervousness, threw the younger woman for a loop and right into a state of silent confoundment. There was a twinkle in Carol’s eye as she looked down at Therese, though, the type which the younger woman had yet to see, a certain something that Therese sensed had nothing to do with the dark water glimmering before them. She wanted to dive headfirst into Carol’s eyes and delve deep into their depths to find where the sparkle originated from, to discover what brought about its genesis. And so, she took Carol's's hand, the mere touch of the older woman's fingers as they lingered in her own making electricity bound from the point of contact to the very extremities of her body, meeting those ends with force before pinballing around within her; and allowed herself to be lead wherever.

Therese found herself incapable of not staring around her as they made their way through the house, a house whose aesthetics were quintessentially Carol but a house which was alive with her energy and exuded the familiarity the younger woman always felt around her. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on -perhaps a dull but persistent longing of sorts- but had felt for some time seemed to ebb as that familiarity swathed her. Time seemed to slow as they continued on deeper into the house but she didn't care, not when the flashes of Carol's brilliant smile as she looked back at her were guiding her forward.

Like all good things that are finite in nature, though, that feeling would come to an end, her bubble of serenity being punctured as the last room of the passage came into view. Fear seemed to rear within her at warp speed as the bedroom’s interior revealed itself inch by inch. *Those connotations* one associates with someone taking you to a bedroom to supposedly "redeem" themselves had Therese’s mind wandering along a lascivious path she’d traversed quite often since meeting Carol. Now, though, it gave rise to a jumble of thoughts that had an overarching theme of alarm, that *that* surely could not be Carol's intentions.

That sudden overwhelming sense of unease she felt was somewhat quelled by the touch of Carol's hand on the small of her back as they continued on past the bedroom but it began to fester within her once the older woman had disappeared upstairs to the rooftop terrace a few moments later. The proliferation of her unease was slow and perhaps imperceptible at first before its far-reaching tendrils knotted together to hang on her very being, almost akin to the unwanted stench of cigarette smoke that seems to weave its way into every fibre of one’s clothing, making it an almost unshakeable impediment for anything akin to joy from developing. Therese began to worry that this would be how she would feel from now on, cautious of getting her hopes up, almost waiting for the dreaded shoe to drop that would arrest the advances of her wishes in their endeavour to come to fruition. It was almost as if something was now silently holding her back, essentially preventing her from giving herself over to her overwhelming want and feelings for Carol. In those few agonising minutes spent alone, she came to the conclusion that she'd likely come to simultaneously hate and cherish this new protector of hers.

Any misgivings she felt were comprehensively extinguished when she finally joined Carol in the rooftop terrace, though, and saw utter relief wash over the older woman. Carol's features softened until her bright eyes outshone their celestial companions suspended overhead in the sooty night sky and the warmth of the room seemed to be the pooling of all that overflowed from her smile. Just one look at Carol told Therese that *that* was the defining moment for her, for *them*. That her hopes, *their* hopes, hinged on what happened right then. The realisation seemed to strengthen the almost gravitational force that pulled her towards Carol but her weary rationality fought equally hard to stop
her from giving in to it altogether, not just yet. She recalled exploring the terrace thereafter but failed to absorb her surroundings, instead finding herself hypersensitive and acutely away of Carol and the effect her proximity had on her.

Then the beginning of the glorious climax of their coming together came when the fields of energy between them compressed to an unthinkable strength as Carol came to stand directly before Therese as she looked up at the stars above. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before Therese's darted downward to track the almost slow motion movement of Carol's hands as they came to rest either side of her knees. Anxiety tried to rear up within her at the sight but her neglected want for Carol counter-punched, bravely forcing her to meet Carol's gaze once more. There was the faintest but undoubted tinge of nervousness in Carol's voice as she spoke, her words then more loaded with intent than ever before. The thickness of the air between them seemed to conduct the determination that burned in Carol's eyes to Therese's, essentially torching the restraints on the younger woman's excitement to allow it to lurch within her, having it meet her ribcage with force to bring about the heaving of her chest. Those few moments of intense eye contact felt like an eternity, where she stood precariously on the edge of oblivion and waited for the fateful plunge into its depths.

That sudden rush that had her leaning towards Carol was fleeting as she was forced to seek some respite from Carol's gaze, the immensity of that moment succeeding in defeating her. Thankfully, Carol took the initiative and got them back on track to where they both wanted and needed to go. Therese felt the slight tremble of Carol's hand before it came to rest on her cheek, the caress of the older woman's thumb then going about building her up again with each stroke, giving Therese the strength she needed to lock eyes with Carol once more. Carol's eyes shifted back and forth between her own, making her look like she was trying to find the perfect sequence that would unlock some yet indecipherable code in Therese's. All Therese saw, though, was the absolute want that was begging to be let loose into the world, finding it restrained by the layer of misty tenderness that always seemed to cover Carol's eyes as she looked at her. It was that very look of conflict that broke her.

She remembered thinking, This is it, as Carol moved to stand between her legs, the ghosting of the older woman's hands up her thighs making her muscles twitch like they were possessed by some otherworldly force. It was the pounding of her heart against her ribs that pushed her incrementally forward but she somehow stopped just before Carol's lips. She needed to know that Carol wanted this, wanted her enough, that a sudden cruel twist of fate wouldn't have her falling into an inescapable pit of despair. The cacophonous tumult of her heartbeat and the frenzied panic of thoughts that had erupted within her as she idled dulled her hearing, making her only know she'd asked, "Are you sure" because she felt the whisper of the prominent curve of Carol's upper lip against her own as she spoke. Before any more of her insecurities could fly out of her mouth, Carol closed the infinitesimally small gap between them and brought about the tender meeting of their lips. That kiss. Therese sighed deeply, shook her head, and then smiled to herself at the thought.

Their kiss was held in abeyance as they sighed synchronously, making it almost seem like they'd both stopped to savour the mere taste of each other for the first time. Therese felt the muscles of Carol's back and the tension in her lips slacken as they eased themselves into the kiss, knowing full well that she had done much the same. She came alive in that moment, like the touch of Carol's soft lips was the key that finally clicked into place and unlocked all the portals of her senses, allowing her to absorb anything and everything around her, from the brush of Carol's hair against her cheek and the texture of her full lips as they embraced her own to the intoxicating muddle of citrus and musky notes of Carol's perfume that bombarded her olfactory system.

Nothing was singular or perceived in isolation, though, everything about that moment was interlinked and dynamically interacting with Carol being the lone golden thread weaving every
element together, making her the central node of that network and arguably Therese's world at large. Something built up within Therese as they kissed, something besides her now unencumbered lust, something that made her feel whole. It was almost like Carol put the missing puzzle pieces of Therese into place, completing a picture she hadn't realised just how much she longed to see in all its glory. She knew then that she would never be the same again, that this kiss would mark the point separating the before and after periods of her life, that what she once thought would be a perpetually taunting mirage had materialised before her and had immersed herself in since.

The blue-grey eyes that gazed back at her as they broke apart were the clearest she'd ever seen them, allowing her to see right into their very depths to glimpse at all that lay within them. Just one look into them and she could tell that Carol was as irreversibly changed as she was, that her ardent feelings were reciprocated with equal vigour. The realisation imbued her with a fearlessness that had her agreeing to stay with Carol that night - and for however many more- without hesitation, doing so because she didn’t worry about what lay beyond the moments they'd spend together, all she wanted was to explore all its facets and embrace all that would come from doing so.

Therese smiled at herself once more as she thought about the remainder of their time spent together in the rooftop terrace and wondered just how the hell they did not succumb to their wanton desires for each other then and there. This was especially dumbfounding after countless swipes of their tongues, a smattering of tugs and sucks on one another's lips, the feel of Carol's lips against her neck as she peppered it with typically soft but occasionally wet kisses, and the restrained wanderings of their hands that collectively had the fruits of her arousal seeping out of her. The only feasible explanations she could come up with was that the concept of time was discarded the moment their lips met or that they were too euphorically lost in finally ceding to their feelings for one another to give mind to something as inconsequential as time.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, she thought with a wry shake of her head.

How Newton's third law of motion came to her was beyond her but it explained perfectly how she felt when they were thrust back into a world that no longer comprised of just the two of them, where the highest high was juxtaposed by what felt like the lowest low as they reintegrated themselves back into their reality some time later. The sight of Abby's slight but knowing smile sent her crashing from the peak of her elation, the other woman's wide-eyed intrusion somewhat sullying the pristineness of that memory. The best way she could describe how she felt was like a satellite that had been knocked off its orbit and sent into the boundless dark void of space with no sense of direction or control. The stark contrast between how she felt before and how she felt after had her flailing in uncertainty as to just how to act. Not even the uplifting and comforting presence and touch of Carol could reel her back in and fully dispel the unease that had permeated her being, instead having it hang on her like dank clothing. She desperately wanted to escape back to where they'd been before and the feeling that came with it but found herself simply at a loss for just how to do so.

Much like before, though, Carol succeeded in bringing Therese back to her, the tender kiss she pressed to the younger woman's hair after they'd made their way back onto the beach being the physical trigger that allowed all the emotions from before to engulf her once more. She would have been quite happy to just sit there quietly before the dying embers of the fire, the warmth from which paled in comparison to all that pervaded her from Carol's touch, and bask in their finally being truly alone. But of course, Carol gently probed her, touching base with her to discern the undoubted whirl of thoughts that was to blame for her obvious uncomfortable silence. She knew she could not put into words all that she felt and so she settled on the simplest but most dominant of truths within her: her sheer disbelief that something had finally happened between them.

After pulling back from the reciprocating kiss that set her stomach aflutter, Therese watched Carol's chest rise and fall deeply as she looked intently and unrelentingly at the younger woman with eyes
that again bore the etchings of conflict, this time between want and fear. The simple but heartfelt words that softly tumbled out of Carol's mouth, that she was delighted that they'd ceded for their feelings for one another, sent a wave of affection washing over Therese, the strength of which left her incredibly exposed but strangely not in the least bit scared of admitting her own unadulterated happiness. That very same lack of fear of consequence had her asking what had changed for Carol to want this given that she'd agonisingly ceded control of whatever were to happen between them to the older woman just days earlier. The answer that was forthcoming had her overwhelming need for Carol take control of her as she launched herself forward to forcefully kiss the older woman. Something carnal within her slowly revealed itself with each prolonged graze of their lips, every pointed probe of Carol's tongue, and the rousing groping of her hands in their sensual exploration of the older woman's body. It finally broke forth into the open when Carol forced her way below Therese's bra and came dangerously close to her strained nipple.

Her desperate plea-cum-demand eventually led them down a path she'd wanted to traverse for so long and to a place she simply did not believe existed, a place where she couldn't distinguish between her emotional desires and sexual desires because they were so imbibed by the other. There was no point in trying to remember when she'd had sex quite like that she had with Carol because it simply had never happened to her before. Never once had she given herself so completely over to another and have them do the same with equal vigour. Never once had she felt herself come so alive at the touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight of another. Never once had she felt such ecstasy, an addiction that had her desperately longing for another hit whilst still in the passioned throes of another. Never once had she felt herself completely lost in the moment and at the mercy of the intangible force that possessed her. Never once had she wanted to strip herself bare and display the vulnerability she'd always vehemently protected by withholding it from others.

She recalled looking down at their bodies as she drove Carol to another orgasm with the thrusting of her hand, finding herself incapable of telling where she ended and Carol began. That realisation had nothing to do with the jumble of their intertwined and writhing limbs, though. Her energy and what she was feeling fed into Carol, finding herself willing and ready to adapt to whatever she received in turn from Carol. The realms of that feedback between them changed with every shift in the power dynamics between until they amalgamated into one all-encompassing and shared desire for one another. It was that change that Therese realised had made them become one. It was a change that was definitive and absolute.

As she lay in bed that night with another smile plastered on her face, this time from a sweet goodnight message Carol had sent her, Therese thought back to something Sister Alicia had said to her a short while after she'd seen her mother for the last time. Despite not wanting to get too philosophical, Sister Alicia had explained a quote from Way of the Peaceful Warrior by Dan Millman, "The secret to change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new". It had helped her move forward back then from the toxicity and tumultuous wake her mother had left her treading. The quote seemed to resonate with her once more, though, now for a different reason. She didn't want to dwell on the person she was before Carol swept in and changed her life because that would take away from whatever and wherever that change was going to lead her. All she wanted to do was to run boldly and blindly towards it and embrace whatever came from it, doing so both fearlessly and fearfully.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if this is quite the update you expected or perhaps wanted but I felt I
couldn't move on with the story without expressing Therese's experience of their finally getting together. The next chapter will have the story actually moving forward.

I found myself reading stories by writers old and new from this incredible fandom and it's inspired some changes in my own writing -for the better I hope:)  

Let me know your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Cheers, K :)
Therese

Monday 6 November 2017

Therese walked into work on Monday with a distinct pep in her step, the aftershocks of the weekend’s seismic events still reverberating through her in joyous waves of varying strength. She’d practically bolted out of bed that morning and went straight to her kitchen to start her day off right: by making a good cup of coffee. Only after decanting the freshly ground Sunset Cliffs dark roast from her burr grinder into her French press did she realise she’d woken up a full two hours before her alarm was set to go off, her overeagerness to see Carol having robbed her of what it deemed to be inconsequential sleep. As a result, she sat on the window seat trying to enjoy her coffee but found herself too preoccupied watching the agonisingly slow rotation of the hands of the wall clock to appreciate its bold, rich flavours. Her patience eventually wore through after what felt like hours but was really about twenty minutes, with her turning her back on the clock’s taunting face with an exasperated huff. The coffee’s nutty caramel and chocolate notes were then finally embraced by her taste buds thereafter, making her realise she’d unconsciously chosen a brew that had a strikingly similar flavour profile to that of the stout she’d enjoyed with Carol on the beach just two days prior. She smiled at the memory and got lost in its transcendence. Then before she knew it, it was time to get ready for work.

Upon entering the office, Therese found Dannie lightly bopping his head as he listened to some music, the movement of his unruly hair somewhat restrained by his snug-fitting headphones. She could tell by the way his fingers flew across the keys and the slump in his shoulders that he was in the zone, his tunnel vision in moments like those rendering him unawares of anyone or anything around him. After dumping her things at her desk, she went over and lightly tugged on his sweater before hopping up on the side of his desk that was less cluttered with an assortment of office supplies and a smattering of loose pieces of paper.

“Hey, T!” Dannie smiled crookedly at her after he’d slung his headphones around his neck. “Aren’t you looking all smiley and happy today? You do realise it’s Monday, right?” he asked in a humoured tone.

“Am I?” Therese quite sillily touched her right cheek and found that she was in fact smiling, the tip of index falling into the deep cleft of her dimple. She felt warmth travel up her neck before pooling in her cheeks, suddenly more than worried that she was that transparent. “I don’t feel any different. I’m sure it won’t last, though, because like you said, it’s Monday after all.” She shrugged indifferently,
hoping her Dannie would buy her feigned nonchalance.

“Yeah, I think you’ve somehow forgotten what a shitshow Mondays are,” he said with a light chuckle. “Hey, how was the rest of your weekend?”

“Uneventful.” She counted that as the second white lie in the space of a minute but moved swiftly on by asking, “How was yours? Abby told me you were moping around and kept mumbling about missing Louise before you left on Saturday.”

“Did I?! Shit, that’s so embarrassing. Why the hell did you let me get that drunk?” he asked incredulously with his brows furrowing ever so slightly.

“Good morning,” came Carol’s voice from behind Therese before she could reply, sending electricity tearing down the younger woman’s spine to her limp limbs. The sudden shock made her jerk off the desk rather ungracefully, dropping the stapler she’d been fiddling with whilst sending a small collection of papers cascading to the floor from her hasty dismount. She silently cursed herself under her breath as she quickly gathered the scattered miscellany before snapping back into a bolt upright position.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you, Therese,” Carol said with an amused lilt, the devilish smile that curled her lips making her look anything but sorry. She shot Dannie a sly wink before looking back at the younger woman with a conspiratorial glint in her eye.

Therese soundlessly opened and closed her mouth, drawing a striking resemblance to a fish out of water, finding all appropriate responses jammed in her throat as they fought for the position of most cheeky. She was about to attempt a quip when something inexplicable sneaked up and sucker-punched her in the gut, winding her and stopping the travels of any words that were forthcoming. The ominous and powerfully dangerous fingers of fear had wound around her and seized her in an unshakeable vice-like grip with panic thrown in as a cruel afterthought. *Shit shit shit. How the fuck do I do this?!* It dawned on her as her eyes darted back and forth between Carol and Dannie that she had no clue how to act now, like a spontaneous bout of amnesia chose that exact moment to wreak havoc on her memory, making her forget just how she’d been interacting with Carol all along.

She’d found herself too bewitched by her newfound elation to give mind to the effects their getting together would have on how they conducted themselves around one another at work but more importantly how the dynamics of their working relationship changed. The lead brick that was realisation sunk to the pit of her stomach but continued to be at the mercy of gravity, the abject anxiety she suddenly felt seemed to crush her from within, making it difficult for her to breathe and her eyes bulge as she stared back at Carol. She watched as Carol’s smile faded to be replaced by a look of concern that was accented by quickest of flashes of alarm that streaked across her eyes as the seconds of deafeningly awkward silence ticked by.

“She’s all weird and jumpy today,” came Dannie’s voice through the haze of Therese’s mind, seeing in her periphery that he’d directed his light comment at Carol with a wry shake of the head.

Carol didn’t address him as she spoke in a controlled voice that boarded on strained, instead keeping her eyes locked on the younger woman, “I can see that. Are you all right, Therese?” She took a small step towards the younger woman but didn’t reassure her with the touch of her hand as would usually be the case, perhaps refraining from doing so because she knew it could trigger something more damaging and damning from spouting from Therese.

Therese somehow managed to snap out of her stupor before staggering in her reply, “Y-yeah. I, I think I just had too much coffee this morning. I’m just a bit, uhhh -I don’t know- uhh, jittery.” She tried to assuage their concerns by smiling but knew it probably came out looking more like a painful
grimace than a show of being at ease. Not really knowing what else to do to diffuse the stifling situation nor trusting herself to say anything that wouldn’t incriminate both her and Carol, she fled from the scene under the pretense of starting her day’s work. And that’s exactly what it: pretense. She sat rigidly at her desk, opened to a random page of her notebook, and began jotting down nondescript sentences that lacked much meaning and even less order. But her charade served its purpose because soon enough she heard the frenzied tap-tap-tap from Dannie’s corner and the dissonant sound of Carol rummaging through the drawers of her desk.

Therese’s hope that time would blunt the powerful mix of trepidation, helplessness, and dread that had laid assault on her but it failed to do so, instead having those feelings fester in the pit of her stomach, having it slowly fill her until it seemed to seep out through her pores, the dimensions of her physical being seemingly insufficient to allow for its relentless proliferation. Each of her attempts at work were ultimately in vain, her cognition curtailed by those torturous fiends, the stimulus from her laptop or notebook failing to generate impulses that were able to jump the synapse that would bring about recognition and understanding of what she read or wrote. To put it simply, she was numb and defeated. Numbed by an intangible force that she hadn’t had the foresight to consider and appropriately prepare for and was now being made to pay for that error in judgement by ceding to it altogether. What she didn’t consider as her blank eyes roved across innumerable lines of useless text, though, was just how long this feeling would persist for without getting the better of her.

Therese was pulled from her troubled thoughts maybe two or three hours later. She couldn’t be sure, though, evidently having lost the concept of time as she’d lost her calm. The sensation of her phone vibrating against her arm finally brought her back to the present, that physical trigger forcing her to re-engage with her reality. She opened her messaging app to find a new message from Carol along with six others she’d unknowingly received some time during the day.

Carol >I know you usually have your lunch here but I thought perhaps you’d like to join me for lunch at Café 21 instead. Would you?

Therese read the message over a few times, needing that repeated intake of words to fully grasp what was being asked. After checking to see that Dannie was still absorbed in his work, she cast her eyes across at Carol for the first time since this morning’s uncomfortable encounter. Carol was facing Therese with a ring-bound document held open before her and the end of her pen wedged between her nude lips but her eyes were trained on the younger woman, the older woman creating her own illusion of focus. She cocked a brow in questioning and continued to look intently at Therese until the younger woman diverted her eyes down.

Therese >Yes

Carol >Great. We’ll take my car and leave at 12:30

For some reason Therese couldn’t bring herself to meet Carol’s intense gaze once more, instead choosing to focus her energy on trying to push her unease down so she could actually enjoy their lunch together. She chanced a glance at Carol a few minutes later, though, finding her poring over a thick book, her long fingers of one hand splayed across its pages to keep it from closing while the
other glided across her notepad, laying down what Therese knew was word upon word of her neat script, looking as cool, focused, and collected as ever.

The polarity between the manner in which they were acting sent a pang of guilt cleaving through Therese. Just how was she so inept while Carol seemed to have assimilated all that had happened between them from the past few days and managed to integrate back into work with what appeared to be abundant ease? Was her own incompetency rooted in her inexperience? But she could hardly consider herself to be inexperienced. She’d dated Richard for close to a year and still managed to work with him without difficulty or fuss nor the slightest foray into falling to pieces like she was now doing.

What she now had with Carol felt different somehow, though. It's because you like her more, you idiot. The realisation of something she already knew to be true somehow still came out of the blue and knocked her off-kilter. She swallowed hard and tried to read an email Tim had just sent her but he mind wandered back to that thought over and over again, almost like a boomerang stuck in an infinite loop of coming and going. There was more riding on what she now had with Carol and that was perhaps why she was more affected. The fact that she was already stumbling at the first minor hurdle immediately made her think that perhaps she wasn't cut out for this, that she wouldn’t be able to switch the personal and professional sides of herself on and off at the drop of a hat. Even if she was able to get past this overwhelmingly shaky start, how would she fare when bigger challenges arose? Would she flee once more in the hope of escaping it all despite knowing doing so would just delay facing the inevitable. She began to squirm in her office chair that suddenly began to feel like a restraint chair because in that moment she thought that there was now the very real possibility of her fucking things up one way or another and that terrified her.

She looked across at Carol once more, perhaps hoping to find something akin to a green light flashing at the end of a dock that would guide her safely through this tempestuous storm she currently found herself drowning in. Like countless times before, Therese found herself humbled and awed by Carol as the older woman absentmindedly but gracefully run her fingers through her blonde tresses before delicately adjusting her glasses. How was Carol keeping it together? Would Therese herself ever be able to attain that level of control? Had Carol perhaps gone through something similar to this before and learned how to navigate those slippery slopes more effectively than Therese was at present? Was Carol less affected because she didn’t feel like there was as much riding on what they now had as Therese did? Was there already really that strong a disparity between the value they placed on their relationship? These continued to bombard herself with more nagging and seemingly unanswerable questions she feared to think let alone ask aloud right up until Carol suddenly appeared at her side, quietly asking if she was ready to leave for lunch.

Therese looked out the window as they travelled to Café 21, the silence that hung between them as they’d left the office now appeared to be the unfortunate third wheel that would accompany them on their little lunch date. The quiet seemed to intensify and become heavier within the confines of Carol’s car, having it exert its power over Therese until she submitted to it, doing so because she felt she hadn’t the strength nor the means of doing otherwise.

“Are you okay?” Carol asked gently as she guided them east of Mission Hills towards the Adams Avenue restaurant.

With her head turned away from Carol, Therese could barely see the glances being thrown her way. “I’m fine.”

“Therese.”

“I’m fine, Carol,” Therese said tersely. She hoped that the almost imperceptible waver in her voice as
she spoke would go unnoticed by Carol. But of course she was wrong.

“No, you’re not fine. Come on, talk to me please.”

Carol’s soft but compassionate plea broke Therese’s paper-thin resolve as she blew out, “I just...I, I don’t know how to do this, Carol.” The confession left her slumping in her seat in absolute resignation. She turned further away from Carol, bringing her fist up to cover her mouth so as to hide the slight tremble of her lips.

“You don’t know how to do what?”

“This!” Therese stressed as her hand flew back and forth between them, almost annoyed that Carol didn’t know what she was implying. After taking a quick, somewhat calming breathing, she quietly went on, “I don’t know how to act around you now at work.” She kept her eyes unfocused as she descended further into her unsettled state, feeling the interior of the car contract around her until it almost moulded against her. Being too lost in her thoughts, she failed to notice the colourful collage of passing shops, restaurants, and buildings slow to a stop. She only came to when she felt Carol’s warm fingers slide across her palm before gently pulling her hand so that it rested atop the centre console. After receiving a firm squeeze, she finally shifted her weary gaze across at Carol. The concern-tinged tender look that met her slowly began to empty the deep well of her misgivings.

“I don’t know either,” Carol said with a small, restrained smile, her eyes reaching out to Therese as if to envelop her in a comforting embrace.

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“It may not look like it, Therese, but it’s certainly how I feel.” Carol gave Therese’s hand softer but equally reassuring squeeze. “I read that same introduction page of that goddamn water report about ten times in the last few hours. I also know I’ve looked up what a refractometer is I don’t know how many times and I somehow still don’t know what the hell it is or does,” she said as she diverted her eyes up once more, her voice lightening at the end.

Therese could feel mirth begin to fight through the bog of her unsettled mind but it failed to wade through it altogether. “You’re really having a hard time?” Her voice was so soft as she spoke, like she was whispering when there was no need to do so.

Carol stared at her for a beat before looking down at their hands, toying with them a bit before lacing their fingers together. “I am.” She sighed deeply before continuing, “I think we were too busy thinking about how to act in front of Rindy that we didn’t even consider how different things would now be at work...I was actually kind of hoping you’d guide me along but you’re clearly having as difficult a time as I am. Probably even more so.” The blue-grey eyes that reverted back to Therese were clear and open for all that lay inside them plain to seen.

Carol’s unexpected display of vulnerability sent a powerful wave of adoration and protectiveness sweeping through Therese but it failed to wade through it altogether. “You’re really having a hard time?” Her voice was so soft as she spoke, like she was whispering when there was no need to do so.

Carol stared at her for a beat before looking down at their hands, toying with them a bit before lacing their fingers together. “I am.” She sighed deeply before continuing, “I think we were too busy thinking about how to act in front of Rindy that we didn’t even consider how different things would now be at work...I was actually kind of hoping you’d guide me along but you’re clearly having as difficult a time as I am. Probably even more so.” The blue-grey eyes that reverted back to Therese were clear and open for all that lay inside them plain to seen.

Carol’s unexpected display of vulnerability sent a powerful wave of adoration and protectiveness sweeping through Therese but it failed to breach before her knee-jerk question made good its escape.

“Why would I know how to act?”

“Because you’ve been through this with Richard. You dated while you worked together, didn’t you?”

“We did. But this is different.”

“Why is it different?” Carol asked, her eyes flitting over Therese’s features, not focusing on any one for longer than a few milliseconds, again looking like she was trying to crack an indecipherable code
by finding the perfect combination of their roving movements.

*Because my feelings for you are stronger.* That immutable truth returned with vigour, the object of her feelings fighting to pull it out of her by magnetism alone, forcing Therese to firmly press her lips together to stop from blurring it out in one gust of emotion. She knew she could not look away in that moment because doing so would give her, and what she was trying to hide, away. “It’s different because we work a lot more closely together. Aside from having lunch with him or sitting in on meetings together, I hardly ever saw him at work. But with you...I just...I don’t know how to handle it.”

Carol’s eyelids fluttered before she broke their eye contact, looking like she was thrown slightly off-balance by Therese’s hushed confession. The loss of Carol’s usually indefatigable composure was fleeting as determination suddenly flaming up in her eyes almost immediately after. “Well then we need to help each other out. We need to talk to each other because that’s the only way we’re going to be able to figure out how to handle working together. I don’t know what that looks like exactly but I want to find out. Because I want to have this and still be able to work together, Therese. I *want* this to work, Therese.” She’d emphasised what she’d said by giving Therese’s hand another tight squeeze.

The intensity of Carol’s stare and the conviction of her words imbued Therese with strength that had bounded out of sight earlier that day. She swallowed to clear the thickness in her throat before saying three simple but whole truthful words. “So do I.” The great collapse of Carol’s chest as she breathed out didn’t go unnoticed by Therese and so she did the one thing she knew could banish the most overwhelming of unease and spark a myriad of feelings that would contrast so strongly thereafter. She took Carol’s face in both hands and reassured her with a tender kiss.

The rest of Monday passed with relative ease with Therese even joining in on bit of light banter with Carol and Dannie as they packed up for the day, that feeling of déjà vu that may have brought about a relapse into her previous state being ignored by the power of hope and something akin to lightness. The week followed much the same pattern with both manoeuvring themselves independently and collectively, and navigating situations differently, but they somehow managed to come out at the end of it unscathed. What was noticeable to Therese was that they did seem to talk less than before, forgoing words in moments where the glimmer in their eyes or the almost imperceptible twitch of their lips communicated all that they wanted and needed to say. She knew, though, that if either of them needed to talk, neither would hesitate to do so because they both wanted to make their working together and being together work.
Indulgence

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to FadedLily for editing this chapter at the drop of a hat :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Friday 10 November 2017

Therese walked into Carol’s kitchen late Friday afternoon feeling slightly out of breath but invigorated for the night that lay ahead. She began to offload some of the ingredients she’d be using for the dinner she was cooking for Carol and Rindy onto the immaculate white marble counter while a barefoot Carol padded off back into the garage to retrieve the rest of the groceries from Therese’s car. The meal that had felt eons away when she agreed to it had suddenly crept up on her the night before. The sudden panic she’d felt then left her stalking around her living room like a caged animal with her phone glued to her ear as she interrogated Carol on what was deemed suitable and appropriate for an eight-year-old to eat. Of course Carol’s throaty chuckle and smooth voice floated into her ears and immediately began to put her at ease. The occasional “darling” thrown in thereafter and the concluding “baby” sweetened the deal further and had her smiling like a giddy fool a little while after they’d said their goodbyes.

“Hi Therese!” came Rindy’s exuberant voice from behind, pulling Therese from a reverie that had left her absentmindedly groping around at the depths of the now empty grocery bag.

“Hi Rindy.” Therese had barely turned around before she was seized in a surprisingly strong hug by Rindy, the girl’s arms wound tightly around her waist. Carol walked back into the kitchen at that exact moment with one grocery tote bag slung over each of her shoulders, her steps slowing as she saw them, that loss of vigour juxtaposed by the rapid growth of her stunning smile. Therese tore her eyes away from the spectacle against their own will and addressed the smaller of the two blondes, “I haven’t seen you in so long. Not since you ate nearly all of the cookies we were sharing.” She grinned down at Rindy, excavating two deep holes of mischief in her cheeks.

A delighted squeal ricocheted off the kitchen’s shiny surfaces as Rindy laughed, having it infiltrate Therese’s chest with minimal effort to bring about her own chuckle. “I didn’t eat that many cookies, silly.” After a quick glance back at her mother, Rindy continued, “Mommy told me yesterday -no no. It wasn’t yesterday because Mommy told me when we were doing my English homework and I didn’t have to hand in any English homework today or yesterday. So, Mommy told me… yeah, the day before before yesterday.” Her face scrunched up as she tried to remember when exactly she’d learned that tidbit of information before emphasising her point with the bounding movement of her hand. Upon hearing a whispered “Tuesday” from Carol, Rindy went on, “Yeah, Mommy told me on Tuesday that you were coming for dinner and I was super excited because I wanted to show you this octopus that I drew because I remember you said you really liked that blue one I drew.”

“I can’t wait to see it. If it’s anything like the last one then it’ll be really beautiful. You know I still haven’t forgotten about that promise I made you.”

“About us drawing together?” After receiving a nod from Therese, Rindy quickly spun around to
face her mother and asked, “Mommy, please can me and Therese draw together?”

“Yes but maybe after we’ve had dinner, okay?” Carol replied as she lightly brushed her daughter’s hair away from her forehead. She cast her eyes up to Therese and gave her a less damaging but nonetheless beautiful smile.

“Cool! Therese, Mommy said you’re making us dinner tonight.”

“That’s right. I heard you really like turkey burgers so I thought we could have that for dinner and then chocolate brownies for dessert. Does that sound good?” Therese felt strangely trepidatious as she looked down into a pair of blue-grey eyes that were uncannily similar to Carol’s and waited for an answer.

Therese needn’t have worried, though, because Rindy’s impassioned response came immediately after, “Yes! I love turkey burgers and brownies!” The girl beamed up at her with the toothiest of nose-crinkling smiles, comprehensively stopping Therese’s unease from growing any further.

“Awesome. Would you like to help me? I could use an extra pair of hands and yours happen to be the exact pair I need.” A smiling Therese looked across at Carol after a stifled cough had sounded from the older woman and was met with a look that was borderline sceptical. Her brows had hardly furrowed when Rindy’s enthusiastic answer came.

“Yes!”

“Great! I think you’ll have to sit on a chair or something like that so you can reach the counter, though.”

Rindy lightly tugged on her mother’s shirt so as to drag her attention away from Therese. “Mommy, where’s that step thing I stand on to see things?”

“I put it away because you hardly ever help me when I’m cooking, sweetheart.” Carol’s voice was light and tinged with humour but she kept an excellent poker face as she spoke to her daughter.

“But I wanna help Therese.”

Of course Carol acquiesced upon hearing Rindy's plea-cum-whine, sending a wink Therese’s way before retrieving the small footstool from the pantry. The head chef for the night and her miniature sous chef set about preparing dinner soon after, with Rindy donning a tie dye apron while a white t-shirt clad Therese went the more rebellious route of cooking sans protection. Therese was delighted when Rindy quite literally wanted to get her hands dirty, in fact she insisted on getting her hands dirty. After being entrusted with assembling the fennel, apple, and Brussels sprout slaw, the little girl took to her task with gusto, using her hands to toss the fresh ingredients Therese had expertly sliced in a light yoghurt, lemon juice, and whole grain Dijon mustard dressing, the tangy composition of which Therese had guided Rindy through. A fair share of the slaw ended up splattered on the counter, the pale pieces of shaved fennel and julienned Granny Smith apple blending in and adding texture to the marble counter. Rindy quietly muttered to herself or huffed every time another bit plopped out of the bowl, making Carol and Therese share in a conspiratorial look as they both tried to not laugh. The meal slowly but surely came together, Carol keeping Rindy and Therese entertained as they worked, engaging the both of them in light conversation as she sat at the kitchen island sipping on a glass of Pinot Grigio.

Therese felt so at ease as she prepared dinner, finding herself desperately wanting to talk less so she could just enjoy the easy banter between mother and daughter and marvel at how well they played off each other. There were moments throughout, though, where she caught Carol staring at her with
a look of utter adoration, the older woman holding eye contact for a few beats longer before diverting her gaze elsewhere. To stop herself from getting lost in all that those looks erupted within her then, Therese valiantly tried to focus her attention on ensuring she didn’t lose a finger or two as she finely diced a red onion or on keeping the burgers from falling apart as she went to flip them.

They all eventually settled down at the kitchen island, the air around them now alive with smells of deliciousness, the heady wafts whetting the appetite for what shaped up to be a scrumptious meal. Therese was surprised but delighted when Carol joined Rindy in tucking straight into her burger, the older woman finding no need for a knife and fork as Therese thought may be the case given Carol’s ever-present grace and poise. Carol showed excellent burger-eating form in fact, from her using her long fingers to prevent any slippage whilst biting down to her using an expert neck roll that ensured that every element of the burger was included in one glorious mouthful. Therese couldn’t suppress the smile that took control of her lips as she looked on. Perhaps feeling Therese’s eyes on her, Carol looked up and smiled a closed-mouth smile, her stuffed cheeks making her look like a chipmunk storing just some of its precious winter hoard. The younger woman chuckled before digging into her own burger.

“Thank you, Therese. That was just delectable,” said Carol after she’d finished eating, grinning back at Therese as she sat with her arm slung across the back of Rindy’s chair.

Therese flushed at the way Carol had said “delectable”, the older woman drawing out every syllable, making it sound a lot sexier than necessary for such a situation. She bought herself some time to rein herself in by taking a sip of her wine before answering, “I’m glad you enjoyed it. I don’t think I can take much of the credit, though, because the best part of the meal wasn’t actually made by me.”

Carol nodded in concurrency, immediately catching onto what Therese was saying. “I have to agree with you. That slaw definitely made the whole meal. It was perfectly coated in that amazing dressing so you got a taste of it in every bite.” Rindy quite literally sat up straighter in her seat, the turn of conversation suddenly piquing her interest after she’d gone into a post-meal torpor.

“Well that’s what happens when you have such a good assistant chef working for you,” Therese said with a shrug, shooting a wink Rindy’s way that made the little blonde giggle musically as only a child can, Carol joining in on the action with a more hearty guffaw. The sight of both mother and daughter shaking in their seats made Therese’s chest tighten before swelling with elation. She caught Carol’s eye and held it, knowing full well that she was now the one who had assumed a look of absolute enamourment but found herself simply helpless and at the mercy of how she felt in that moment. Their gazes eventually parted from each other when Rindy asked Carol if she could be excused so she could start assembling all that was required for their after-dinner drawing session.

“You really like the slaw, huh?” Therese asked after catching Carol sneaking another forkful or two of the crunchy slaw as she retrieved the tupperware of the no-bake chocolate brownies she’d quickly whipped up that morning from the fridge.

“As a matter of fact I do.” Carol smiled slyly at Therese before having one more bite, making the younger woman laugh and shake her head. “That really was a delicious meal, darling. You really are quite the whiz in the kitchen, aren’t you? How did you learn to cook so well?” Carol asked over her shoulder as she stacked the dishwasher.

“Well I started cooking when I was at the Home. I was a shy kid growing up and I never really felt all that comfortable playing with the other kids. Sister Alicia thought it was a good idea for me to learn how to cook so I could keep myself busy. So she took me to the kitchen one day and left me in the hands of the cooks. They immediately put me to work just doing the most basic things like peeling vegetables -you know? but since then I’ve been hooked.” Therese looked across at Carol
after the older woman had come and leaned against the counter beside her, finding her eyes soft but teeming with conflict, seeing in them all that Carol wanted to ask but for some reason or another didn’t. Wanting to put Carol at ease and to show that she wasn’t afraid to talk about her childhood, Therese smiled, putting the dimples she knew the older woman loved on full display.

“So I should really be thanking Sister Alicia, then?” Carol asked lightly, her eyes flitting over Therese’s face while her lips twitched ever so slightly with the smile that slowly began to reveal itself.

Therese grinned after placing the last brownie atop the brownie pyramid, gesturing at the plate she now held up as if to say “ta-dah” before saying, “Hmmm, pretty much, yeah.” They both chuckled as they made their way to Carol’s expansive munggar dining room table, the one end of which was now covered with an assortment of colouring implements, a few well-worn colouring books, and stacks of unblemished paper that were ripe for the picking. Rindy’s eyes lit up when she saw the heap of chocolatey goodness and politely asked if she could have one. Hums of appreciation sounded from all three as they tucked into their first before quickly moving onto their second and third, and in Carol’s case fourth.

What Therese wasn’t expecting as she made good on her promise to draw with Rindy was for Carol to join them. She looked up after she’d finished drawing the outline of her red *Disa* to find the older woman with a pencil crayon in hand as she worked on her own piece of art. Carol quietly went about her task, only interrupting the chatter had between Therese and Rindy every now and then when she made the occasional comment or asked for another colour. Therese had to fight the urge to not watch Carol throughout the two and a bit hours of drawing, her eyes flicking across the table for only the briefest of moments, finding Carol absorbed in shading the tree-lined lake of her mountain scene just about every time. She did so willingly, though, both because she felt it was important to give Rindy her as close to undivided attention as possible and because she genuinely enjoyed interacting with the girl.

Rindy’s energy dropped off the closer the hour hand inched its way up to ten o’clock, her voice becoming dulled with fatigue and the strokes of her pencil slowing to a lazy glide. It didn’t stop her from talking to Therese altogether, though, as she continued asking questions about all sorts of things, from how dizzy would Therese get whenever she rolled down the hills in Central Park when she was growing up to which Disney sidekick she preferred most. Carol eventually ushered her off to bed after her speech became dominated by countless powerful yawns that shook her entire body.

Therese sat on Carol’s ridiculously comfortable couch in the living room, absentmindedly sipping on some water as she scrolled through the mesmerising images on National Geographic’s Instagram page. She only snapped out of her daze when Carol plopped down beside her — only considerably closer than any time throughout the evening — and proceeded to slump down in her seat. The adorable sight made a chuckle bubble up from deep within Therese.

Carol lolled her head to the side and looked at Therese for a moment. She reached to take her glass of wine in hand as she said, “Rindy knows.”

Despite not having explicitly said it, Therese knew exactly what Carol had meant just by hearing the tone of her voice. She stared dumbfoundedly back at Carol before her mind whirred back into life.

“What?! How?”

“I was tucking her into bed and she just... asked me. She asked if I liked you and I said I did. I asked if she liked you and of course she said yes. But then she went on and said that she doesn’t like you the way I do because I supposedly look at you like I really, really, really like you — her words, not mine. I just... I didn’t want to say no and then go back on it at a later stage. I didn’t know what else
to say so I just told her that I liked you in that way.” Her face was a picture of vulnerability and worry as she looked back at Therese, remaining silent as she waited for a response.

The sudden panic Therese had felt evaporated almost as quickly as it had descended on her as she took in the crease of Carol’s brow and the tightness of her lips. She ceded to the fact that what Carol had said could not be undone and thus chose to swiftly move on. “Well I guess that’s one less thing we have to worry about, then” she said, hoping her light tone and dimpled grin would assuage Carol’s unease. It certainly did because Carol leaned over and kissed her softly.

“Now we just need to figure out how to tell everyone else.”

“Let’s not worry about that now, okay?” Therese said before pressing her lips to Carol’s once more.

They certainly didn’t worry about the next hurdle they’d have to overcome as they sat and quietly chatted away, both luxuriating in what was their first time spent alone since their lunch at Café 21 had days before. Therese had found herself too preoccupied with just soaking up the feeling of just being able to enjoy their being together that she caught a fright when she saw that it had ticked past one-thirty in the morning.

“Jesus, Carol. Look at the time. You see this is what happens when I decide to let you talk,” Therese teased as she got up and stretched.

A sound of pure exasperation escaped Carol’s lips before she quipped, “This was hardly a one-sided conversation, darling.”

“Could have fooled me.” Her dig earned her a playful swat on the backside from Carol as she proceeded to the kitchen to place her glass in the dishwasher. “I better get going before it gets any later,” she said as she returned, crouching down by the side of the couch as she rummaged through her handbag.

“What? Why?”

“I can’t sleep here.”

“Why not?”

“Even though Rindy knows about us I don’t think it’s such a good idea for me to stay over already.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Therese. You can’t leave right now. It’s the middle of the night for Christ’s sake. Just stay here tonight, please.”

The look in Carol’s eyes begged only one response but Therese still hesitated, her mind wandering to what it would look like from Rindy’s perspective if she knew Therese had slept over after just finding out that she was more than her mother’s friend. Her abeyance wasn’t allowed to last for long, though, as Carol stood and and wrapped her arms around her waist. With a stoop of her head, Carol kissed the side of Therese’s neck. The touch was soft and fleeting but sent tingles spouting from its source to the very extremities of Therese’s body.

“Stay.”

Therese tried to suppress a shudder that threatened to overcome her after Carol had breathed her plea onto her neck. She managed to hold it together long enough to force out a simple, “All right.”

Carol pulled Therese flush against her and just smiled triumphantly, her eyes wandering to the
younger woman’s lips and dimples as she grinned back. She moved no further, though, perhaps wanting Therese to come to her when she was ready.

The wait wasn’t long, though, as Therese kissed Carol firmly, allowing herself to get lost in its completeness and in the suppleness of the lips embracing her own. She pulled back slightly out of breath and tried to regain some hint of normalcy even though it would be feigned. “I’ll stay but no hanky-panky, okay?” The straight face she tried to keep faltered immediately and quite miserably as her impish grin came to the fore.

Carol threw her head back and laughed, sending delightful tremors through Therese’s chest. Inexplicably, though, she loosened her arms and took a step back from Therese. “I don’t know if I can really be with someone who uses the term ‘hanky-panky’?” She sat back down on the couch, crossed her legs over at the knee, and spread her arms along the backrest with an air of nonchalance about her, appearing as unaffected as ever. The mischief that twinkled in her eyes said otherwise, though.

“Oh, is that so? Well I’m sure you can find someone else that doesn’t use it. I’ll leave you to let you get to it,” Therese added with her own shrug, turning around as she began to walk away. She’d barely advanced more than a metre before Carol leapt into action, seizing her in a side-on hug and lifting her off the ground, before shuffling over to the widest end of the couch and flinging the both of them down onto it, leaving Therese lying supine with Carol sitting astride her. A yelp of surprise escaped Therese before she was overcome with laughter.

Carol took both of Therese’s hands and pinned them above her head with minimal force. She managed to force out, “No. I’ve already told you you’re not leaving,” before descending into her own fit of laughter.

A stitch goaded Therese’s side but she hardly noticed it, instead finding herself too lost in this carefree moment she was sharing with Carol to give mind to any physical pain she felt. She continued to guffaw and looked up into a pair of eyes that were sparkling and threatening to overflow with mirth, utterly captivated by the sight and all that went along with it. They both eventually stopped and just stared at one another with achingly wide smiles on their faces. Therese freed her hands, using them to brush away the blonde tresses that curtained Carol’s face to reveal more but not all of the older woman’s natural beauty. Having memorised the shape of Carol’s lips, the smooth but defined line that curved around her cheek bone before running across to the edge of her jaw, and every beautiful laughter line that graced the corners of her eyes, Therese wanted to delve deeper to find the rest of the wonders she knew laid beneath. She craned her neck up and met Carol halfway, their sharing in a kiss that was tinged with everything and nothing, setting off all things within Therese that were indescribable and definable.

After slowing the brief, languid dance of their lips to a gentle stop, Carol whispered against Therese’s lips, “Please stay.”

Therese struggled to open her eyes but eventually managed to do so, finding Carol’s blue-grey whirlpools now larger than ever before, allowing her to see right into them as she felt herself being sucked deeper in, the rest of the older woman’s sublime features blurred from view. “I was never going to leave.”

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact: I totally have a small footstool -*cough cough* three in fact- like Rindy's so my short ass can reach things :D

In case anyone was interested, you can see what a red *Disa (Disa uniflora)* looks like [here](#). It's a stunning species of orchid that is endemic to South Africa.

Feel free to tell me your thoughts about this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Also feel free to just pop in and "hi" :)

Cheers, guys :)
Chapter Notes

I really struggled with this chapter for some reason so a massive thanks goes to FadedLily for helping me with getting this shit-show together. She tried to not be an asshole about it but we all know that's close to impossible for her to do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Saturday 11 November 2017

Therese rolled over onto her stomach and buried her face deep into the pillow that already hugged her head snugly, attempting to fall back into the deep, contented sleep she’d fallen head-first into a few hours earlier. It was a realm in which Carol was present albeit not in all her glorious vivacity. For some reason or another, she’d felt herself being flung from that state of blissful unawareness, a state that was imbued with a sense of buoyancy only Carol could induce. Now, as she reached her arm out and met with the cold, vacant space beside her, the true state of her reality woke her fully, a reality which she’d willingly agreed to. They’d both decided the night before that it was best that they sleep in separate beds, just for the time being of course, until Rindy got a bit more used to their being together. Despite knowing that that was sound reasoning, Therese couldn’t help but resent such logic now as she lay alone in the guest bedroom, the power of her longing and want for Carol stripping her of her rationality.

She turned back onto her back but kept her eyes closed, wanting to get completely lost in the memory of their time spent together in this bed last night before she succumbed to her reality altogether. What was intended to be a quick kiss goodnight ended up being an hour-long cuddle that had them both coming within a few heavy blinks of falling asleep in each others arms. Her senses were alive and so willing to take in any stimulus as they lay together. The gentle puffs that blew across her collarbone after Carol had nuzzled into the nook of her neck had roused the hairs there until they stood on end, yearning to meet with the warm breath once more. She’d breathed in the scent of Carol’s hair as if her life depended on it, the whiff of orange blossom and coconut accented by something subtle but distinct. She could remember the exact resonance of Carol’s hums of contentment whenever she’d pressed a kiss into her hair or held her tighter. The smattering of light freckles on Carol’s bare shoulder had caught her eye and held it, their roving movements thereafter only ceasing once she’d accounted for each one in sight. It was those subtleties of their intimacy that Therese found addictive, those usually inconsequential attributes of another that were now anything but.

She reluctantly opened her eyes and with it felt her reality inundate her, only she noticed just how dulled everything around her was. The elongated orange triangle that cleaved across the ceiling’s grey facade wasn’t as vibrant, her exposed skin glided uncomfortably against the once plush bed cover, even the rasping sound of crashing waves evoked only a diluted sense of calm and tranquility. The only thing that retained its vitality was the “Does running late count as exercise” emblazoned t-shirt she’d borrowed from Carol, and so she held it up to her nose and inhaled deeply, breathing in something more valuable than air itself. Not wanting to draw out her time spent alone any longer, though, she escaped from the bedroom, only doing so after the feather pillow had swallowed her
Therese made herself a cup of milk oolong tea Carol had raved about, the tendrils of steam lazily spiralling up off its clear golden surface, infusing the air with rich creamy and floral notes, and the faintest but most teasing of hints of sweet caramel; before she made her way upstairs. Despite not wanting to disturb Carol from what had only been barely five hours of sleep, Therese couldn’t quite resist the urge to peek in on her, needing that little hit to sate her for the time being. She found Carol lying on her side with one arm locked over the puffy pillow she was cuddling. The sight had Therese momentarily fighting tooth and nail with herself to not replace the offending pillow with herself before she took to the task of eagerly drinking in Carol’s absurd level of adorableness. And so after getting her fix and quietly making her exit from the bedroom, Therese made a beeline for the library she’d practically drooled over when she saw its wood-panelled interior for the first time.

The expansive room was decked out in mesquite wood, the network of burnt umber veins cutting through a sea of deep amber to make the most exquisite of grains that just exuded luxury and sophistication. The shelves were laden with a plethora of books of many a colour and size, some weathered whilst others looked as if they’d yet to lose that distinct ‘new book’ smell, the extensive collection utterly envy-inducing for any lover of books. The members of each shelf hugged their neighbours tightly until their spines aligned perfectly, creating undulating hills that begged for exploration by the curious. As a quick warm-up for her fingers before they began their arduous travels across the many peaks and troughs, Therese ran her hand along the backrest of one of the black Chesterfield couches situated at the room’s centre, feeling no resistance against the leather that was already worn to a smooth softness. The texture imprinted on her, making her decide then and there that that was where she would curl up with a book and wait for the rest of the house to wake up.

“Hi Therese,” came a tinkling voice from behind Therese after she’d quickly become lost in a world comprised of just her and the books, the sudden surprise making her perform the jerkiest of half-pirouettes.

“Jesus, Rindy you scared me! I mean. Uhh, God,” Therese fumbled as her eyes finally landed on the girl, finding her lying on her stomach in a cozy little inlet that was partially obscured by one of the stand-alone bookshelves.

The girl laughed unabashedly and bobbed her feet up and down as she did so. “It’s okay. Mommy sometimes says things like that but then she tries to act like I’m hearing things. She’s silly like that,” she said with a humoured shake of her head before looking down at her open book once more.

Not wanting to impose on Rindy nor stop her from reading any longer than she had already, Therese took up her preferred seat, inexplicably having to stop herself from groaning as she was embraced by its comfy cushions, with her tea in one hand and a copy of All Creatures Great and Small by James Herriot in the other. She’d chosen it unconsciously, doing so because such a feel-good book was appropriate for many an occasion, including one where Therese already did not need an excuse to smile. The book’s cover depicted the story’s protagonist and a trusty canine companion gazing out over the rolling green hills of the Yorkshire Dales, a moment of calm before the day’s inevitable chaos ensued. It was the exact same edition as the one she had growing up, only the pages weren't dog-eared to within one overzealous page-turn of tearing at the well-worn fold and the name on the spine was still legible. She smiled to herself, opened to the first page and began a slow walk down memory lane.

Therese was about halfway through the second chapter when Rindy padded over to where she sat and hopped up beside her. It was only then that she noticed the girl’s pyjama top that had a giant 100s and 1000s-covered donut on the front with bold block letters spelling out, “Donuts for
Breakfast” arching over it. “Hey, I’ve also got a donut shirt, you know?” she said, the smile that had taken control of her lips expanding its reign until it shone in her eyes.

After a quick glance down at her shirt, Rindy asked, “Really?” Her voice was tinged with disbelief and her eyes had widened until the whites framed her clear, blue-grey irises, making it look like she feared blinking in case she missed Therese’s response.

“Yeah, except mine says, “Donut worry. Be happy” and it’s covered in smaller donuts of all different colours.”

The brightest of beamed smiles broke through Rindy’s cloud of seriousness. “That’s funny!” she exclaimed with a mirthful lilt before letting loose with a musical laugh that filled the room with harmonious reverberations of delight. “What are you reading?” she asked once she’d quieted, craning her neck to the side to get a better look at the book’s cover.

“It’s All Creatures Great and Small by James Herriot. Have you heard of it?” After receiving an enthusiastic shake of the head in response, Therese went on, “Well he’s this country vet in Yorkshire -that’s in England- and this book is a whole bunch of stories about his adventures from when he first started out as a vet. It’s really funny because he gets himself into a lot of interesting situations while treating the animals. There’s this one story where this draught horse -you know those large horses that have long hairs that cover their hooves and you usually see them pulling carts? Well it picks him up by his jacket and doesn’t drop him until the owner comes back and rescues him.” The absurdity of the image had them joining in a duet of giggles. “It’s also really funny because the owners of the animals he treats are all a bit crazy so you read about all the things they do. I think it’s a book you’d enjoy when you’re a bit older.”

“How old were you when you read it?”

“Hmmm, I think I was thirteen. Yeah, I was. Sister Alicia thought I’d enjoy it because she knew how much I loved books, especially ones like this that had stories about animals in them.”

“Who’s Sister Alicia?”

Therese’s eyes bulged at the innocuous question’s asking. Panic began to radiate through her entire body as she looked down into Rindy’s wide, expectant eyes. She hadn’t considered the array of follow-on questions that would undoubtedly spout from someone as curious as the girl beside her. Not wanting to ignore what had been asked nor delve into a topic as heavy as her childhood, Therese decided to answer vaguely, hoping above all hope that it would both satisfy Rindy and allow for them to move onto something more light-hearted. “She looked after me when I was growing up.”

The hopeful breath she’d barely begun to hold blew out of her in defeat when another question immediately came her way.

“Was she like your mommy?”

Therese swallowed back her growing trepidation before attempting another reply. “Kind of. She wasn’t my real mommy but she looked after me like your mommy looks after you. And she cares and loves me like your mommy cares and loves you.”

“But what about your real mommy? Where was she?” Without intending to be, Rindy was unrelenting in her frankness in the way only a child could be, challenging the recipient of such goading questions in the most non-confrontational but disarming of ways.

Therese could feel herself descend into the hole she was digging herself, losing sight of the safe horizon, finding herself at a complete loss for how to stop her downward trajectory. The nauseating
helplessness she felt had her forcing out the least damning of explanations for her mother’s relative absence during her childhood and complete absence throughout her life thereafter. “She thought it was best for me to grow up with Sister Alicia.” She gritted her teeth, obstinately refusing to allow the painful memories she associated with her mother to sully what had been utter bliss any further.

Rindy looked down for a moment, the restlessness of her mouth and the furrow of her brow during her pause for thoughtful deliberation on what to say next, before she eventually lifted her gaze and met Therese’s once more. “Did you think it was best for you?” she asked, her voice soft but weighted with earnestness.

Therese merely looked at Rindy for a beat. The destructive tsunami of distress that broke forth within her was met head-on by the look of the girl’s open and innocent face, forcing it to dissipate into calm nothingness. Something inexplicable stopped whatever misgivings she’d typically feel when posed with such a question, allowing her to do nothing else but answer truthfully, “I do.” She gave Rindy a small smile in assurance, the girl returning the gesture only with slightly more vigour.

As if by an act of divine intervention, a low grumble sounded from Rindy a few moments later to break the somewhat heavy silence that hung between them. Therese couldn’t suppress the guffaw that the sight of the girl’s bulging eyes and reddened cheeks elicited. “Are you as hungry as I am?” she asked good-naturedly. Her attempt to put Rindy at ease succeeded because the girl giggled before nodding her head vigorously. “Let’s go make some breakfast, shall we?”

“What would you like for breakfast?” Therese asked Rindy once they’d made their way downstairs, finding herself taking any opportunity to cook in a kitchen she’d fallen deeply in love with.

Rindy looked down at the front of her shirt before returning with a mischievous smile she could have only inherited from her mother. “Donuts?” she asked with feigned innocence, again not unlike Carol had done many a time.

Therese chuckled heartily at the girl’s cheek before swatting the suggestion away with the flap of her hand. “Me and Mommy usually have scrambled eggs, fruit and yoghurt, pancakes, muesli, oatmeal, waffles. I sometimes just want jam on toast, though. Oh! Mommy sometimes makes breakfast pizzas. They’re really good. You must ask her to make you one. Oooo, maybe you can ask her when she wakes up.” Rindy replied, shifting excitedly in the barstool as she sat at the kitchen island, making Therese smile at her eagerness.

“I think I will. But in the meantime, what would you like for breakfast?”

“Hmmm….scrambled eggs and toast, please.” Rindy gave Therese a toothy grin as if to persuade her when of course it wasn’t even remotely necessary.

Therese quickly and effortlessly whipped up the desired breakfast, only slowing at Rindy’s request to show the girl how she deftly cracks eggs with just one hand, and promptly placed it before a ravenous Rindy who proceeded to practically inhale her breakfast. She’d just peeped into the fridge to look for some fresh orange juice for the both of them when Carol strolled into the kitchen and greeted her daughter.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”
Something within Therese dropped upon hearing the lower than usual timbre of Carol’s tone, the remnants of her recent state of slumber plain to be heard by her deeper lilt, somehow making the older woman’s already alluring, smoky voice even sexier. Therese took a moment to compose herself behind the safety of the fridge door before starting with a simple, “Hi,” accompanying her bright greeting with a pop of her dimples. She found Carol standing behind Rindy with the older woman flexing her fingers in her daughter’s slightly mussed hair before she stooped to plant a kiss atop Rindy’s head, doing this all the while her eyes remained on Therese.

“Hi.” Carol’s lips looked like they had a mind of their own as she tried to not smile too openly. “Why didn’t you wake me when you woke up?” she asked as she came around the island and retrieved a fresh mug from the cupboard, doing so after taking what looked like a last second detour away from Therese for perhaps what would have been a good morning kiss.

“I wanted to let you sleep in a bit. You did get to bed really late last night.”

Carol cast her gaze up to Therese once more after she’d finished decanting some loose leaf lemongrass and ginger tea into a manatee-shaped infuser, giving the younger woman an easy smile before saying, “Yes, but so did you.” A fingertip glided across Therese’s lower back as Carol went to return the tin of tea to the pantry, making the younger woman flinch before the affected muscles relaxed as the warmth that sprouted from the older woman’s touch began to suffuse from the point of contact. “Did this one wake you this morning?” she asked with a nod of her head in the direction of Rindy, shooting her daughter a wink as she came to stand right beside Therese.

“No, I woke up by myself. I actually accidentally interrupted her this morning while she was reading in the library.”

“Is that so?” Carol narrowed her eyes as she looked sideways at Rindy with a sly grin now curling her lips.

Rindy’s attempt to stop herself from laughing failed as a peep of a giggle forced its way through the hand she’d clapsed over her mouth before the rest followed suit now unencumbered by its previously lousy restraint. After calming somewhat, the girl said, “It’s true Mommy. I was reading The Witches when Therese came in and started looking at all the books. She showed me this really cool-sounding book I wanna read. It’s called ‘all small creatures’, or uhhh...Wait, let me go get it!” She shimmied off the barstool and bounded out of sight.

“That one.” Carol shook her head wryly before she turned to Therese, sliding her hand around the younger woman’s waist and pulling her into her. “Good morning, baby,” she whispered as she leaned over to kiss Therese.

Therese pulled away slightly. “I haven’t brushed my teeth yet.”

Carol merely smiled and kissed her anyway, gently guiding Therese’s lips with her own, finally feeding the hungry beast that was the want they had for one another even if it was for only a few moments. They broke apart with matching sighs of reluctance when the dull thud-thud-thud of Rindy descending the stairs sounded. “You were right about not having brushed your teeth,” Carol teased after she’d run her tongue across the front of her own teeth, making Therese gasp and lightly pinch her stomach.

“Mommy, I couldn’t find the book but I’m sure Therese can tell you all about it,” Rindy stated matter-of-factly as she walked back into the kitchen, the purposefulness of her step now nowhere to be seen. This was by no means a sign of a loss of energy, though, as she quickly and enthusiastically moved onto a subject when she asked, “Mommy, what do I call Therese?”
“What do you mean what do you call Therese?”

“Well do I call her your girlfriend?”

The release of both Carol and Therese’s creased foreheads seemed to bring about the sudden straightening of their backs as they now both stood bolt upright. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before Carol attempted a response, only doing so after appearing to swallow with great difficulty. “W-we haven’t discussed it, sweetheart.”

“Oh, I just thought I’d ask because Justin from school’s mom hates being called his dad’s wife. She wants to be called his ‘partner’. But then Emily’s dads call each other their husband. I didn’t want to call Therese by the wrong name when I tell Daddy all about how cool last night was,” Rindy said with an innocent shrug, smiling back at the both of them.

“I’ll talk to you about that later, okay, sweetheart?” Carol asked, her voice now having taken on a slight edge. The unexpected change in her tone perturbed Therese, the catalyst of such a change planting a worrisome and potentially prolific weed of unease within her. Rindy evidently didn’t notice the shift in Carol’s mood as she politely asked if she was allowed to read on the deck outside, leaving just the two of them standing alone in the kitchen.

The touch of Carol’s hand on Therese’s hip as it turned her so they faced each other, pulled the younger woman from her thoughts. “I’m sorry about that. I wanted Harge to hear about us from me first, not from Rindy. I thought I’d only need to do that at a later stage but I can’t now because Rindy already knows. I said I needed to talk to her to make sure she doesn’t tell Harge about you before I do. He needs to hear it from me first, Therese.” Carol’s eyes shifted back and forth between Therese’s as she waited for a reply.

Knowing this to be true, Therese ceded with a curt nod and a somewhat strained smile as her form of agreement.

Perhaps sensing the younger woman’s lingering unease, though, Carol entwined their fingers and tugged their conjoined hands behind her own back until Therese was flush against her side. “What do you want to be called, baby?” she asked lightly, nuzzling into Therese’s hair until the younger woman chuckled softly, that small bubble of mirth that burst doing enough to loosen her up.

“I haven’t really thought about it to be honest. How about you?”

“I have thought about it a bit. And by ‘a bit’, I mean I thought about it in the few seconds of silence after Rindy asked me what to call you.” Therese playfully shoved Carol away so they stood facing one another once more but didn’t loosen the tight grip she had on Carol’s hand even slightly. They both snickered before Carol continued in a soft but serious voice, “I do like the sound of you being my ‘girlfriend’. What do you think?”

Therese tipped her head up and looked right into Carol’s eyes. “I like it, too,” was all she said before she stepped forward and kissed Carol once more.

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Sunday 19 November 2017

Therese sat on the couch, absentmindedly popping roasted Cajun spiced pumpkin seeds into her mouth as her eyes devoured the book of poetry she was reading. It was *Nectar* by Upile Chisala, a little gem of a book she’d bought on a whim a few weeks back and found herself reading almost daily since. Its pristine white cover that was adorned with simple but bold drawings of flowers was beginning to show signs of being well-used, namely its increasingly yellow-tinged facade and the
deep creases framing the spine. Therese knew, though, that no amount of use could change or possibly take away the words that reverberated within her from the poet’s stories of self love and all that followed from it. One line in particular drew her eye over and over again, *Something in me yearns for something in you*. Despite that ‘something’ being both nameless and faceless, Therese had realised its power was unparalleled.

She was so lost in her reading that she caught a start when her phone chimed into life. The name on the screen had her springing forward to grab it off the coffee table, her overeagerness resulting in her banging her knee on its hard edge. “Fuck!”

**Carol> You still awake?**

**Therese> Of course**

**Carol> I’m coming over. I’ll be there in 15 minutes**

Therese’s overwhelming want for Carol lurches within her as she read the last message, her mind wandering along one path and one path only, one they hadn’t traversed for two weeks now. That want had been put on the backburner with the both of them only just surviving on the scraps of affection they managed to find during that time. Aside from the kisses they stole here and there, the lengthy hugs they shared that were full of longing, and the few priceless moments of privacy they’d greedily taken at work and anywhere else they could find it, they hadn’t been intimate in the way they both so craved. Therese had ventured over to Carol’s just once since last Saturday, the older woman’s sultry whispered assertion to really get Therese alone later that night came to nothing after both were left exhausted by the Energizer bunny that was Rindy. Now though, with nothing else standing in their way -not even Rindy, who’d left for her father’s that afternoon- Therese was starving for something more, something that would release all that had built up within her and undoubtedly within Carol, too. The anticipation of what was to come set in and quickly began to work its way south.

The jarring ring of the intercom system that sounded a few agonisingly long minutes later had barely ended when Therese leapt off the couch and buzzed Carol in. She took a moment to compose herself as she waited, doing so despite knowing it would only last the duration of the door’s opening and closing. After a deep breath, she opened the door with a flourish and started with perky, “Hi.” The short greeting died in her throat, though when she saw Carol standing in the doorway.

**Chapter End Notes**

Check out *Nectar* by Upile Chisala if you're that way inclined. It's a stunning book of poetry.

As always, feel free to tell me your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Or just pop in to say hi :)
Thanks to FadedLily for helping me fix my numerous bugger ups. She's kinda cool that way :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Sunday 19 November 2017

Therese took in the sight of Carol, only she wasn’t seeing the Carol she’d ever seen before. There was a rigidity to Carol as she stood across the threshold with her shoulders squared and her arms held tensely at her sides, a stark contrast to the fluid grace that typically permeated her every movement and stance. The hard line of her mouth seemed to have sucked all the fullness from her lips while accentuating the stiffness of her jaw, effectively sharpening the beautiful soft edges of her countenance until it assumed a cold, angular hardness. Despite already feeling considerably unsettled by the change in Carol she’d seen thus far, nothing could have prepared her for what she felt when her eyes finally locked with Carol’s. Carol was looking at Therese but right on through her, her usually vibrant eyes dull and distant, almost lifeless in fact, with the makings of dark bags of harrow hanging below them. To put it simply, Therese was stupefied by the woman before her, leaving her barely able to process everything she was seeing let alone react or respond to it.

A few more moments of stifling silence passed before something seemed to snap in Carol, her eyes suddenly sparking into life as she finally recognised Therese. She closed the gap between them in two long, purposeful strides before her lips seized Therese’s in earnest, their entering into an aggressive kiss that made their teeth clink and clash with jarring force. The inertia of Carol’s front meeting with Therese’s knocked them back into the younger woman’s apartment with Carol closing the door with a hasty flick of her wrist. Carol continued to forcefully kiss Therese with her one arm locked around the younger woman’s waist whilst her other hand busied itself by enthusiastically kneading her breast. The carnal beast in Therese lurched forward at the lustful caress before growling when Carol’s tongue snaked its way into her mouth, finally receiving what it had been begging for for so long.

Before being engulfed by her overwhelming want for Carol altogether, though, the image of the woman she hardly recognised that stood before her moments ago flashed in her mind and the shock that went with it reverberated through her with formidable force once more. She stilled the rousing movement of Carol’s hand on her breast with her own while the other cupped the older woman’s jaw firmly to assist in her pulling away, her lips being tugged by the vacuum-like sucking of Carol’s. This hardly deterred Carol as her arm tightened around the younger woman while she leaned forward to try to initiate another hungry kiss. But Therese defiantly fought back once more. “Stop Carol,” she said resolutely before her lips could be consumed by Carol’s, her voice coming out level, loud, and strong despite the tumultuous storm of conflicting emotions she found herself in the midst of. Carol’s motions came to a grinding halt upon hearing the command, her eyes flying open to lock with Therese’s. “Stop.”

That final softly spoken plea was enough to clear the heady lust in Carol’s steely darkened eyes.
After a few fluttered blinks, Carol let go of Therese as if she were white-hot and took a few hasty steps backward until her back met with the closed door. Her chest heaved with great force as she tried to calm herself after their frenzied greeting. The usual effortless grace with which she ran her fingers through her hair was now tinged with anxiety, their movements that of someone under considerable distress. She started to advance towards Therese with her arms held before her as if to take the younger woman in them but stopped almost as soon as she’d begun. “Therese. I’m, I’m so sorry, baby...I just, I, I don’t know what came over me.” The voice that came out of Carol was foreign to Therese’s ears, its usual smokiness drowned out by something small, breathy, and overwhelmingly shaky. Carol ceded eye contact with the younger woman, instead focusing her gaze down at the gaping fissure that had cracked open between them.

Therese tentatively approached Carol after she’d taken a moment to calm herself, not because she was frightened but rather because she didn’t want to provoke any more of a reaction from the almost panic-stricken older woman by invading her space too abruptly. After taking incremental steps forward, Therese reached to gently take Carol’s hand in both her own. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay.” When no response was forthcoming from Carol, Therese closed the gap between them altogether so she stood right before the older woman. She slowly brought their conjoined hands up to her chest and nestled them there before speaking once more, “Carol.” The absolute tenderness of her voice drew Carol’s eyes back to her, allowing her a closer look at the sheer but as yet indefinable torment that was whirling within them. “Please talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

Carol was completely still for a few beats, almost perfectly suspended by the conflict had between two warring sides within herself, before she gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head and allowed herself to be tugged towards the living room. They both sank into the couch, seemingly under the weight of the heavy silence that now hung between them. Despite wanting to give Carol her own space and allow her to come around in her own time, the anxiety that built within Therese as she watched the older woman continue to grapple with herself was almost too much to bear. God knows how many agonisingly long minutes passed before finally Carol spoke again.

“How do you have anything to drink? Something other than beer.”

Therese caught a start when Carol’s voice pierced the bubble of deafening silence that had sealed in around them, her head snapping to the side to look at the quiet’s interrupter. The faintest hint of relief swept through her when she saw that a clarity of sorts had returned to Carol’s eyes. However, it unfortunately wasn’t enough to expunge her unease altogether. She swallowed hard and nodded mutely before escaping to the kitchen.

After pouring three fingers of whiskey into separate tumblers, Therese found herself rooted to the spot, unable to move, fearful of what lay beyond the conversation about to be had between them. The consequences it would have on their relationship would have been as yet unknown and unfathomable but the sheer panic she’d seen flash in Carol’s eyes earlier lead her to believe they would be significant. An unnerving sense of vertigo took hold of her where she stood, forcing her to stabilise herself by placing her hands on the counter while screwing her eyes shut in the hope that the room would stop moving beneath her. After a few deep breaths, she opened her eyes, finding them reflected back at her in the placid whiskey, the amber liquid mercilessly offering itself up to her, giving her the chance to steel herself. She tossed the drink back with a vengeance, revelling in the harsh burn of the alcohol as it hit the back of her throat before it sank deeper, burning a black hole-like void in the pit of her stomach that sucked all her misgivings into nonexistence. With a roll of her shoulders, she took both tumblers and the bottle of whiskey in hand and went to face whatever was coming her way head-on.

Carol’s hand shook somewhat as she accepted the offered drink but promptly necked it with much the same confidence as Therese had done. She hardly winced at the strength of the alcohol, the slight
crease at the corner of her eye being the only sign of any discomfort she’d felt. Therese merely
watched on as Carol’s first was immediately followed by a second but intervened when the older
woman went to pour herself a third, pulling both the tumbler and bottle of whiskey from her hands
without a word, placing them out of reach behind her on the coffee table. She took both of Carol’s
hands in her own and tugged on them until their bodies were angled towards one another. “Hey, it’s
just me, okay? It’s just me. You can talk to me.”

The combination of Therese’s unwavering gaze, assertive tone, and insistent squeezes to Carol’s
hands finally forced the older woman into giving in. After a great rise and subsequent collapse of her
chest, Carol started, “Harge wants to meet you.” She stopped and allowed for her words to hang
between them for a beat before continuing, “Because we’re together now and you’ve been spending
more time with Rindy and will probably continue to do so, he thinks it’s only right that he meets
you… And I have to agree with him because if I were in his position, I would want to meet the
person he’s involved with if they were spending time with Rindy.” She’d spoken slowly, carefully
choosing what she’d said and how she’d said it, with her weary eyes appearing conflicted between
which of Therese’s features to focus on as they pinballed all over the younger woman’s face.

“Okay. I don’t mind meeting him.” Therese answered without hesitation, knowing she would have
to meet Carol’s ex-husband at some stage were she to become a part of rather than just a feature of
Carol’s life.

“I know, baby. I know. I knew you’d be willing to meet him. But him wanting to meet you is not the
reason why I’m upset. I’d told him that you and I were involved last Saturday already. I didn’t tell
you this before because I wanted to discuss it with you when we had more time with just the two of
us. I told him then because Rindy already knew and if she knew it was only a matter of time before
he found out. It’s something that he needed to hear from me and that’s why I was upfront with him
about it. And he seemed to take it… surprisingly well.” Carol paused to swallow hard before
continuing, “You already know that our marriage didn’t end well and that we still have the
occasional fight… Well that’s what happened this afternoon when I went to drop Rindy off. For
some reason it now irks him that I’m with someone who’s not only younger that me, but who also
happens to be a woman.” She stopped and shook her head, the muscles in her jaw twitching as she
gritted her teeth over and over again. “Although he didn’t explicitly say it, he insinuated that he
couldn’t wait to tell you things that happened in our marriage, specifically things I did while we were
married… But I’m not going to allow him to do that –not because I want to give ‘my side’ of the story
or because I’m trying to defend what I did- but because you need to hear this from me first, Therese.
It’s only right that I’m the first to tell you… You also need to hear it from me because… because I
remember you said it was something that makes or breaks a relationship for you.”

Something sharp stabbed and twisted in Therese’s stomach but she held firm and nodded in
understanding, silently prompting Carol to continue despite knowing that something worse was to
come from it.

Carol looked down at their hands and let out a heavy breath, her pursed lips trembling ever so
slightly as she blew out. She lifted her eyes once more and held Therese’s gaze during a prolonged
pause, allowing the younger woman a glimpse at what was eating away at her. After giving
Therese’s hands a tight squeeze, she freed her own and clutched them in her lap. “You already know
that I was the one who filed for divorce because I was so unhappy. But I didn’t tell you what the
reason was for our finally getting a divorce… I cheated on Harge… with Abby.”

Carol stopped talking, looking close to being sick after doing so, and with it, Therese felt whatever
had goaded at her insides be violently ripped out, leaving a jagged, gaping hole within her that
allowed for a suite of heart-rending memories to flood forth and burst back into life in all their painful
detail. She was left reeling back to her freshman year at NYU, when she met Kelsey, the first girl
she’d ever been with and soon after that, the first person with whom she’d ever fallen in love. It was that stereotypical, heady, passionate, young love generation after generation are warned about but are irresistibly enticed by. Their relationship was nothing short of turbulent with dramatic swings of emotions experienced by both during its numerous high and low points. The unadulterated euphoria Therese felt whenever she was with Kelsey was juxtaposed by bouts of abject confusion when trying to understand just how and why she felt the way she did. She couldn’t comprehend how she hadn’t been attracted to any girl before, only for a certain auburn-haired girl to quite literally stumble into her world and throw it into utter disarray. It was her own inability to just accept what she was feeling and allow for herself to be swept up and away in it that was the persistent sticking point between them, with it eventually being one of the two defining factors that brought about the end of their relationship, the other being Kelsey cheating on her a little after they’d been together for a year. Kelsey had pointed the finger of blame back at Therese, trying to tout that Therese’s inability to just give herself over to how she felt had resulted in Kelsey searching for the affections of someone who could. That almost unfathomable indifference she saw in Kelsey’s eyes as she admitted her indiscretion left an indelible mark on Therese. The sheer hurt she’d felt then was gut-wrenching, soul-crushing, and changed how she approached love or anything remotely akin to it ever since. Therese only overlooked another’s cheating past if it was just sex had between them but other than that, she found herself simply incapable of risking experiencing such demoralising dejection and absolute heartbreak again by getting involved with or staying involved with someone who’d cheated before.

Therese eventually broke from her pained reverie and was met with a look on Carol’s face she’d seen before, a few times now actually, one where fear escaped through her eyes and tumbled out into plain sight. The first time was when Therese, along with Carol and Amka, had exchanged stories about their first loves during their last night spent together in Prudhoe Bay with their host lightly prodding Therese until she admitted her insecurities that resulted from her first love and the cruel heartbreak that followed. She’d glanced at Carol then, expecting to see an acknowledgement of shared uncertainty or, at the very least, a hint of understanding, but all she found was a deer in the headlights look, the wide-eyed older woman frozen in her place beside her. It didn’t last long, though, because Carol quickly gathered herself before giving the younger woman some sage advice on the matter, completing what Therese now knew to be a facade with a reassuring squeeze of her hand. Therese had almost forgotten the then puzzling incident but now all the pieces fell into place, with that now completed sense of realisation dropping to the bottom of her gut like a lead brick.

Therese felt herself be flung into a state of chaos with her being bombarded by powerful emotions all vying for control over her. A deep-rooted hurt, a fresh betrayal, simmering anger, anxiety that was chomping at the bit to be released, abject helplessness, the most peculiar sense of relief; all were pounding away at her in earnest, each hoping to gain the upper hand over the others in their fight for dominance. Calm slipped through the offences of those warring fronts to win out, “Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.” The sudden harshness of Therese’s tone that her emergent anger had brought about seemed to take Carol aback, the older woman’s eyes fluttering as she broke eye contact. Therese composed herself before continuing, doing so tersely, “I’m not asking for an excuse because there aren’t any. I’m asking for a reason why you cheated?”

Carol looked up once more and this time held Therese’s gaze. “I’d allowed myself to feel so unhappy for so long while I was married and I resented myself for it. I resented the fact that I allowed myself to feel that way in the first place because I married someone who everyone else thought was best for me except me. I resented myself for allowing myself to continue to feel that way, and I resented the fact that I used my daughter as my excuse for continuing to subject myself to feeling that way. That’s
“all I felt for years and then the one day it... it was just too much for me to handle.” Her shoulders tensed up to her ears at the concluding sentence before a deep sigh worked its way through her, slackening her whole body until she slumped dejectedly into the couch. The once strong eye contact she’d made was lost as her eyes became glazed and unfocused. “And so I took advantage of the one person who’d stuck by me, the one person who was always on my side. I took advantage of Abby even though I knew I’d probably hurt her by doing so.” Her voice came out as a tremulous whisper as she spoke to the air before her, not to the younger woman beside her.

“Why did you do it if you knew it would hurt her? Do you know how fucked up that is?” Therese voice wavered as she spoke, the old, deep hurt Kelsey had inflicted on her coming to the fore in a wave of fresh, agonising glory.

“I don’t know... No, that’s bullshit,” Carol stressed, firmly running with the tips of her thumb and fingers across her creased forehead. “I did it because I was so... desperate to feel anything else back then that I was willing to do anything -no matter what the costs were, no matter how short-lived it would be. I was willing to do anything just as long as I stopped feeling the way I did... And it worked, for a little while at least, but then things changed.”

“Why?”

Carol squirmed in her seat as her uncomfortable interrogation continued. “Even though we both knew it was just sex -well we at least went into it intending for it to just be sex- I could see the affect our sleeping together was having on Abby. They were just slight changes in her but I could still see them. I knew I shouldn’t let it continue because that...affair could not and would not go anywhere...But I did anyway. I let it continue because I selfishly wanted to continue to feel that little bit happy, that little bit... alive...Things only ended between us because we became sloppy and Harge ended up finding out...Even then, though, I greedily and selfishly wanted to continue after he found out. That’s how I awful I was. I wanted to continue with that fucking affair...But I just...I just couldn’t when I saw how hurt he was. When I saw how much hurt I’d willingly inflicted on him...Yes, I was unhappy in our marriage but I never wanted to do that, not even to him...But I did...And I have to live with myself knowing that I deliberately did that to someone I’d once cared about.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows atop her knees, holding her head in her hands.

A weighty silence descended on the both of them, its stifling thickness entering through Therese’s idle, parted lips before filling her lungs, choking her and all that she wanted and needed to say from the inside. Her mind was awhirl while her emotions played a jarring game of seesaw within her, seemingly unsympathetic to how torturous it felt. She only came to some time later when she heard her name spoken so softly that she almost missed it over the din of her mind. The sight that greeted her as she slowly looked to the side was that of a broken woman, finding the most absolute of expressions of remorse and impending heartbreak on Carol’s face that distorted her countenance until it was a pale shadow of its former self.

“I remember you said that you couldn’t look past the fact that someone cheated before and I understand that because I’ve seen first hand the pain it can cause… And just from hearing you talk about it, I know how much getting cheated on hurt you and the effect it’s had on you...I’m sorry that I knew this and yet still waited until now to tell you about what I'd done... I don’t know if or how you can trust me but if you think you can, if you can somehow overlook what I’ve done, I will do everything I can possibly do to earn your trust because I...Because I’ve never felt this way before... I’ve never felt what I feel for you and I’ll do anything to make sure I continue to have what I have with you, Therese.” Carol stopped and took what looked like the heaviest of swallows before continuing, “But I need to know if this is...if this is...” She stopped once more as she ceded eye contact to the floor, gripping her knees firmly until the whites of her knuckles showed and the tendons of her fingers bulged.
Therese’s heart lurched as Carol slowly began to crumble before her very eyes. It wasn’t out of sympathy or compassion for someone experiencing such distress, it was because the entirety of this outward display of emotion alone, what spanned the violent meeting of their lips before to all that happened thereafter and culminated in the picture of desolation beside her, showed just how much Carol cared. There was never any doubt in Therese’s mind that Carol did but seeing how she was acting now told her that there was just as much on the line for Carol as there was for her, that they were both putting as much at risk here. Yes, she’d found it impossible to overlook someone’s cheating past before but this was different. She herself had never felt this way before and although nothing is ever certain, something told her she could never feel this for another again. There was everything to lose but so much more to gain for her, for the both of them. And as she had looked into Carol’s eyes as the older woman had laid herself bare, she could see someone who was begging for a second chance, someone who wouldn’t reoffend because they now knew the consequences of their indiscretion, both for others and for themselves; someone that wouldn’t jeopardise something that they themselves were banking everything on. That fear that had loomed so ominously over Therese before whenever those insecurities came to life had vanished, leaving her to bask in the resplendent possibilities of what was to come by continuing on in their relationship.

The realisation made something click into place in Therese, her mind whirring back into life at the flip of that switch to spark her back into action. She slowly rose from her seat and went and knelt before Carol, gently draping her hands over each of the older woman’s, a physical reconnection that provided the opening for her monologue. “Carol.” She paused, waiting for Carol to lift her eyes to meet her own once more, finding a sea of unshed tears brimming in them when they eventually did. “I know I said it was something that makes or breaks a relationship for me...and it does.” Carol’s chin and brows quivered as she waited to hear her fate. “But not this one.”

A quiet but heavy breath escaped Carol as a single tear broke forth and streaked down her smooth cheek, leaving a glistening, transient mark of her despair, before she closed her eyes and forced more to plunge to their end. She opened them weakly and took Therese’s face in her shaky hands as she leaned down to press the tenderest of kisses to the younger woman’s lips, sharing just some of her salty catharsis with her saviour. After pulling back, she gingerly rested her forehead against Therese’s and blew out a soft, “Thank you, my angel.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if this quite lived up to the cliffhanger I left at the end of the previous chapter but it is what it is. It's a conversation I'd planned on them having for quite some time but I am not sure if it's as impactful a topic to everyone else as it is to me. But I went with it anyway because it's something they had to talk about.

Feel free to tell me your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Feel free to stop in and say "hi", too :) 

Cheers, guys :)
Chapter Notes

Another big thanks to FadedLily for editing this lil thing :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Therese

Monday 20 November 2017

Following their emotional conversation, Carol and Therese had crawled into bed and waited for the imminent arrival of utter exhaustion to seize their entwined bodies and lull them into a tranquil state of rest. Therese had woken up some time later to find herself alone in bed, the space beside her warmed but vacant, lacking the restless body she'd tried to still and cuddle into but to little or no avail. After sitting up with a start, her eyes adjusted to the room's darkness, finding an eerie light ghosting in from the lounge, its long, silvery fingers stretching into the bedroom and twitching with life, beckoning her to come closer. She'd padded over to the threshold and stopped, utterly bewitched by the vision across from her, finding herself at a complete loss for how to move any further. There sat Carol on the window seat, her long legs outstretched before her with the moonlight that poured in through the window bouncing off her pale skin giving her a wondrous luminosity, making her look like an otherworldly creature quietly surveying the foreign land outside. Her head was turned to the side, away from where Therese stood, her cheekbones casting severe shadows that contoured the fine edges of her countenance that only an artist with an eye for beauty and a deft hand for precision could have created.

Despite the sheer allure that just radiated off Carol and drew the eye effortlessly, Therese noticed the unease about the older woman as she sat perfectly still, frozen in place, seemingly unperturbed but evidently perturbed enough by something or another to rob her of her sleep. Carol's focused gaze was forlorn and distant, reaching far beyond whatever it was she was looking at -if she was looking at anything at all. Even the slight resigned slump of her shoulders belied the poised straightness of her back. It didn’t surprise Therese that Carol's misgivings lingered despite the younger woman's resolution that things between them were not over, knowing that the abject desolation the older woman had displayed just hours earlier would be difficult to shake off completely in such a short period of time.

When Therese had eventually regained control of herself, she made her way over to the window seat, Carol's attention having been drawn to her then by the shuffle of her sock-clad feet against the wooden floors. Carol swung her legs off the seat in one fluid motion as she turned to face Therese with a gentle smile adorning her lips. Even then, under the relative cover of darkness Carol's face had fallen into, it was plain to be seen that her smile had failed to reach her eyes, whatever mirth had powered its growth exhausted itself after lifting her cheeks. As Therese stood before Carol, she could see a touch of torment remained in Carol's eyes from hours earlier, its aftershocks still reverberating through her, slowly exorcising itself from her.

Wanting to dispel that distress once and for all, Therese lovingly cupped Carol’s cheek with her hand, hoping her touch would reawaken the utter adoration she knew resided in Carol’s eyes from its tortured slumber. Carol lolled her head slightly to the side and leaned into Therese’s touch, her chest
rising and falling with great effort then. After taking the hand that rested upon her cheek in her own, Carol brought it to her lips and placed a weighty kiss upon it. “I was scared I'd lose you,” she'd softly admitted.

Therese's heart lurched upon hearing the admission, pushing her forward until she stood between Carol's legs. She tipped Carol's face up to hers with both her hands and looked deeply and unwaveringly into the older woman's eyes. In that moment, words were inadequate, lacking the capacity to communicate what was needed to assuage Carol’s fear, lacking the depth to convincingly convey to the older woman that such an outcome was not even remotely feasible. And so she bent down and kissed Carol, hoping everything she wanted and needed to say to the older woman would be transmitted by the assured and impassioned movement of her lips. After pulling back, Carol's eyes were still closed, held in abeyance after the powerful connection of their lips, making Therese tense up as she waited to see whether the kiss and the immensity of all she’d tried to put into it was felt by the older woman. When Carol's gaze finally met Therese's, the cool blue-grey facade of her eyes was juxtaposed by all the warmth that had returned to them, their vitality rebounding with vigour until it assumed its characteristic self. Carol smiled once more, that time with a smile that transformed her entire countenance, before she wound her arms around Therese's waist and hugged her tightly with her head nestled against the younger woman's breasts. That intimate pose remained for some time before Therese quietly ushered them back to bed where they both finally fell into a peaceful sleep together.

Now, Therese had been awake for what she assumed was the last half-an-hour or so. She daren't reach for her phone to check the time for fear of disturbing Carol, though, happily resigning herself to quietly revel in a closeness she now craved almost above anything else. They were both lying on their side with Carol’s front moulded against Therese’s back, her arm securely locked around the younger woman, creating the tightest fitting big spoon-little spoon combination. Carol's even breathing blew across Therese's neck, that featherlight caress calming her beyond measure—not just because of the sweeping feel of it itself but also in knowing that Carol was at ease once more. The sight of their hands nestled together just before Therese's stomach caught Therese's eye and held, Carol's hand loosely covering the younger woman’s creating a warm cocoon for the pair. Therese was perhaps so lost in focusing on the delightful intrusion of her personal space that she started when Carol’s voice sounded from behind.

"Why are you awake?"

"How did you know I was awake?" Therese responded with a whispered question of her own.

"Because your body is all stiff and you're breathing differently,” Carol mumbled matter-of-factly.

Therese smiled to herself, loving the fact that Carol was paying as close attention to her as she was the older woman. After forcefully dragging the corners of her mouth down so as to not smile too openly and unabashedly, Therese shifted around to face Carol, their eyes immediately meeting despite the room’s poor light. “I was trying to not disturb you.”

Carol tightened her arm around Therese's back and shimmied a little closer to the younger woman. “Baby, as long as you're in my arms, I can never be disturbed.”

Therese was helpless against the powerful grin that took control of her lips, seeing the faint outline of Carol's own beaming back at her. After brushing a fingertip along the curve Carol's jaw, Therese leaned over and kissed the older woman’s full, upturned lips in an unhurried, chaste manner. “That was a pretty smooth line.”

“Thank you. I’ve been waiting for the perfect opportunity to use it and you just gave it to me,” Carol said with a slight shrug, her response eliciting a throaty chuckle from Therese. It wasn’t allowed to
last for long, though, because she promptly silenced the younger woman with a quick peck before peppering her lips with more, each stifling any attempted giggles that were forthcoming. Carol finished off the assault of her puckered lips with a deeper kiss, one that made Therese go to jelly and sent warmth radiating through her from the heated point of contact. “I need some water. Can I get you some, baby?” was breathed against Therese's now idle but pulsating lips as Carol lazily ran her hand up the younger woman’s side until it rested over her ribs. After receiving a curt shake of Therese’s head in response -the only response the younger woman could muster with some degree of confidence in that moment- Carol kissed Therese's cheek before rolling away from their hub of intimacy at the centre of the bed.

Therese threw the covers off herself after Carol had made a beeline for the kitchen, suddenly feeling considerably hotter after that rather emphatic seizure of her lips. After the fumblings around in the dark to locate her phone came up empty-handed, Therese flicked the bedside lamp on, annoyed to see it lying just one more blind reach away. Her eyes briefly landed on the “03:57” glaring on the screen before they were dragged away by Carol as she loped back into the bedroom. A devilish grin plastered itself on Therese's face as she took in the sight of Carol in the grey drawstring pyjama shorts she'd borrowed, the length of which were more appropriate for someone of Therese's stature, not someone whose legs seemed to stretch endlessly on, effectively reducing the once modest garment to something closer to a pair of sexy loose-fitting boyshort panties.

“What are you grinning at?” Carol asked as she came to a stop at the foot of the bed.

“Those shorts.” Therese stopped, happily taking the opportunity to sweep her eyes down Carol's body and up again before continuing, “They look ridiculous on you.” *Ridiculously hot.*

“These?” Carol surveyed herself, delighting Therese by performing a slow turn that allowed the younger woman to see how the shorts hugged her peachy derriere in all the right places, showing off the smooth curve of her behind. “I was actually thinking of keeping them for myself.”

“But they're mine.”

“But I like them.” Carol crawled up Therese’s body until she crouched over her, looming large over the younger woman with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“But they're mine,” Therese challenged, looking directly into Carol’s eyes as she did so, seeing lust begin to build itself up in the older woman’s gaze.

“But I want them.” Carol lightly tugged Therese's lower lip between her teeth in what was a playful but thoroughly rousing tease. “Don’t make me beg for them,” she said, her eyes appearing conflicted between focusing on the younger woman’s darkening eyes or the tantalising lips that waited just below her own.

Therese ran her tongue slowly across her bottom lip, wetting it but doing so to deliberately whet Carol’s desire. “What if I want you to beg for them?” she whispered, watching on as fire leapt in Carol’s eyes, trying to remain calm before the imminent end of this tease.

Carol ceded eye contact with the slight bow of her head before she flicked her eyes to look up through her lashes at Therese. “Then I’ll make you beg for something else,” she asserted in a sultry voice as she brought her knee up to meet with the juncture between Therese's legs.

And then it was over.

Their lips collided violently, eliciting synchronous moans of pleasure that were hummed in exchange between their hot, open mouths, their tongues entering into a rapturous battle of dominance that
neither was willing to give an inch in. Therese’s hands were frenzied, torn between tangling in Carol’s hair in an attempt to bring the luscious lips she was already devouring with her own even closer, kneading the breasts that now moulded and heaved against her, and clawing at the older woman’s back as her increasingly roused clit was met with the thigh that thrust into her with rhythmic precision. Carol, on the other hand, was more methodical in her approach as she firmly took Therese’s jaw in hand and forced it sideways, leaving the younger woman’s sensitive neck exposed and ripe for the picking. Therese breathed heavily as Carol’s hungry lips moseyed their way across her jaw before latching onto the soft skin behind her ear, the quick, wet lick that was placed there making the younger woman writhe around agitatedly while attempting to stifle the moans that were trying to force their way through the lips she pressed tightly together. Therese’s resolve didn’t last for long, though, because Carol bit the supple flesh below the edge of her jaw, making the younger woman’s hips buck fervently upward while letting loose with a strangled, “Carol.”

Carol’s head snapped up with her teeth bared as she huffed and puffed laboriously, her irises reduced to the thinnest blue-grey border around her dilated pupils. The look was the absolute definition of hunger, one Therese had briefly bore witness to hours earlier, and luckily for the younger woman, she was the sole object able to sate such abject hunger. Carol pushed herself off of Therese and crept down to the foot of the bed. After dismounting, she grabbed Therese by her ankles and pulled her closer, the younger woman’s shirt rolling up as she was dragged across the covers, exposing the heated flat of her stomach to the cool air, sending a shockwave of goosebumps streaking across her skin. Carol’s roaming hands slid up Therese’s stomach, the muscles of which flexed with every hot breath that fought its way out of the younger woman, before she tore the offending shirt off in one hasty tug. With a hand firmly cupping the nape of Therese’s neck, Carol stopped the younger woman from falling back on the bed and hungrily kissed her once more, the both of them breathing heavily into the other’s open mouth whilst their noses mashed together as their lips switched positions in their duel.

Therese was so lost in the fierce but rousing clash of their tongues that she didn’t feel Carol’s hand leave her neck and delve between her legs, only briefly being flung from her inebriated haze when the older woman began massaging her pussy, those long fingers undulating rhythmically against her throbbing clit. The sudden shot of pure ecstasy that coursed through her left her unable to continue on in their all-consuming kiss, as she ceded to Carol’s dominant lips. Carol took that victory and immediately went in search of another as she leaned down and took Therese’s nipple in a warm, wet embrace, raking her teeth over its surface before nipping at its sensitive peak, making the younger woman thrust her chest forward. Therese wound the fingers of her one hand into Carol’s tresses as she sought to prolong contact between her puckered nub and the hot mouth it was currently being devoured by, while the other seized the back of the older woman’s elbow and pulled it into her, urging the teasing ministrations of those expert fingers on.

The urgent touch brought Carol back to Therese, with her greedily kissing the younger woman once more before sinking to her knees on the floor, her hand never leaving the heated cleft between Therese’s legs as she did so not tiring from the relentless, pleasurable assault she was mounting on the epicentre of the younger woman’s desire. An overwhelmed Therese’s back hit the bed once more, resigning herself to being possessed by Carol in any way the older woman pleased. With the hook of her fingers into the hem of Therese’s shorts, Carol removed them in one fluid motion, leaving her panties in place, in what was the briefest cessation of her titillation. Therese was uncomfortably turned on by this stage, feeling her sodden underwear stick to her lips, undoubtedly creating a modest but lascivious mould of her arousal. To put it simply, she was absolutely desperate for the release she now craved with her entire being. But Carol seemed quite content to continue on with the torture that would only heighten the younger woman’s eventual rapture. Without pulling Therese’s panties to the side, Carol began probing the younger woman’s opening with two fingers, not nearly as deep and fulfilling as was desired but rousing enough to have Therese perform a body
roll downward in search of more meaningful contact; all this while the thumb of her other hand went to work on rubbing the younger woman’s swollen clit. Carol removed the hand teasing Therese’s clit and splayed it across her lower stomach instead, stilling the wayward movement of the younger woman’s hips.

“Oh-ah. Stay.”

Therese groaned but acquiesced to the command. And so Carol continued to bring about the restrained ascent of Therese’s arousal, teasing the younger woman at a torturously slow pace that left Therese shielding her eyes with her arm in utter helplessness and resignation. The steadily increasing pressure that had been applied to Therese’s clit and had deepened the well of moisture that had seeped out of her ceased when Carol removed her hand altogether, making the younger woman’s head snap up in confused desperation. Appearing just over the younger woman’s mound, Carol’s blazing eyes locked onto Therese’s and bore into them unwaveringly. That intense eye contact was held as she pressed a firm kiss to Therese’s clit, then another, and another, each one sending potent shocks of electricity bounding through her, each one pushing her dangerously close to the edge that preceded making that fateful jump into blissful oblivion. Therese merely watched on in an intoxicated stupor before Carol firmly nipped the pulsating nub, leaving the younger woman choking out, “Ca-Carol.”

The anguished cry seemed to flick a switch in Carol as she swiftly removed the younger woman’s underwear, leaving Therese completely naked while the older woman hadn’t removed a stitch of her own clothing, before moving to crouch over the younger woman once more. With one arm propping herself up, Carol -the provocatrix, the seductress, the predator- looked down at Therese and said, “What do you want, baby?” Her calm voice belied the fingers that had taken to rubbing Therese’s slick clit in earnest.

Therese all but lost control at the sound of her voice and the wanton caress, making her screw her eyes shut in anticipation of her imminent climax. “You...Please.” The beg came and Carol sank to her knees on the floor once more to give Therese what she wanted.

Wednesday 22 November 2017

Therese stood between just two of the many bookshelves that made up the PRNT archives, a dingy room that stored just about any resource that had been used for anything that had gone to print, from copies of redacted government reports and sworn depositions by key witnesses to scandalous email chains between local politicians and their “aides”. She was perusing a rather thick book commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency that summarised the findings of all studies conducted in the last fifty years on the environmental and social impacts of natural gas and oil extraction. Having already spent the last one-and-a-half hours or so trying to find one extensive study in particular that used different proxies to compare freshwater quality before and after the discovery of the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field, she was well overdue for taking a break to breathe in some fresh air that didn’t smell like mothballs and that didn’t pose the risk of inhaling potentially harmful mould.

“Hi.”

Came Carol’s voice from behind as Therese went to turn one of the flimsy pages, almost tearing it in two as she jerked in fright. “Jesus! Carol, are you trying to give me a heart attack?” Therese asked as she fought to re-balance the heavy book in one hand and her notebook and pen in the other. Her attempt at appearing indignant failed when Carol dramatically rolled her eyes before she leaned against the bookshelf before the younger woman with a expansive, smug smile curling her lips and that characteristic mischievous twinkle in her eye. “What are you doing in here?”
“Can’t I come in here to look for something?” Carol quirked her one brow in questioning as she folded her arms across her chest, doing what Therese now knew to be a power play that used to easily succeed in throwing her off.

“Of course. But you hardly ever come in here. I mean you asked me where the archives even were just two weeks ago and you didn’t recognise Pam - the woman who keeps track of all these records - when she said ‘hi’ to us in the coffee room last week,” Therese said matter-of-factly, arching her own brow in suspicion. Her comeback made Carol shrug in defeat before throwing her head back and laughing, filling the room with something other than stifling silence. Not needing a second invitation to marvel up close and personal at such a wondrous sight, Therese merely watched on. “What are you really doing in here?”

“I came looking for you, actually. We’ve got a meeting with Tim in 15 minutes.”

“We do? I don’t remember getting an email about any meeting?” Therese asked quizzically as she manoeuvred to rest both her notebook and the hefty book against her chest, while digging into the back pocket of her jeans to retrieve her phone.

“You wouldn’t have because I arranged the meeting. We’re going to tell him about us.”

“We’re what?!” Her shocked exclamation was dulled by the loud, dull clatter of books hitting the floor after they’d slipped from her grasp.

“Shhh”. Carol knelt down and tugged on Therese’s hand to join her. “I set up a meeting with Tim yesterday because we need to tell him about us. We need to get it over with before he becomes suspicious or finds out,” she whispered calmly as she gathered the fallen miscellany.

“What?! You can’t just do that without telling me, Carol. I don’t feel ready for it.” Therese had just about hissed in exasperation, suddenly experiencing the weird and awful feeling of falling with no safety net to catch her.

“This may sound cruel, baby, but that was my exact intention. I didn’t want to tell you about it earlier because I knew you’d overthink it and get all in your head about it and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want you to worry about it and that’s why I took the liberty of setting up the meeting,” Carol explained in a hushed tone, giving Therese’s lower arm a reassuring squeeze with a restrained but the most caring of smiles on her face.

The overwhelmingly daunting prospect of telling Tim about their relationship suddenly felt less so when she realised just how thoughtful Carol had been in wanting to ease the burden on her. She took comfort in Carol’s calm eyes as they gazed evenly back at her, knowing then and there that that look alone could reduce any even remotely trepidatious feelings she ever had into nothingness. “Thank you, Carol.” After casting a furtive look around, Therese leaned forward, gripping Carol’s knees for support as she did so, and chastely kissed the older woman, surprising the both of them with the brief meeting of their lips, doing so because in that moment, nothing felt more right. “Okay, so what do we do?”

What Therese assumed would feel like walking towards the executioner’s block suddenly felt like anything but as they strode down the passage towards Tim’s office together. After one final reassuring squeeze of her hand by Carol, they knocked and prepared to tackle the third major obstacle stopping their being more open about their relationship head on.

“Come on in, guys. Shut the door and take a seat, would you?” Tim genially ushered them in with a wide smile on his face, flinging his glasses onto his desk across which all sorts of papers were
haphazardly scattered. “I’ve been boggling my brain trying to think about why just the two of you would want to meet with me and I came up with diddly-squat. So please put me out of my misery and tell me what this is about.” His dark eyes darted intently between Carol and Therese as he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk, the look on his face one of open expectation.

After briefly making eye contact with Therese, Carol started, “I don’t quite know how to tell you this so I’m just going to come out and say it but...Therese and I are together. We’re seeing each other.” Her voice remained level throughout, not sounding in the least bit perturbed by approaching such a foreign and sensitive subject, doing so with her ever-present grace and confidence. Carol’s sheer assuredness made Therese never feel more thankful for and awed by the woman beside her. It didn’t stop her stomach from wringing itself, though, as the silence that now filled the office stretched on.

Tim scratched the three days-worth of stubble before leaning all the way back in his swivel chair. “Well, I can certainly say I did not see that coming,” he joked, eliciting nervous laughter from both women. “Ummm.” He pinched the bridge of his nose before running his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair until it fell back into his classic comb over style, something Therese knew he did when he was a tad agitated. “I’m not going to lie but I’m not the biggest fan of the idea of you two being together...No, not like that! I mean, from a professional standpoint,” he added hastily after seeing the alarmed skyward arch of both women’s brows. After threading his fingers together as he rested his hands against his stomach, he continued, “Carol, there were many reasons why I hired you. Aside from being lucky enough to call you my friend, you are one of the best writers I’ve ever had the great good fortune of working beside. Your career and your accomplishments speak to that. I hired you because you were bringing that pedigree and fire I know you have. But I also hired you because I knew how it would have a positive effect on our younger writers. And that’s certainly what’s happened with Bel, here, and Dannie, too. I know it’s only been -what? two months since you started here but I’ve already seen changes in both of their writing and their overall approach to writing. I just...I worry that with you being together, that you, Carol, will not be able to give Therese objective advice and guidance, that you won’t be able to put your feelings for her and emotions 100% aside when doing so. I also worry that Dannie will now question his working relationship with you because he may see himself as an outsider now, as the -for lack of a better term- “third wheel”... And you, Bel, I worry that you will question the validity and quality of any piece of work you produce that has even remotely been influenced by Carol. I don’t want you to question whether Carol is being unbiased when critiquing your work or giving you advice... Do you get what I’m saying?” He’d spoken slowly and with the utmost care and consideration of who he was talking to, looking like he was going to great lengths to ensure that what he said and how he said it was done so wisely.

Therese hadn’t thought about the effect their relationship would have on their professional relationship from that angle before and it gave her pause. It had occurred to her before that the dynamics of their professional relationship may stay the same, but she hadn’t thought about how the intricacies of it may be anything but. She tentatively looked across at Carol, finding what she knew was her own nervous expression reflected back at her, uncertainty suddenly alive and present within the both of them.

“Please don’t take this as me thinking that the relationship you have now isn't amenable to working together because it very much can be. I know you both well enough to know that you know how to handle yourselves in a professional manner. But I just want you to be conscious and cognisant about those subtle changes that can happen when you blur the lines between your personal and professional lives. You need to be aware of how changes in one will undoubtedly feedback and bring about changes in the other. I don’t think it is something that you can avoid or prevent from happening but what you can do is be open and honest about it with each other. And keep checking in on one another as time progresses to make sure that you’ve acknowledged, accounted for, and diagnosed those changes. If you’re able to do that -which I hope you will- I honestly think you’ll
succeed in maintaining both a healthy personal and professional relationship. Now does that sound like something the both of you can and are willing to do?” His warm, dark-brown eyes looked searchingly between them as he awaited their response.

Therese looked across at Carol once more, seeing the older woman’s eyes alive with determination, the sheer strength of which spurred her own sputtering determination on until it grew larger within her. In that moment, just with their looking into each others eyes, they came to an agreement. They both turned to look back at Tim once more and simultaneously answered with an unwavering, “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to tell me your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below. Or come say a quick “howzit” (South African slang for ‘hi’).

Cheers, K :)
“Remind me why I’m here again?” Carol asked Abby as they walked towards the back of the indoor bicycle-lined room, finding herself among an eclectic mix of fellow SoulCycle goers who were willingly subjecting themselves to what she believed would be 45 minutes of torturous high-intensity cycling. This was a far cry from how they would typically spend a Saturday morning together, the only reason for the change being that there was a woman at stake –as so often is the case when Abby is involved. Carol would have much preferred to be enjoying mimosas or pink grapefruit-flavoured gin and tonics at their favourite restaurant overlooking the marina. But instead, she was here in the relatively dark, cramped room that would be teeming with endorphins and sweat in a matter of minutes, joining in with those who were masquerading their need to keep up with anything that was even remotely faddish as their want to keep fit.

“We're here because I promised Taylor that I would come to one of the classes she was running. You're tagging along because you owe me for all those boring as hell parties your dear ex-husband always made you attend that you dragged me along to just so I could keep you entertained. You're also here because you have nothing better to do because your girlfriend has other plans that don't involve you,” Abby, clad in matching geometric printed tights and headband, said in a matter-of-fact but humoured tone as she mounted one of the bikes, giving it a quick once-over before doing so.

“Oh nonsense!” Carol replied indignantly despite there being a hint of truth in what Abby had said.

Abby turned her attention back to Carol, ceasing her search for Taylor -the latest conquest in the seemingly never-ending list of dalliances her friend had- among the crowd. “So you’re seriously telling me you're not here because Therese is off kayaking with surfer boy Xander?”

Damn her! Of course she happens to remember that tidbit but you can never remember that there’s a four-year and not two-year age gap between us?”

“I remember the important things,” Abby admitted with a shrug.

“Important? As in it’s helping you prove your point?”

“You’re fucking right! It’s called ‘selective hearing’ for a reason, dear.” They both guffawed, drawing a few side-eye looks from those around them, something that happened quite often when Carol was in the company of Abby, her friend’s lack of filter, proclivity for the inappropriate, razor-sharp wit, and unrelenting sarcasm easily drawing the attention of others for both good and bad reasons. “How have things been going with Therese? We haven’t really spoken since you told me about that cosy dinner she had with you and Rindy.”
“Haven't we?”

“Yes. I distinctly remember rolling my eyes really hard and having to bite my tongue as you were telling me about it.” Abby's cheeky elaboration earned her a swat on the leg from Carol, a smug smile drawn across her face as she copped the blow. “So I take it that things have been going well.”

Carol tried to not smile too openly but she no longer seemed to quite be in control of her lips as they very quickly curled upwards. “They really have, yeah. It's been…” Carol stopped with a smile still playing on her lips, suddenly at a loss to explain just how revolutionary the last three weeks had been. Has it really only been that long? She thought back to all that had happened during that time. The countless kisses they'd shared. The lingering conspiratorial glances they'd exchanged at work, saying everything that needed to be said without ever having to utter a word. The amount of times Therese had caught her staring, the younger woman rewarding her abject inability to keep her eyes off her girlfriend with a bashful dimpled grin that made her stomach perform an acrobatic number in delight. The few occasions they'd laid in bed together and just talked about everything and nothing with no physical or emotional barrier separating them, something she found herself having an intense yearning for. The alluring intimacy that seemed to underlie everything they did together. Everything about the last few weeks she wanted and could only see herself continuing to want over and over again.

“Hmmm...I don't think I've ever seen that look before.”

Carol's came to from her pause for reflection upon hearing Abby's voice, finding her friend looking intently at her, her dark eyes roving over her face with her nude lips pulled into a restrained smile. A blush flourished up from Carol's chest, its ascent only stopping upon reaching her cheeks, rouging them with a colour that only an intense workout could successfully disguise. Despite knowing all too well what it was Abby was getting at, a knee-jerk defensive retort shot out and escaped from Carol's lips, “What are you talking about?”

Abby merely arched her brow, her countenance now assuming an expression that was both expectant and knowing, in this instance the latter more pronounced than the former. When no response was forthcoming from Carol, though, their falling into a drawn out silence where neither was willing to cede eye contact, Abby started, “Well I suppose if you aren't willing to say it, someone else has to...You're in love with her, Carol.” Her tone was gentle and low, much unlike the boisterous manner in which she usually spoke, her dark eyes following suit with their softening.

The notion Carol daren’t think about let alone speak of for the mere fact that she thought she surely could not feel that way after such a short period of time suddenly materialised between them, transitioning out of its ethereal state and manifesting itself into a fully fledged truth. The alarm bells Carol half-expected would ring out were such a truth to be uttered failed to sound, her mind instead quiet and open, leaving her to ponder just why she’d thought it would elicit such a response. Fear. She was fearful of the all-consuming nature of the feelings she had for Therese, fearful of the control they already had over her, fearful of what could come of her if she were to be further at their mercy. But is that really how I feel? Was that the feeling she had whenever her hand sought out its rightful partner, whenever they kissed, took each other to the precipice of rapture and over, or merely spent time just being together? Was that how she felt whenever she breathed in the scent of Therese’s hair, looked into the green eyes she had a hard time tearing her own away from, or simply heard the younger woman’s voice? No. No. The admission came with ease, paving the way for her to come out with an even simpler but more profound truth, “Yes, I am.” The shock of boldness she felt at finally saying it aloud was exhilarating but albeit fleeting as a small, self-conscious smile came to the fore immediately after. “I’ve never felt like this before, though, Abby. Ever...And I just.” She stopped and cast a wary look around, finding everyone else too absorbed in their own conversations to notice the earthmoving one she was having at present. “I can’t help but think that it’s too early to
be feeling like this.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Really?” The timidity with which Carol spoke was at odds with Abby’s unwavering assuredness.

“Do you want to know what I honestly think, Carol? You may have not realised this because you couldn’t even entertain the possibility of you and Therese being together, but I could tell right from that first day at that farmer’s market that there was just something there between you two, something that could develop into something bigger if you allowed it to. So when you finally got together with Therese, I knew something like this was bound to happen. I think you falling for Therese was inevitable. The way I look at the inevitable is: why put a time frame on it? What is the point of doing so? The inevitable happens regardless of whether it’s today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, or however long after that. But the fact of the matter is that it was going to happen.” Abby paused for a beat to allow what she’d said to sink in before continuing, “I’m not telling you this because I think you need to tell Therese how you feel as soon as possible. I’m telling you this because if you feel like this, if you love her and you want to tell her that you love her, any time is a good time to do so. Just as long as you say it.”

“Abby!”

Carol turned her head towards the source of the interruption, finding Taylor -whom Carol thought bore a striking resemblance to Gabrielle Union only with a short undercut and considerably more defined muscle definition- beaming back at them from the elevated podium at the front on which the instructor’s bike was mounted. Abby reciprocated the gesture along with a short wave before looking at Carol once more. “Remember what I told you. Do not fight how you’re feeling. Do not push it down and do not hide from it. Okay?” She didn’t wait for an answer as she promptly turned her attention back to the front of the room, doing so just as Taylor’s voice boomed out once more to commence the class.

Friday 1 December 2017

Carol was busy finely grating quite a sizeable rock of palm sugar, finding the snowfall-like cascade of the dark caramel crystals into the ramekin oddly satisfying to watch, when the doorbell rang out, that chime being the cue for her lips to be tugged into the biggest smile and for her heart to skip a beat before pounding in earnest. After wiping her hands clean and giving the kitchen a quick once-over for anything glaringly disorderly, she hurried off to greet her date. She just about yanked the door clear off its hinges in her eagerness to open it but stopped mid-backswing when her eyes landed on Therese, the sight before her reminding her just why the younger woman had assumed the position as the epicentre of all her desires. Therese was dressed simply and casually, her fitted black long-sleeve, off-shoulder top disappearing into dark grey, high-waisted skinny jeans, the rolled cuffs of which stopped just above a pair of heeled, black suede boots. Without really intending to do so so openly, Carol drank Therese in, her eyes strolling across the creamy expanse of the younger woman’s exposed upper chest and shoulders, over the smooth curve of her breast and down the flat of her midsection. Simply put, she was absolutely transfixed by her stunning girlfriend.

“Is this how we're going to be spend our entire date?” came Therese's voice through Carol’s awestruck reverie.

Carol's eyes snapped up, quickly zoning in on Therese's lips which were swathed in a rich coat of maroon lipstick that popped against her pale skin, finding herself unable to do anything but silently stare at them as the younger woman smiled coyly back at her. After regaining her footing and straightening up to her full height, Carol calmly shot back, “No, only for the first hour or so,” doing
so with a slight quirk of her brow and a sly smile. Her response brought about a delightful, dimple-filled chuckle from Therese who then closed the gap between them with a playful skip. The younger woman steadied herself by lightly holding onto Carol's waist as she stretched up and chastely kissed the older woman's smiling lips, dragging her own away soon after as she sidled past into the foyer.

As always, that simple touch was catalytic, initiating the most potent of reactions within Carol that had her going in search for something more fulfilling. Carol seized Therese by her hips, stopping the younger woman in her journey into the house, and spun her around so she could kiss her with all the hunger she had for her, exulting as always at the fact that Therese responded with ardour. The feel and movement of Therese's lips against her own made electricity crackle within Carol, those pointed bolts being directed in one direction and one direction only, bringing about an insistent throb between her legs. Her hands hurriedly swept down from Therese's waist to firmly grab her behind and pulled her in, their hips now meeting to do their own dance. Therese's tongue made its unencumbered entry into her mouth, the feeling of its wet self now writhing again her own making a soft moan spill from her lips as her head began to swim with intoxicating arousal. The image of the enticing expanse of Therese’s alabaster decolletage seen moments ago flashed in Carol’s mind, her lips immediately detaching from the younger woman’s as they sought to become reacquainted with every exposed inch of supple skin. Carol began placing hungry kisses down the younger woman’s neck as she in turn frantically tugged on Carol’s blouse in an effort to untuck it from her skirt. Just as Carol’s tongue dipped into the hollow at the base Therese’s neck, depositing a lascivious lick there, the younger woman breathily spoke her name, the hushed desperation of her voice only spurring the travels of Carol’s lips on. Carol’s mouth departed from Therese’s neck with a nip, doing so because she knew the reaction it always caused, before finally descending to the younger woman’s chest, her hand joining the fray as it began to fondle Therese's breast.

“Carol, the timer,” said Therese, only louder and more forcefully than before. With her fingers having just inched their way up to the edge of Therese’s top, poised to expose more of the younger woman’s chest, Carol finally ceased the ministrations of her mouth and opened her eyes, finding Therese’s head slung back with a strained expression on her face. Only then did Carol hear the beep-beep-beep sound of the timer emanating from the kitchen, that persistent high-pitched alarm ringing through the air that just a moment ago was loaded with intent. Carol rested her forehead against Therese’s chest and groaned in abject dissatisfaction at not being able to take this any further at present, the younger woman reciprocating with her own deep, loud sigh of frustration. After lightly kissing Therese’s sternum, Carol lifted her head and smiled apologetically before taking the younger woman’s hand in her own and leading them into the kitchen.

“Mmmm. It smells so good in here. Is that...lime?” Therese asked as Carol retrieved the whole salmon that had been roasting from the oven, the heady citrusy smells that wafted into the kitchen adding a freshness and lightness to the air.

“That’s right.” Carol was still smiling as she turned to face Therese and deposited the roasting pan on the kitchen island. The curious look on the younger woman’s face lasted for a split second longer before the most impish of grins twisted the one side of her lips. “What?” Carol asked, slightly perplexed as to what could have caused such a reaction.

Therese shrugged and attempted to straighten out her smiling lips but ultimately failed to do so. “Nothing. Well, it’s just that some of my lipstick is smudged on your lips. Here, let me clean it up for you.”

Jesus Christ. Carol almost gave into her overwhelming desire as Therese swiped her thumb around the corner of her mouth and along the bottom of her lower lip, finding herself desperately torn between two lascivious scenarios where she either took the thumb in her mouth or claimed the
tantalising lips that had caused the mess once more to undo the clean-up altogether. But she didn’t, not when she saw the slight crease of Therese's forehead as the younger woman focused on dutifully completing her task, a strong wave of adoration suddenly washing over, displacing one desire with another that warmed her inside. Therese finally looked up from Carol's lips, finding what the older woman knew would be a look of utmost tenderness, and smiled that smile that made Carol melt every time. Carol brought her hands up to take Therese's face in them but stopped when she realised she was still wearing oven mitts, any remnant of sexual tension between them evaporating as they both laughed. After quickly whipping the offending mitts off, Carol pressed a soft kiss to the younger woman’s lips. Although the gentle synchrony with which their lips moved ensured little to no exchange of lipstick, the kiss was by no means any less fulfilling than the ravenous one interrupted moments earlier. Their eyes met after they broke apart, Carol's stomach more aflutter than ever before as she looked deeply into Therese’s wide, green eyes. I love you. That's what Carol wanted to say but the moment did not feel quite right, not like quite like this, not just yet. It will come.

“Shall we have that dinner I always promised you?”

“Hmm...I think it’s only fair. I mean, I’ve cooked for you I don’t know how many times now.”

Carol gasped playfully before chuckling heartily at the younger woman’s cheek. “You are unbelievable, Miss Belivet. Why don’t you make yourself useful and grab us something to drink while I finish making the glaze?”

The younger woman stole one final kiss before making her way to the fridge. A squeak of excitement sounded from its depths with Therese's head poking out from behind the door immediately after. “Singha beer?”

“Well, you did say it's one of the only drinks one can have with Thai food so I thought it would be perfect for dinner. There are also glasses chilling in the freezer for us to drink out of,” Carol said as she switched the oven to grill, her elaboration bringing about the biggest grin from Therese who then promptly retrieved two bottles that were emblazoned with the brand's signature fire-breathing dragon. As Carol began reducing the glaze in a small saucepan, she was rewarded with a frosted glass of beer. “Cheers, baby.”

“Cheers.” They clinked glasses, sealing their toast with a sip and another kiss. “So what are we actually having for dinner?” Therese asked after pulling up a seat at the kitchen island.

“We’re having tamarind and ginger glazed salmon with a crunchy and herby salad.” Carol returned the smile Therese was beaming at her with vigour after she’d added one final sprinkling of palm sugar and a dash more of fish sauce to the saucepan, swirling them around in the glossy, chestnut-coloured concoction until it formed a homogeneous glaze that was flecked with red chilli and yellow ginger. Therese leaned forward in her seat to glimpse at the salmon as Carol peeled back its protective tinfoil parcel, a plume of steam that was laced with scents of lime, spring onion, and coriander drifting into the air. After carefully manoeuvring the salmon out of the tinfoil and onto a wire rack mounted over a baking sheet, Carol brushed the glaze into every crevice of the fish’s deep-scored flesh and over its skin before sliding it under the grill.

Carol busied herself with chopping up handfuls of coriander, mint, and Thai basil that she then added to the shaved vegetable salad she’d prepared earlier. She tossed the salad together as Therese began to regale her with a story where she went as Princess Peach for Halloween, doing so only because Dannie and Xander said they’d look “pathetic” if there was no damsel in distress for their Super Mario brothers-dressed selves to rescue.

“They made me wear this awful pale pink dress that made so much noise whenever I moved that you could hear me coming from a mile off. The dress was made out of this really static material so
random things kept sticking onto me so I ended up looking like a weird pink Christmas tree. Then there was also a mix-up at the rental store so the blonde wig that came with the costume was styled in a mullet. I ended up looking like a cross between Sleeping Beauty and Joe Dirt. And then, to top it all off, they made me throw mushrooms into the air where they shouted “punteggio” in the worst Italian accents you’ve ever heard whenever they caught one. I swear it was one of the most embarrassing night's I’ve ever had,” Therese said as she made her way to the dining room table with the salad bowl in hand.

Carol was within a few throaty chuckles from tearing up as the timer sounding once more. “Please tell me there is photographic evidence of this. I absolutely have to see this costume! Wait, did Dannie grow a mustache for this? Because the one he’s been sporting this past month was just aw-
ARRRGGHH! FUCK!” Carol screamed as the baking sheet dropped to the floor with a loud clang, having been too distracted to remember to put an oven mitt back on as she went to retrieve the salmon.

“How’s it goin’?!”

Carol was furiously shaking her injured hand as she stood before the open freezer door when Therese rushed back into the kitchen. The younger woman took control of the situation, quickly ushering Carol over to the sink so she could place the older woman’s now reddened and throbbing hand below the running tap. The cool water slowly began to quell the heat that radiated from Carol's hand but did nothing to all that boiled in her veins. “Fuck, Therese. The fucking salmon!” Carol anguished, looking beside herself as she took in the crime scene-like mess before the stove, the salmon lying crumpled and broken, large chunks and smaller flakes of peach flesh scattered around the victim, its sticky, caramelised skin adhering to the pale oak floors with droplets of glaze splattered all around, completing an utterly shattering image.

“I’ll take care of it. Just keep your hand under the running water, okay? Just stay right there.”

Carol could do nothing else but watch on as Therese went to work on cleaning up the heartbreaking culmination of all her efforts, eventually diverting her gaze so she could glare at her hand, wishing that she could somehow go back and undo what had been done in a moment of absent-mindedness. The anger she felt subsided as the minutes spent watching the water stream over hand passed by, though, the sheer dejection she felt thereafter succeeding in sinking her heart. The evening that was going as smoothly as she could have ever hoped for had somehow come to a grinding and agonising halt, destroying every aspiration she could have had for it, leaving her to wonder just what, if anything, could be salvaged from it.

Therese eventually moved them over to the kitchen island so she could tend further to Carol’s hand. The silence in the air was thick, hanging on them like a heavy, wet blanket, smothering anything that attempted to flourish. Therese cleared her throat before chancing at opening up some line of communication between them, “I’m sorry about dinner.”

The smallness of Therese’s voice just about broke Carol, the sight of the younger woman tenderly drying down her injured hand providing a much needed distraction that prevented her from meeting the eyes she knew would succeed in breaking her. “I just...I wanted tonight to be special...I just wanted it to be perfect.” Her own voice was weak and tinged with absolute dejection and desperation, nothing like its usual self. Therese immediately rose from her seat, moving over to Carol so she could press a lingering kiss on her cheek. Carol felt tears fight to make themselves known and her chin quivered ever so slightly the longer she felt the touch of Therese's lips. But she bit those salty rebels back with a vengeance as she gritted her teeth, obstinately refusing to to allow them to escape and get the better of her
Therese threaded her slender fingers into Carol’s hair and whispered into it, “I know, baby. I know. I'm so sorry.” After sitting back down, the younger woman took Carol’s hand in her own, placing it palm-side up, and began to rub a cooling lotion into the smooth, soon-to-be blistering skin with a feather-light touch. “I know this isn’t what you wanted this night to be like, not even close, but any time where it’s just me and you is special to me, you know? I’m not saying that I don’t love and appreciate you doing all of this for us because you know I really do, Carol... I’m saying that although we may have nights like this again in the future, I know we’ll have times together where things will work out exactly how we wanted them to and other times where things will work out even better than we could have wanted or imagined. But all I want is for us to enjoy those times together. As long as that happens, I’ll be happy.” She looked up and smiled gently before focusing once more on the hand she cradled.

A searing warmth tore through Carol, something similar to that which had swept through her earlier that evening only more formidable and all-encompassing, ripping her asunder in the best way possible. That destruction left only one feeling in its wake, that of an intense desire to tell Therese how she felt, not wanting another moment to go by without the younger woman knowing just grateful she was to have her in her life nor how deeply and profoundly in love with her she was. As she stared at Therese while she continued on with her task, she realised in that moment that there was no such thing as the ‘perfect time’ to say ‘I love you’. No attempt should be mounted to stifle or prevent the proliferation and eventual outward manifestation of the powerful feeling she had for Therese. She’d tried to ignore it or better yet not give mind to such thoughts at all in the past few weeks but she simply could not and would not continue to do so. “Baby.”

“Hmmm?”

“Baby.”

“Yeah?” Therese’s head remained bowed, now focusing on loosely wrapping Carol’s hand in gauze, evidently unaware of how pivotal the next few moments would be for the older woman, hopefully for the both of them.

“Therese.” Carol laid her other hand over Therese’s, stopping their motion and finally drawing the younger woman’s gaze to her. She looked unwaveringly into Therese’s eyes for eight whole beats before breathing out, “I love you.” There was no fear or any other feelings of unease that awaited her on the other side of her uttering those three words. A sense of serene buoyancy filled her instead, that easy lightness she felt mixed with a peculiar contentment of sorts while she also felt as if she'd never in her life said anything more right. Those feelings were reduced to background noise, though, as she continued to look intensely into Therese’s now slightly widened eyes, noticing in her periphery the great rise and fall of the younger woman’s chest as she breathed deeply. The silence that stretched on and amplified with every second passed almost got the better of her. Before it could do so, though, Therese closed the gap between them in one purposeful spring forward so she could gently cup Carol’s face in her hands as she kissed her, seizing the older woman’s lips with her own in the most resounding manner one could. A tsunami-like wave of relief and delight crested and crashed over Carol, leaving her awash with resplendent happiness that sent tingles racing throughout her body. Their eyes met once more after they’d broken apart, the majestic kaleidoscope of colours that had burst forth behind Carol’s closed eyelids as they kissed reduced to inadequacy as she looked at Therese, the younger woman being the first to speak for herself, but more importantly for the both of them.

“I love you.”

Chapter End Notes
Let me know your thoughts on this chapter or the story in general by dropping a comment below.

Thanks for reading, guys. Cheers, K :)

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Thanks for reading, guys. Cheers, K :)
Distractions

Chapter Notes

A massive thanks goes to FadedLily. She was certainly more helpful with whipping this chapter into shape. That was a lovely change ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Carol

Sunday 3 December 2017

Carol gave one final, massive jerk, her body now awash with overwhelming levels of endorphins and other heady chemicals, before she went limp, her back meeting the bed once more as she flopped down in exhaustion. She hummed in absolute satisfaction and allowed herself to bask in the pulsating aftermath of her orgasm - her third that morning - before she opened her weary eyes. Therese was crouching over her with a slight grin set above her glistening chin and her bottom lip trapped slightly between her teeth, the younger woman's face a picture of smugness. The smile above was soon mirrored by the one below when Carol's lips curled upwards.

After wiping Therese's chin with her hand, Carol pulled the younger woman down for a deep, sensual kiss, easily parting the lips her own were embracing with her tongue so she could slowly lash it against its partner in seduction, allowing her to taste the subtle sweet tang of her own wetness. Therese melted into the kiss, making Carol delight as always in the feel of the weight of the younger woman’s body as she lay fully on top of her. Carol squeezed Therese's behind before she lightly dragged her nails from the small of the younger woman’s back all the way up to her shoulders at a leisurely pace, doing so because she knew it was a caress Therese had a serious weakness for. As if on cue, Therese broke their kiss as she arched her back and shuddered, moaning softly as she did so. Carol smiled satisfactorily to herself before starting, “Wouldn't you say it's my turn now?” Not wanting Therese to really have the capacity to argue otherwise, Carol went back to running her fingers up and down her back.

With what looked like great difficulty, Therese forced out, “No.” In an effort to perhaps regain some control of the situation, she passionately kissed Carol, latching onto the older woman’s full upper lip with abandon. The ploy worked because Carol’s hands idled before she focused on regaining her footing by returning the kiss with her own hunger. Unlike before, Therese purposefully pulled her lips away so she could continue on with her reply, “Your hand’s injured.”

It was now Carol's turn to struggle to respond, blinking repeatedly in an attempt to clear some of the arousal that was clouding her mind from their hungry kiss. “Now you know I don't have to use my hand. In fact...I prefer it that way,” she whispered, somehow rebounding with incredible vigour. Her sultry confession brought about the desired effect as Therese’s eyes immediately zoned in on the lips she now held in a devilish grin. Wanting to entice Therese just a little bit more, Carol slowly ran her tongue along her bottom lip before continuing, “But if you’re worried about my hand, don't you think this is the perfect opportunity for me to become ambidextrous? Hmmm? I think you’d really like that in the long run.” This time, all Therese could do was blink in astonishment. Carol stretched her neck upwards to initiate another kiss, claiming what she perhaps thought was the victorious end of their discussion, but Therese inexplicably pulled back, the gap between their lips now far too wide for
Carol's liking, making her stifle a huff of exasperation.

Therese hemmed and hawed for a moment before responding, “You make a good point, but no.” She quickly pecked Carol as if in apology but again withheld her lips. “I'm not convinced you're fully relaxed.”

Carol laughed at the absurdity of the statement. “Baby, I was relaxed two orgasms ago.”

“Okay, you may be relaxed now but are you relaxed enough to no longer worry about this afternoon?”

Carol was about to answer with a resounding ‘yes’, one which would have purely been powered by her arousal, but knew it wouldn't be the whole truth. That afternoon would be the first time Therese would be meeting Harge, bringing about the unavoidable collision between her old and new lives. Harge had called out of the blue the day before, the curtness of his greeting immediately telling her exactly in which direction their conversation was to go, and asked whether he would finally get to meet Therese. Had she not been relaxing at Therese’s apartment after they’d spent their morning strolling around the San Diego Art Institute, Carol had no doubt that she would have said ‘no’, especially after he’d referred to Therese as the “woman” she was currently seeing, doing so despite Carol having repeatedly called her by her name in the row they’d had two weeks prior. She could feel the bile-like, annoyance-tinged anger build within her as she listened to him practically spit down the line at her, almost demanding that Therese be there when he came to drop Rindy off. Thankfully Therese intervened before any barbed remarks could be hastily tossed between them in yet another one of their heated moments, mouthing “It’s okay” to Carol, her green eyes as clear and calm as ever in that moment. So Carol acquiesced to their wills, going against her desire to continue to put off their meeting.

Her nervousness had ebbed and flowed since the call, receding in moments when she was sufficiently distracted -like at present- and peaking in others when she could do nothing else but fixate on what could unfold. Having already told Therese the most damning part of the marriage she’d recklessly conspired to end, Carol knew that any ammunition Harge may well be willing to use against her wasn’t nearly as damaging as what she’d already used on herself. But that didn’t stop an ominous feeling from festering within her, the twisted side of herself her ex-husband inevitably brought out in her being the catalyst for its growth. Although she’d felt the slow leaching of the bitterness that had pooled during the last few agonising years of her marriage, there was still a large enough well of it remaining for her to be easily irked or provoked by him and his own bitterness, the bitterness whose genesis she’d brought about. Now that she was with Therese, though, she no longer wanted that side of her to exist, nevermind having to worry about hiding it from the younger woman. She wanted to leave all those ill feelings that continued to linger from her marriage behind her, knowing that if she didn’t disentangle herself from that part of her past, there was no way for her to fully commit to her future, a future which she now hoped above hope would include Therese.

“Carol.”

Carol broke from her reverie, finding Therese looking intently down at her, concern now faintly clouding her countenance, the misty layer of lust over her eyes having dissipated entirely. Wanting to put the younger woman at ease, she smiled gently and quickly kissed her before moving so that she could sit up, Therese splaying her legs out to either side of Carol’s waist so she straddled her lap. “So that’s why you’re doing this, then? Because you know I’m nervous.” She absentmindedly ran the tips of her fingers over Therese’s spine, lightly strumming the slight ridges along its length.

“It’s part of the reason. I just don’t want you to worry about it. We both knew it was going to happen some time or another and it’s better to get it over and done with now than put it off any longer. I
know that’s not what you think because you’d be quite happy to put it off indefinitely, but you’ll be so relieved when it’s out of the way.”

“That’s how you think I’ll feel, is it?” Carol asked in a somewhat humoured tone.

“No. I know that’s how you’ll feel afterwards. It may be awkward and maybe even a bit excruciating for you at first but those feelings will eventually pass. I’ll be right there with you so we’ll get through it together. The best thing about it is that once our first meeting has happened, we won’t have to worry about it ever again. It’ll be done and we can just move on.”

Carol of course knew this to be true, but it still didn’t stop her from worrying about the impending coming together of her lovers both past and present. As she looked into Therese’s eyes, though, she could see the determination that blazed within them, making her believe that what the younger woman had said was an absolute certainty. “You’re not scared or at all worried?”

“No. I’m more worried about you worrying.” Therese’s voice was both earnest and firm, begging no question nor further argument.

There it was again, that deceptive but unerring strength Therese possessed which never failed to take Carol by surprise, doing so despite having bore witness to it many a time now. In that moment she found herself, as so often was the case in the last few months, thankful that this woman was part of her life because it meant she didn’t have to wage battles by herself, that she didn’t need to be the only one bearing any burden, that she didn’t have to constantly assume the rank of the ‘strong’ one in any situation. The fact that she was also fortunate enough to call Therese the woman she loved was an added extra she scarcely believed she deserved. She shook her head in disbelief as she looked into the eyes that gazed at her unwaveringly. “I love you,” she said, her simple confession drawing the tenderest of smiles from Therese.

With a now overwhelming urge to kiss the woman she held, she wound her arms around Therese and pulled her closer to her. A heavy sigh staggered its way out of her lips thereafter, though, after she felt the younger woman’s heated sex against her stomach, comprehensively igniting her wanton desires once more. “You said that was only part of the reason you’ve kept me in bed all morning.”

“Yes. Well this was actually one of those kill-two-birds-with-one-stone kind of situations. You see, I didn’t want you to feel nervous anymore so that’s why I’ve been trying to distract you since we woke up but I was also doing that because I can’t quite seem to get enough of you.”

Carol had to fight a wide smile from taking control of her lips after hearing the exact answer she was hoping for, with her instead coyly asking, “Is that so?” After receiving a short nod in confirmation, Carol flipped them over so that she now loomed over Therese. “What about me, though? Do you think I could ever get enough of you? You’re sorely mistaken if you think so, baby.” The fingers of her injured hand took to the task of squeezing Therese’s breast in earnest as she spoke, that brazen caress making the younger woman’s eyes widen in surprise, allowing her to see just how quickly lust had manifested in their green depths once more. “Don’t you think it’s only fair that I at least get a little taste of you?” She teasingly rolled Therese’s nipple between her thumb and forefinger before she tugged on its peak, making the younger woman arch her back and moan softly. Perhaps being too distracted by that small victory, Carol failed to notice the younger woman slip her hand between them, only coming to when she felt two fingers glide into her with lubricious ease, comprehensively ceasing the ministrations of her own fingers.

“I’ll let you have a taste but only if you can tell me you want me to stop trying to distract you.”

Carol’s premature celebration of what she thought would be her winning the battle came back to bite her, her body betraying her as she began to move her hips back and forth, rocking herself towards
yet another orgasm and the most pleasurable of defeats. She screwed her eyes shut as Therese began moonwalking her fingers deep inside her and breathed out a heavy, “Don’t stop.”

With a tumbler of whiskey in hand, one Therese had handed to her without a word, Carol sat quietly on the deck, doing so after the younger woman had ordered her outside so she could no longer needlessly fuss over her already orderly home, something she’d been doing for the past hour or so as a means of alleviating her restlessness. The slow trickle of blue from the sky into the ever-present ocean below successfully distracted Carol, its loss along the horizon never missed as vivid reds and oranges selflessly flung themselves from the edges of the day’s fading sun to take their place, their leaps occasionally intercepted by wispy cirrus clouds that disappeared into the distance.

The feeling of the younger woman’s body nestled in the shelter of her body added to her relaxation, swathing her in a contentment that brushed aside any hint of unease that remained. All she needed now was Rindy and she’d be set. She nuzzled into Therese’s hair and pressed a lingering kiss to her dark tresses, making the younger woman hum softly and shift just that little bit closer. Therese tilted her head up, involuntarily drawing Carol’s eyes to her as always, and smiled, the delightful pair of crevices in her cheeks deepening as Carol traced her finger along her jaw. With a slight stoop of her head, Carol kissed Therese. The doorbell chose the exact moment their lips met to ring out, that drawn out chime being met with a groan of disdain from both women. After disentangling herself from Therese, Carol asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Therese answered with conviction and without hesitation. “Are you?” With a nod in reply, Carol walked towards the deck’s sliding glass doors. Her journey was stopped, though, when Therese tugged her back. “Hey. Remember I love you and we got this, okay?”

Carol couldn’t help but smile at Therese and her gung-ho attitude, the warmth that suddenly suffused her chest after hearing those simple words stopping any ice that threatened to develop under her skin at the thought of seeing Harge. “I love you,” she said, stealing one more kiss before rushing off.

“Mommy!” Rindy barrelled through the door before it was even fully open, her pineapple printed backpack bouncing wildly against her back as she entered, and threw her arms around her mother’s waist to envelop her in a tight hug, her slight stature belying the strength she possessed.

“Sweetheart!” Carol practically squealed, the reunions she had with her daughter being the only time her voice pitched quite that high, but she cared not in the slightest about how foolish she sounded. She bent down so she could embrace Rindy properly, peppering kisses all over her daughter’s face as soon as possible, the loud, exaggerated smooching sounds that accompanied each one making the squirming little girl giggle. “Oh, I’ve missed you so, so, so, so, so, so much!”

“I missed you so much, too, Mommy!” Rindy enthused after they’d pulled back from each other, joy now twinkling in her eyes as she looked at her mother, her response earning her a lingering kiss on the cheek.

“I don’t think you’ve ever quite said hello to me like that before, sunshine. I’m a little jealous now,” came Harge’s voice from behind the door, his tone light and humoured, one he invariably used when addressing his daughter.

Carol stood and opened the door fully, revealing the somewhat imposing figure of her ex-husband, finding him uncharacteristically clean-shaven, the absence of his salt-and-pepper stubble making him look a few years younger than he actually was, with his dark hair appearing, as always, naturally tousled. As she looked at the man she once loved, Carol was reminded of one of the reasons he’d caught her eye all those years ago. His classic good looks seemed to only be enhancing with age. Aside from his defined jawline, hazel eyes, the green of which was brought by the deep green shawl
cardigan he wore today, and dazzling smile, his easy-going and kind nature cemented his position atop the ideal husband rankings her mother liked to keep track of. But he endeared himself considerably to her regardless of how well he was liked by her family, treating her as any woman would want to be treated by her partner. She was never against the idea of marriage, but her biggest reservation back then, at a time when the word was continually tossed around, was that she herself was not sure if getting married to Harge was what she wholeheartedly wanted. Despite this, and as a result of increasing pressure from her mother, she agreed when he popped the question. She did hope above all hope that by embarking on this adventure with him at her side, she would warm to being a married woman altogether and eventually be thankful for having done so. Things hadn't worked out the way she imagined they would, of course, something she was both relieved and resentful of now.

Harge continued to grin down at their daughter for a few more beats before diverting his gaze up to look at Carol, his smile fading to a more strained one. Carol had seen that same loss of strength in his smile for some time now, knowing that she herself could sometimes not even muster a smile when seeing him. She resented the fact that that was where they were at, that their relationship had deteriorated to such a point despite their best intentions to put their issues aside for the sake of Rindy. The strength of the ill feelings they had towards one another fluctuated, sometimes flaring up over the most innocuous of things, but lingered regardless, the stubbornness on both their parts thereafter effectively preventing the air from being cleared. And so that was perhaps why they sometimes could only fake a smile or could barely stand to be civil towards one another, because they never hashed out how they felt at the time and instead allowed their resentment to accumulate and fester.

Now that Therese had reawakened everything that was once good and alive but had withered somewhat within her as she remained in a marriage that had far exceeded its expiry date, Carol no longer wanted such a toxic cycle to continue. She no longer wanted her insides to contort and knot during yet another one of their bust-ups. She didn't want to worry about how Harge would retaliate were she to do something that was largely dictated by her own unwillingness to compromise. She didn't want such feelings to take up any space within her let alone let it build over time. No, if she wanted things to change between them, she had to take the first step towards doing so. “Hi Harge. How are you?”

His brows shot up somewhat, perhaps surprised that Carol had greeted him warmly. “Hi Carol. I’m doing well, thank you.”

“Come on in. Sweetheart, why don’t you go put your things in your room, okay?” Rindy bounded out of sight, leaving them to walk toward the kitchen in silence, one that was slightly less stifling than usual. Carol's stomach wrung itself when Therese rose from the dining room table and made her way into the kitchen.

After casting a wary glance sideways at Carol, Harge offered up his hand. “Hi there. Theresa, is it?”

Annoyance attempted to spike within Carol but was stopped from doing so when Therese calmly and easily replied, “Therese. Hi. Is it alright if I call you ‘Harge’?” Her small hand was practically swallowed by his as they sealed their introduction.

“No please. My parents named me after my great-grandfather despite the fact that he himself hated the name. So please, call me Harge,” he said good-naturedly, flashing his pearly whites for the briefest of moments, looking like he almost forgot the tact he had chosen when setting up this meeting when they suddenly disappeared from view. “So Therese, I’m sure you understand why I wanted to meet you today.”

Carol knew Harge was never one to really beat around the bush, preferring directness instead of any other approach in everything he did. It therefore wasn’t surprising that he dove straight into the issue
at hand. No foreplay yet again. She was thankful that Therese replied at that moment as it distracted from the fact that she was trying not to smile at such a thought.

“Of course. I’d want to do the same if I was in your position. That’s why I agreed to do this as soon as Carol mentioned it.”

Harge looked somewhat taken aback by her response, his eyes darting to his ex-wife as if he were seeking confirmation that that was in fact the truth. Before he could chance at responding, though, Rindy loped into the kitchen, her face lighting up when her eyes landed on Therese. Much like before, the little blonde made a beeline towards the person she was to seize in a fierce hug. “Hi Therese! Daddy, this is Therese I told you about,” she stated matter-of-factly, casting her eyes towards her father before looking back up at Therese.

“I know, sunshine. We were actually just getting to know each other. Say, why don’t you show your mom that new book on frogs of yours so I can get to know Therese a little better?”

“Oh, I don’t thi-”

“I think that sounds like a good idea. Then you can show me your frog book afterwards, Rindy,” Therese said as she smiled down at Rindy, cutting across Carol as she attempted to argue against such an idea.

Alarm bells immediately rang out at the thought of Harge being left alone with Therese, but as soon as Carol locked eyes with the younger woman, she saw that same unbridled determination she’d seen earlier that let her know that there was no way she could argue otherwise. And so she allowed herself to be dragged off in the direction of the living room by Rindy as Therese and Harge in turn made their way outside. Despite being well out of earshot and unable to read lips from her vantage point, Carol could not help herself from stealing glances as Therese and Harge stood on the deck, finding herself too distracted by what could be unfolding between them to listen intently as Rindy bombarded her with frog-related fact after frog-related fact. She noticed how animatedly Harge was speaking, something she knew he was not prone to doing but she hardly worried about what brought about such a change in him when she saw how calm Therese was as he spoke. After Rindy huffed exasperatedly when she again caught her mother’s eyes elsewhere and not on the glossy pages of her book, Carol turned her back on what was happening outside and gave her daughter her undivided attention, doing so because she had no control of a situation she herself was not apart of.

After half-an-hour or so, Harge made a move to leave, asking for a quiet word with Carol in private. The gentle smile Therese gave her before she made her way outside imbued her with a sense of ease and reminded her about just what the end goal was of this whole endeavour: that Therese become a permanent feature in her and Rindy’s lives. She found Harge beside his car, dusk beginning what was its brief stay before darkness would come to take over the night’s sky. He looked agitated, pained almost, as he stood with his arms locked across his chest. It was a sight Carol had seen in the weeks leading up to the end of their marriage, perhaps when it finally dawned on Harge that their marriage was in fact over, that what he had expended great effort on trying to revive within Carol was well and truly dead, that their idealised “perfect marriage” had not come to fruition. Seeing it now, though, she didn’t get the same sick gratification she felt during the times he broke down in front of her, when she almost exulted in the fact that he was feeling as awful as she had in the last few years of their marriage. The peculiar sense of revenge she felt then returned once more, only more diluted and not nearly as satisfying.

“Is it serious between you two?” he asked to the ground, his arms tightening across his chest as if to keep himself together and protect himself against the incoming answer.

“Yes.”
“That’s why you’re playing nice now, huh? You want to be on my good side for once so I’ll be okay with your girlfriend being around Rindy. Is that it?”

Carol winced at the bitterness of his tone but steeled herself to answer him. “No. Harge, things haven’t been good between us for a long time now and I know that that has taken a considerable toll on the both of us. I don’t want us to fight or try to keep Rindy away from each other like we have been doing. I want to put an end to it because it’s not good for either of us but more importantly because it will have an even greater impact on Rindy if we continue on like this. That’s something we can both agree we don’t want to happen.”

“Harge, this resentment we have towards one another is not healthy or sustainable. I don’t want to feel it anymore. I have resented myself for a long time for so many reasons. Because I committed to a marriage I wasn’t ever fully on board with which meant that it was bound to fail. Because I kept us both in a marriage even though I’d checked out of so long before it actually ended. Even though it has now been over a year since we got divorced, that resentment has stayed with me. That’s why I’ve acted out when I had no reason to do so. That’s why I’m always so willing to go toe-to-toe with you when we fight. That’s why I act like a bitch towards you.”

She paused once more so she could take a deep, calming breath before continuing, “But I don’t want that anymore, Harge. I don’t want that ugliness to remain inside me. I don’t want to feel that way. That is why I’m acting the way I’m acting, because I don’t want things to go on the way that they have. If I’m serious about what I now have with Therese - and I very, very much am- and I want to give it everything I’ve got, then I need to try put this behind me. Harge, I cannot tell you how you should act towards me and I won’t do such a thing, but I think that we must both try move on from this difficult time in our lives because we can’t go on like this. We need to put a stop to this.”

Harge’s body slackened as he listened to his ex-wife until he slouched where he stood. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and straightened back up to his full height. After coughing to clear his throat he started with a simple, “Okay.” He looked up and held Carol’s gaze for a few moments. “I agree. For Rindy’s sake, that’s probably the best thing for us to do.” He looked away for a moment, the poor light now deepening the frown lining his forehead, his gaze forlorn and distant. After sighing deeply and audibly, he looked at his ex-wife once more, the eyes which at one time could only look tenderly at her now hardened and unemotional. “Everything you do has consequences. I hope you remember that before you do something fucking selfish again.” He didn’t wait for any response that may have been forthcoming as he promptly turned on his heel and got into his car.

“I won’t do that ever again,” she said as she watched him drive away, never meaning the sentiment more in her life.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to tell me your thoughts on this chapter or the story as a whole by dropping a comment below.

Thanks for reading, guys!
THIS ISN'T A NEW CHAPTER!!! This is a re-post of the first chapter. I don't know what the fuck happened but I managed to delete it. Don't ask me how because I myself don't fucking know. The only way I can get it to appear first up is if I delete the whole work and re-edit every chapter -something which I shan't be doing. Not now at least.

Sorry for the bugger up, guys.

HOWEVER, I do hope to post a real new chapter soon.

Cheers, K :)

Therese

Thursday 14 September 2017

"Belivet?!!"

Therese's head snapped up, the velocity of which surprisingly did not give her whiplash, as her reverie was broken. "Sor...sorry, Tim. I was just ..." she began to stammer while looking down in the hope of finding a believable excuse written somewhere on the doodle-filled pages of her opened notebook. Shit, what was he talking about? Something about green energy solutions, or fundraising, or group bonding. It couldn't have been about a fundraising green energy group, could it? Shit! Her mind flailed while she flipped through yet more scribbled pages, none of which offered the slightest solution to her problem at hand.

"Daydreaming? I know!" Tim Nilsson replied incredulously but with a distinct wry edge. He shook his head as a knowing smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Upon hearing his reaction to her lapse in concentration, Therese looked up to flashed an apologetic, toothless smile, bringing her deep-set dimples to the fore, before sinking a bit lower in her seat.

"Let's pull our heads in, please. That goes for you, too, Richard!" he went on with a little bit more bite in his tone. Richard jerked upright from his reclined position, being caught red-handed as he ogled an attractive temp who happened to pass the glass-walled conference room in which they currently congregated. Therese bit down on the end of her pen, attempting to prevent a smile from spreading across her face, and, as ever, fought the urge to roll her eyes at Richard, his indiscreet gawking this time being the source of her annoyance. What. A. Tool.

"Where was I? Oh, right. Dannie, your piece on the impact repealing the Climate Action Plan and Clean Power Plan and the United States' pulling out of the Paris Agreement will have on current and future clean energy initiatives was an absolute hit with readers! And, that goes for both printed and online editions! There was a lot of feedback and commentary about states seeking autonomy to implement their own initiatives, predominantly positive, might I add. And, those tidbits of Mary D. Nichols were pure gold! Excellent, excellent job, Dannie!" Tim beamed proudly across the large mahogany table at a scraggly-haired Dannie McElroy, an action mirrored by Therese.
"Thanks, Tim. That means a lot to me," Dannie replied meekly before continuing, "But others really came after me for writing the piece, you know? Posting all kinds of shit on Facebook and Instagram about how I'm the Left's puppet who's ‘peddling this climate change nonsense’ or something along those lines." His use of exaggerated air quotes brought about a few chuckles from the room. "You didn't read the things they said about my mom," he mumbled, shaking his head ruefully all the while staring blankly down at the table on which he rested his forearms.

"That's because you were ruthless, kid! As for the comments, that unfortunately comes with the territory. Especially when you name every climate change denialist currently sitting on the Cabinet in your opening salvo. Talk about shit-stirring, Dannie! People posted that crap because they knew you had a story, and a damned fine one at that, and they were running scared. The old saying, 'the best defense is a good offence' would be those people's motto. Their criticism is not a reflection of the work you did. Your writing was factual and succinct and your sources were water-tight. You did good, Dannie. I wouldn't have allowed it to go to print if I didn't think the piece was good enough. I need writers like you on my team who are willing to go for the jugular. Do you hear me? I need you, Dannie."

The finality and conviction of Tim's words, along with a round of nodding heads from the others, was enough to drag Dannie out of his doldrums as he ceded to them a broad smile of appreciation.

"You just need to have thicker skin, D. You know, almost as thick as your tongue gets whenever you try talking to a girl," commented Phil McElroy, Dannie's older finance writer brother, while elbowing him in the ribs to bring about yet more laughter from the room. Dannie let out a rasping laugh before playfully trying to get even with his brother through a few carefully placed punches.

"Okay, okay. Enough of that, children!" boomed Tim, effectively silencing the tumult, before continuing, "Tomorrow will be Carol Ross' first-"

"Wait, who's Carol Ross now?" Richard interrupted, his interest suddenly piqued.

I'm surprised my eyes haven't rolled across the table with how hard I've been rolling them at you today, Richard. How the hell did I date you for almost a year?! Therese quickly pushed those thoughts out of her mind, not wanting to delve into those muddied waters.

"Carol Ross, formerly Carol Aird, she's recently divorced so she goes by her maiden name now," he said pointedly to Richard, "will be joining our team from tom-,

"Divorced, huh?" asked Richard, a sly smile fighting to take control of his thin-lipped mouth. He was dangerously obtuse to the glint in Tim's eye and the not so subtle setting of his jaw, evidence of his all too clear annoyance at having been interrupted twice. Seriously, Richard? How are you this oblivious? How is it even possible that I still get secondhand embarrassment from the shit you pull? Just shut the fuck up and let him talk!

"Enough, Richard!" The edge in Tim's tone invited no further interruptions. "As I was saying, Carol will be starting with us tomorrow. As you all well know she is a real powerhouse with some serious writing credentials and more than a few awards already under her belt. I'm sure you all read her exposé last year on how a few major multinational vegetarian and vegan companies use various animal products in the production of their foods. It's a real steal that we managed to land her and we should be thanking our lucky stars that she actually chose to work here at PRNT," he said, looking pleased with himself.

By contrast, Therese's face was akin to a child gazing in wonderment at an all-you-can-eat sweets buffet, a look complete with glazed eyes and a dopey smile. Wow, Carol Ross is actually going to work here! She's a total badass and obviously an amazing writer. Maybe I could learn a thing or two from her ... More importantly, though, how am I going to play it cool and not completely fangirl
Tim's voice called her musings to an unexpected close yet again. "Even though Carol's a bit of a big name, she's told me she wants to be treated like anyone else on the team and that's exactly what's going to happen. So, I'm setting her up in the office Therese and Dannie are in. No buts, guys. There's no desk available in your office anyway since Jeanette moved in so pipe the hell down already!" shushing the grumbles of discontent coming from Phil and Richard.

Therese's stomach did a bit of a somersault before plunging to the bottom of her gut upon learning about her soon-to-be office mate. Well, I guess I can scratch avoiding her at all costs as a means of trying to not fangirl over her. How the hell am I going to do this?

"I expect you all to welcome her and to make an attempt to bond with her because she's as much a part of this team now as anyone else. I think that just about covers all I wanted to say. I'll be coming around some time tomorrow to introduce Carol to each of you. Please be on your best behaviour. Okay, let's get cracking with the day," he concluded playfully before everyone proceeded to gather their things and filter out of the conference room.

Once back in their shared office, Dannie turned to eye an absentminded Therese. "Well, I guess the mystery of the empty desk is solved, huh?" he said, gesturing at the corner desk beside the double hung window, hoping to reverse the obvious downturn Therese's mood had taken following the meeting's end.

Therese gave a weak smile and a short, half-hearted chuckle. "I guess so." I already feel out of my depth working here and after tomorrow I'll probably feel even more inadequate. How can you not when working next to someone who's won a Pulitzer or two?

"You're overthinking this, Rez. You'll be fine and we'll be fine and she'll be fine and everything else will be fine, too. It's just Carol Ross. She's a total nobody with zero cred," he joked, again trying to loosen Therese up.

This time a real laugh emanated from her and with it her dimples began to peek out. "Yeah, Carol who, right?" she played along. "Who knows, meeting her may do me good, you know?" she said with a slight inflection at the end. That sounded optimistic, almost believable even.

Dannie grinned. "That's the spirit! That's that glass half-full mentality right there! You'll be thankful that you met her, Rez. I'm sure of it.

The earnestness in his voice was enough to quell any lingering doubts in Therese's mind, reminding her yet again why she considered him one of her closest friends.

Friday 15 September 2017

The following day, Therese was a veritable nervous wreck. From her restless slumber the night before, to her aimless and almost haphazard attempt at an early morning run in the crisp late autumn air, to her present struggle to find something appropriate to wear to work. How the hell did I dress myself before I started working with Carol Ross?! Why am I overthinking this? Dannie's right, I'll be find. It's just another day. Yeah, just another day working alongside an award-winning writer. Idiot! No, I'll be fine. I'll be fine. I will be fine. I. Will. Be. Fine. You can say that all you want but it's still not going to change the fact that you've been standing naked in front of your closet for the last 30 minutes and have yet to resolve the conundrum of what to wear! Pull yourself together, woman!

After another 15 minutes of deliberation, Therese settled on a thin, fitted black turtleneck, black,
uncharacteristically, untorn skinny jeans, a pair of black leather chelsea boots with a slight heel to add some much needed height to her diminutive 5'3" frame, and finished off the look with a thigh-skimming houndstooth jacket. She even went so far as to add a touch of makeup, something she was not prone to do. I've gone through this much trouble, I might as well go the whole nine yards. A dab or two of foundation, a slight brush of blush on the apples on her cheeks, some mascara, and a few swipes of her deep burgundy lipstick accentuated her best facial features, namely her wide, green eyes, high cheekbones, and poised lips. Having run out of time, though, she was forced to leave her hair untouched, a simple middle parting dividing her wavy, shoulder-length brunette tresses. So, after more than two hours of absolutely grappling with herself, Therese was finally ready to leave for work and tackle the day head on. Tackle? Let's not get ahead of ourselves here, Therese. You dressed yourself for work like most goddamn adults! Get it together and get your ass to work!

Once at the PRNT building, Therese made a beeline for her office, her sanctuary of sorts for perhaps just a little while longer. Her outfit didn't go unnoticed during her journey from the elevator, though. Richard's eyebrows were almost lost in his hairline while Jeanette exclaimed, "You look incredible" before dramatically clutching her hands across her heart and giving Therese a pair of playful heart eyes. Therese giggled at her absurdity but admittedly began to walk a little taller and it had nothing to do with her heeled boots. I should dress properly more often.

Upon entering her office, Dannie did a triple-take, looking a bit gobsmacked. "For me?" he eventually asked as he suggestively wiggled his eyebrows, an act which earned him a firm swat to the arm from Therese.

"I wanted to look more … presentable. To make a good impression, you know?" she explained somewhat defensively.

"Yeah, let's go with 'presentable', Rez." He sniggered, earning himself yet another blow, this time to his shoulder. "Ow! Okay, stop! Excuse me for trying to pay you a compliment," he exclaimed with a mischievous smile before turning back to his desk. "You look great, Therese," he finished genuinely.

"Thanks, D," she replied quietly, smiling to his back.

Therese busied herself thereafter with a few odds and ends, most of the time spent perusing what she had already written for her upcoming piece on lethal control of a burgeoning Florida panther population down in southern Florida. It's getting there. I just need to polish up a few things here and there before I'm satisfied with it. It was only her fifth solo piece since she started at PRNT. So, despite having worked there for over two years, she still felt like a relative newcomer.

Just before midday, Therese heard Tim’s animated lilt along with a few other indiscriminate voices, their conversation fragmenting from the foyer down the corridor to her office. That can only mean one thing. Oh, God, she's here! No, remember you'll be fine. Well ... supposedly.

Dannie practically bounced up from his seat and bounded out the door without so much of a backward glance at Therese, evidently eager to become acquainted with the newcomer. Therese, on the other hand, advanced on unsteady, leaden legs, stilling just before the door to take a few calming breaths whilst absentmindedly smoothing out her unwrinkled clothes. She squared her shoulders, shook her head as if to expel any lingering negative thoughts and let out a deep sigh, looking more like a boxer preparing to step into the ring than someone meeting a new co-worker. Go get 'em, tiger!

Much to her surprise, and admitted dismay, Therese was greeted by an empty foyer, hearing only faint murmurings coming from the graphic design team's studio to her left. How long was I dillydallying in there? What do I do now? I can't just stand and awkwardly wait for them to come back in here and I could never pull off casually sliding into an ongoing conversation just to
introduce myself. No, I'll just wait in the office because she has go there eventually. Shit! How could I forget that I'm going to be sharing an office with her?! Shit! Therese chided herself internally, making a detour toward the kitchen in the vain hope of finding some liquid courage to get her through the inevitable introduction. Stop being fucking ridiculous! You can do this! she chastised herself once more before rebounding back to her initial destination.

Some time later, Therese heard Tim again, his voice this time growing ever louder as he got closer to her office. She steeled herself in her seat but remained with her back turned to the door, feigning being engrossed in her work.

"Finally, here we are! You said you wanted to be given no special treatment, so I've got you slumming it with the kids in here." Tim's last comment elicited a deep, throaty laugh that undoubtedly came from Carol, a sound which caused Therese to snap to attention. "Speaking of which, let me introduce you to Therese. Come over here, Bel."

Therese extracted herself from her seat and set about navigating the six or so meters that stood between her and the new arrivals. Almost immediately, though, she stopped dead in her tracks. Holy shit! She's hot! Her cheeks flushed at that revelation, forcing her to look down as she quickly scrambled to regain control of her faculties. She somehow managed to advance the last few steps without incident and willed herself to look up once again. She faintly recalled Tim gently teasing, "Carol, I'd like you to meet Therese Belivet. Therese, you may have heard of Carol Ross here," while gesturing for them to shake hands. But, to be perfectly honest, she was too entranced by the blonde stunner standing before her to pay more attention.

Wow.

Carol was fair-skinned, possessing a certain luminosity, slender, and quite a bit taller than Therese, probably around 5'9" or 5'10", even without the additional height afforded by the younger woman's heeled boots, rendering the blonde quite an intimidating figure. Her face was angular yet soft-edged with prominent cheekbones and a gently inclined jawline. But it was her eyes that had transfixed Therese. They were feline, slanting ever so slightly upward, and hooded, serving to enhance her blue-grey gaze that had locked itself on Therese. The slight upturn of the corners of her wide, full-lipped mouth gave the illusion of her taunting Therese. More like haunting,. She swallowed hard, audibly she hoped, under the unwavering scrutiny.

Perhaps sensing Therese's abeyance, Carol took a step forward, hoping to finally initiate the introductory handshake that would seal their acquaintance. "Therese Belivet. I can't say I've heard such a unique name in quite some time. It's lovely," Carol said, her smoky voice dragging out the 'z' sound. "And, as banal as this may sound, I really look forward to working with you at some stage." She flashed a brilliant smile at Therese, whose stomach knotted involuntarily, while simultaneously reaching to seize her hand in her own.

"Oh … yes, likewise. I mean, I can't wait to work with you, either. Tha-thank you … I unfortunately can't take credit for my name, though … You know, my parents did name me after all ..." she replied awkwardly.

"Be sure to pass the compliment on to them when you see them next." Carol winked at her and gave another mega-watt smile. Both actions ripped Therese asunder, leaving her desperately grasping onto Carol's hand as a sort of lifeline in the midst of her current tempestuous state. "Tim's already told me about how you started working here right after finishing top of your graduate class at NYU, no less. Very impressive. I've also read a few of your pieces and I must say they aren't half bad for rookie." She grinned playfully to make up for the disappointing moment she relinquished her hold on the younger woman's hand.
Therese just about gaped at Carol's casual confession. "You-you've read my work?" she stammered incredulously.

"Of course!" exclaimed Carol, nodding her head at a dumbfounded Therese. "I had to know what the hell I was getting myself into coming here! You know, find out the types of journalists I'd be working alongside. I even forced myself to read a few business pieces. Jesus. No offence, of course, Tim, but you know I find reading about finance about as stimulating as watching paint dry." Her dry-toned admission brought out a nervous chuckle from Therese while Tim let loose with a belly laugh before he guiltily nodded his head in agreement. Therese grinned still further, thinking about how such a remark would have immediately wiped the smug smile from Richard's face. The only thing more boring than the business section are the writers themselves, including Richard. That's a bit harsh, isn't it? Maybe, but kind of true.

Tim collected himself and turned to Therese. "I think having you work with and around Carol will do your writing good, Bel. It's already improved leaps and bounds since you started here but Carol can get your writing to that higher level I know you can achieve. A Pulitzer won't be far off by the time she's finished with you!" He smiled good-naturedly. She managed to respond with a small but dimpled smile.

A stifled cough drew Therese's attention back to Carol, who started somewhat awkwardly, "No pressure on me to help you out then, huh? I'll probably end up learning a few things from you instead, Therese." She finished with a slight tilt of her head and a grin on her face.

"Yeah, I think I could teach you a thing or two." Therese's eyes bulged after the rather suggestive words had already made good their escape from her subconscious. Where the hell did that come from?! She's going to think I'm trying to flirt with her!

Carol quirked a perfectly shaped brow after a flash of emotion briefly crossed her eyes. "I look forward to it," she eventually replied.

Therese could only stare for a moment. Wait ... is she flirting with me?! Nope, that's not what's happening here. Why would she even flirt with me?

Thankfully, Tim chose that exact moment to interrupt. "Well, I think that just about covers everything, Carol. I'll let you get settled in here. I'll have Marcus from IT come over and tell you a bit more about our intranet, server set-up, access codes, electronic archives, and what not. He knows a helluva lot more about that shit than I do! Do you need help bringing anything up from your car?"

"No, thank you, though, Tim. Richard already offered to help."

Therese ground her teeth this time instead of resorting to her customary eyeroll. And, so, it begins with Richard.

"Okay, great! I have to head out for a bit so I'll probably only see you at the meeting Monday morning. Remember, nine o'clock? Don't be late! God, being your boss for a change may actually be fun! Oh, and, of course, welcome to PRNT," he said cheekily before leaving.

Carol chuckled heartily before turning to face Therese head on. "I guess I better get set-up before Tim changes his mind on me." The look of mirth in Carol's eyes brought a smile to Therese's face and banished any lingering awkwardness she felt.

"I think he'll want to boss you around a bit first. Get his full money's worth before going back on his decision, you know?" She grinned before joining in with Carol for a short laugh. Carol started toward the door but stopped when Therese said, "I'm going to be around for a little while longer. Let
me know if you need help with anything. Oh, and, welcome, Carol." She finished with a bit of a flourish and this time gave Carol a smile filled to the brim with dimples.

"Thank you, Therese," came her reply before she swept out of the room.

*Well, all things considered, that wasn't a complete disaster. Good job, Therese.*
Doubt

Chapter Notes

Technology and all its fuckery has messed things around, namely the order of chapters. This one follows on from chapter 26 Distractions. So if you've forgotten what's been happening -I don't blame you if that is the case because it has been that long- check that chapter out first before giving this one a read.

I'm posting this on a whim. As a result, it hasn't been beta'd. Any fuck-ups are mine and mine alone :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carol

Sunday 3 December 2017

The unfaltering darkness of night had long since swallowed the red glow of Harge’s tail lights, and yet Carol was still rooted to the same spot from which she’d watched him leave, barely able to think let alone move. The adrenaline that had galvanized her into ending their battle to out-bitter the other - or at least putting the wheels for its end into motion- dissolved when he uttered his parting words, ones which now seemed to linger hauntingly in the crisp winter air. She’d anticipated an attack of animosity, a barrage of barbs, and a melange of malice from Harge, but nothing quite like this. The prospect of receiving as dour a warning as the one she had received never once occurred to her. Perhaps that was what unsettled her the most: the sheer unexpectedness of it all.

The longer she stood looking blankly into the distance, though, the more she realised that that wasn't the whole truth of the matter. Harge’s words were goading, calculatingly so, but in a different way to anything she'd experienced before. The outcome was the same as he still managed to inflict injury upon her. Having been forthright about her adulterous past to Therese weeks earlier, Carol thought she’d neutralised the most damaging weapon he had in his arsenal against her. But she unwittingly handed him a far more destructive one when she admitted that things between her and Therese were in fact serious. Harge would have known as much prior to his dropping Rindy off that afternoon -his prearranged meeting with the younger woman spoke to that fact. But it was almost as if he wanted her to say so face-to-face, because only then would he be satisfied enough to launch his latest attack on her.

One thing Harge had repeatedly accused her of in the past was of acting like she didn’t have something to lose, be it her partner, her family, her best friend, or others that she loved. After finding out that she had been sleeping with Abby, he lambasted her for thinking that the consequences of that affair were hers and hers alone to bear, and for neglecting to take her family's long-term wellbeing into consideration when she sought what would always be a fleeting personal gain. The most damning allegation levelled against her, though, was that she knew the harm she may cause to those around her, but disregarded it as unimportant or merely unworthy of consideration. As much as she hated to agree with him -and she really did- he was right. Not about her simply not caring, of course; but his assessment of everything else was hard to argue against.

Such was the dire state of their marriage some four years ago that she became woefully reckless and selfish. That wasn't an excuse by any stretch, but the precipitating factors rendered such an outcome
unsurprising, and arguably unavoidable. Love had long since petered out by then, whatever space it had once occupied within both herself and Harge had instead festered with disinterest, indignation, and spite. Dramatic and erratic swings between those dispositions and all their nasty subordinates left her perpetually on edge, never knowing when or exactly what would trigger another stony silence, furious argument, and everything else wretched in between. It was an excruciating time for her, but one which she vowed to hunker down and endure it, no matter how taxing it would be for her, nor how much her soul would be compromised in the process; believing it would all be worth it if it meant Rindy wasn't dragged through the ordeal of divorce. Pain without need, was how she put it, a notion she thought to be as irrefutable as it was succinct.

Just how delusional such thinking was only came to light when an unexpected but potent pang of jealousy stuck while Abby regaled her about her latest dalliances. It was almost customary for their boozy get-togethers to take a bawdy turn, but not once had it evoked such a response in Carol. Having known of her best friend’s long-held feelings for her, and seen the way her dark eyes amorously misted over on occasion, Carol knew that the ball for their sleeping together was very much in her court. But until that moment, she'd never entertained the idea. As soon as she did, though, it sent possibility cascading through her, and stirred a longing unlike any other she'd experienced before.

In the end, all it took for them to fall into bed together was a few too many martinis after Carol recounted a particularly harrowing argument she'd had with Harge. The alcohol that coursed through her then ridded her of her reservations, that of taking advantage of someone who she deeply cared about, and of potentially jeopardising a friendship she’d cherished since childhood. And with that initial hit, she was hooked: on the release being with Abby gave her, on having something that was only for herself, on the seductive thrill of it all, on the escape it gave her from her reality. That was perhaps why she surmised that embarking on an affair with her staunchest and sometimes seemingly only ally was a good idea, and wanted it to continue even after Harge found out their relationship blurred the line between friend and lover.

The resurgence of a need she thought she could suppress by sheer will alone was powerful enough to keep any guilt that would usually accompany such an illicit act at bay. But it wouldn't be held in abeyance indefinitely. No. It was merely laying in wait for the bottom to inevitably fall out from under her. Only after she’d broken things off with a close to lovesick Abby and plunged herself into the most desolate of lonelinesses was that torrent of guilt allowed to surge through her, seemingly on a mission to crush her from within, and purge her of every ounce of happiness and hope she had. That anguish was debilitating on its own. But when it combined forces with the existing despondency and misery she felt, and the second wave of Harge’s wrath she'd incurred, she finally broke, leaving her no choice but to seek a divorce and the liberty it would bestow upon her.

Despite having taken place over three years ago now, the toxic detritus from her affair and its aftermath continued to linger within her today, a constant and potentially perpetual reminder of her indiscretions, one which yielded considerable power over her. Having heard Carol turn herself inside out both in private and during the many rounds of divorce proceedings they’d sat through, Harge knew just how thick that layer was, just how much she regretted curating its existence and fostering its persistence, and just how desperately she wanted to be ridded of it entirely. He'd used that invaluable knowledge time and time again either in defense of himself or when attacking her, never once shying away from the opportunity to reopen a wound which had once gutted her. Unlike before, though, when he'd been more conspicuous with his approach and his intentions, he'd chosen a far more stealthy tactic. Under a veil of apathy or something akin to it, his voice that of someone who had been chewed up and spat out, he landed the most cutting of parting shots when he reminded her that the consequences of her reoffending would be far greater than before because she would do so knowing exactly what she'd risk losing.
Almost as soon as the realisation of what Harge had really said cleared the haze of stupefaction, it gave way to torment as a deluge of dark thoughts sprang forth and inundated her mind. That of proving him right as her self-serving and thoughtless former self re-emerged to dole out the karma she was due. That of betraying the trust Therese had placed in her. That of giving up a chance at happiness she already thought she didn’t deserve. That of destroying a love that unthinkably had been kindled within her. That of losing the one person whom with little effort nor pomp, had changed her life forever. That of hurting Therese.

Those fiends continued their menacingly assault upon her until she shuddered where she stood. She unfurled her hands which had been clenched tightly at her sides and swept them up her arms, to calm, comfort, and control herself. The shock of cold against her palms broke her nightmarish musings, but failed to stop her stomach from contorting with unease. She felt bereft, incredibly weak, and suddenly in desperate need of taking Therese in her arms - a physical confirmation that nothing of the sort had happened, and a reminder to herself that she would never let it happen. So with a forlorn stare directed towards the horizon, she muttered, “Fuck you, Harge,” before turning on her heel and advancing towards the front door, leaving those thoughts behind her as she went, each step taken bringing her back to a reality she no longer cowered from.

A peculiar quiet greeted Carol upon re-entering the house, leaving her to wonder just where the animated babble that usually came with Rindy’s return home had disappeared to. She looked towards the lounge as she walked through the empty kitchen, finding both her daughter and Therese were nowhere in sight, not lounging out on the couch, nor sprawled out on the plush carpet. Confused, she slowed to a stop. That was until a soft thud to her right drew her attention, finding Therese moving around one end of the grand dining room table she was preparing for dinner. Sensing an opportunity, Carol started towards the younger woman with a purposeful stride. “Baby, where’s Rindy?”

With a slight jolt, Therese set the last plate down with a clumsy clunk. She turned to face Carol with a guilty smile having drawn out her dimples. “Hey.” After a quick glance down at herself and back up again, she finally answered the question, “She just went to re-thread her cleats with her new laces. Well, she said she was at least going to try do that by herself.”

“Good.”

Before the question that knitted Therese's brows could translate itself into words, Carol closed the gap between them all together and drew her in, the curl of her finger around the back of the younger woman’s neck urging her forward so she could capture her lips with passion. The force of their unexpected embrace made Therese teeter back onto her heels before Carol caught her, slinging a strong arm around the younger woman’s slim waist to steady her mid-stumble, holding her tightly, unwaveringly against her. Without a moment's hesitation longer, Therese fell into step of the kiss, matching every heavy graze of Carol’s lips against her own with fervour and absolute surety. It was almost as if the younger woman knew what the objective of the kiss was, and exactly why Carol had seized her lips with such urgency, as she did not stray from her task until she’d undone every knot of discomfort within Carol. And with that, it felt like the strained encounter with her ex hadn’t happened at all. They soundlessly broke apart after a few moments, but beyond the separation of their lips, they barely moved any further.

“What was that for?” Therese asked breathily, swiping an errant lock of Carol’s hair back into place with her finger. With her lips slightly pursed and cheeks still tinted with colour from their kiss, she waited.

Carol usually would have quipped something along the line of ‘does there need to be a reason?’ but in moment, the urge to be pretentious wasn’t with her. “I just really needed that,” she blew out the
truth with a deep sigh. As soon as the hushed admission left Carol's lips, a shadow swept in and
darkened the younger woman's countenance, displacing the lust in her eyes as it went. Carol
knew it was now more a case of when and not if she was asked why that was so. In the meantime,
she lifted Therese onto the tips of her toes by winding her arms tighter around the small of her back,
and nuzzled into the nook of her neck - a favourite refuge of hers.

Therese allowed Carol to nestle there for a few moments before starting with the simplest of
openings, “Harge?” The only answer that was forthcoming from Carol was a hum and nod-cum-
nuzzle in confirmation. “You okay?” she whispered into the ear closest to her chin. As if the
gentleness of her tone wasn’t enough to coax an answer out of Carol, the soothing caress of her
fingertips between the older woman’s shoulder blades could have exacted the hardest of truths.

Carol sighed once more, lighter than before, but still heavier than she intended. After pressing a soft
departing kiss to Therese’s neck, she straightened up. As if she expected anything else, she found the
younger woman’s eyes clear and wide, allowing for an unencumbered look at the now fully-fledged
concern lurking within. Wanting to put Therese at ease for the time being, Carol asked, “You do
realise that I should be the one asking you that, right?” accompanying that light jest with a slight cock
of her head to the side and lift of her brows. It worked to some extent as a knowing smile forced its
way through Therese's expression of apprehension. But other than that, nothing by way of a
response was forthcoming from the younger woman.

Although she had only been teasing, Carol did want to know how Therese was after meeting her
rancorous and often volatile ex-husband. It looked like nothing was untoward with the younger
woman, as evidenced by the way she was the one doing the comforting, and the steadiness of her
gaze. However, having witnessed firsthand how the younger woman often tried to maintain a
semblance of calm when she wasn’t, Carol knew better than to take how she was acting at face
value. With Rindy’s return undoubtedly imminent, and dinner close to being served, this wasn’t the
time to get into what had transpired during Therese's one-on-one with Harge in quite the way Carol
would like. But her curiosity wouldn't abate without having a morsel of information to sate itself
with. “How did it go with Harge?”

Therese's smile faltered imperceptibly, more so in her eyes than anything else. “It went…okay.” She
looked away as she paused, almost as if she was searching for the right words over Carol's shoulder,
but what was perhaps more a case of her gathering herself. “He was like you said he’d be,” she
answered slowly, cautiously. Silence hung for a beat, before she blinked to clear the gleam of
preoccupation covering her eyes, and met Carol's gaze once more. She offered up a weak smile for
the worried look given to her, before going back to gliding her fingers up and down Carol's back.

With alarm now starting its slow wind up, Carol moved to stop its progress by tackling the issue at
hand head-on, wanting to diffuse any unease Therese felt now than wait for it to worsen. “Can we
talk about it later? After Rindy’s gone to bed?” Knowing just how reticent Therese could be about
anything that bothered her, Carol was surprised when she not only nodded with little hesitation, but
even sealed her assent with a chaste kiss. It made a small but fighting sense of relief rise within Carol,
and lead her to think that whatever had been discussed between the younger woman and Harge
wasn’t as bad as she suspected it would be. At least, that’s what she hoped.

Whatever relief Carol had felt waned soon after dinner began, and had all but disappeared by the
time they settled down to watch The Emperor's New Groove together. Perhaps she was more attuned
to Therese’s demeanour than usual, or was merely overanalysing what she typically deemed to be
inconsequential, but she became more and more perturbed by the younger woman’s behaviour as the
night wore on. The infinitesimal delay it took for Therese to laugh or reciprocate a smile, the nigh on
indiscernible slackening of her jaw and parting of her lips as she absentmindedly looked elsewhere,
the small frown which occasionally flitted across her forehead; all perhaps would have gone unnoticed before. They certainly still did for Rindy, the smaller of the two blondes having assumed the role of ‘Kronk’ as she enthusiastically conducted an impromptu ‘squirrel talk’ lesson with her mother and Therese being her two students.

But the same could not be said for Carol tonight. Her watchful eyes had tracked the younger woman’s every move, almost splitting each into its constituent frames like a slow-motion camera, allowing her to easily discern the typical from the untoward, or at least what she thought was untoward. That uncertainty put her on edge, and eager to find out whether there was in fact something amiss with Therese, or if she was merely imagining it. Wanting to get to the part of the evening that would allow her to do just that, Carol decided it was best that she get Rindy ready for bed a little earlier than usual. Although Rindy was now at an age where little supervision and even less assistance was required when bathing, dressing, and brushing both her hair and teeth, her energy levels were increasingly not amenable to falling asleep at the agreed upon bedtime. And therein was where Carol’s hardest battle with her daughter now lay. Fearing that tonight would be no different, especially after Rindy’s lively display earlier, Carol wanted to use those extra few minutes to get her to fully wind down for the night. She was willing to indulge any of haggler-in-training Rindy’s requests, just as long as she shimmied all the way down into her bed with another victorious smile on her face and a promise to make a concerted effort to fall asleep.

Having hung back a bit after ushering Rindy upstairs, Carol went over to where Therese sat with her laptop perched atop the armrest of the couch. “I’m going to take a quick shower once I’ve put Rindy to bed. But I’ll be back afterwards, okay?” The younger woman eyed her for a beat -just long enough to pique her concern once more- before giving an acquiescent nod. So after giving Therese a quick peck on the lips, Carol dashed off with nervousness beginning to toy with her insides once more.

Chapter End Notes

I know nothing much happened in this chapter (my apologies), but I'm just trying to get myself back into the swing of writing. I really struggled with this chapter and am still not 100% happy with it. But out of sheer annoyance with the writer's block I've had, I decided to bite the bullet and post it anyway. I'm just trying to get this story back on track while setting things up for later on.

Let me know your thoughts by dropping a comment, because after chapters like this, they're not only appreciated, but also helpful.

Cheers, K :)

End Notes

Thanks to Ligeria and her epic beta skills!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!